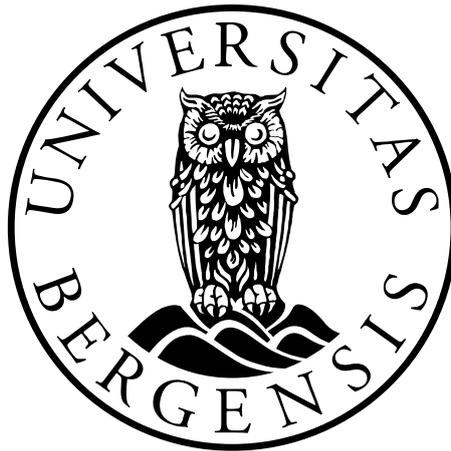


**The Nicaraguan Women's Movement after the  
comeback of the Revolutionary Heroes**

*Preventing and Responding to Violence against Women*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the increasingly difficult situation for the Nicaraguan women's movement after the comeback of the heroes of the Revolution. I comparatively explore two women's organizations' goals, strategies and conceptualizations that are at play in the project of preventing and responding to violence against women. The organizations compared in this thesis are, the RMCV, a feminist organization which coordinates a nation-wide network of local organizations; and AMNLAE, which originated as part of the Nicaraguan revolution and is still influenced by its connection to the former revolutionary group and current political party, the FSLN. Through this research I discovered that the RMCV is mainly concerned with formulating a strategic and long-term solution to the problem of violence against women by emphasizing the transformation of state policies and institutional structures. AMNLAE, on the other hand, focuses on giving an immediate response to a pressing problem for individual women. Additionally, I found that the nature of the RMCV's and AMNLAE's responses to the problem of violence against women is influenced by whether they see violence as a consequence of personal or structural factors, and by their level of political autonomy.

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## **Glossary – Spanish Words and Concepts**

*Capacitación* - The meaning of this concept varies, but generally it involves capacity-building or/and awareness-raising.

*Sensibilizar*- awareness rising, to sensitize or make sensitive to a problem/need

*Comisaría (de la Mujer)* – the specialized Women’s Police Stations in Nicaragua

*Escuela laboral* – Technical school: Courses were women are trained in practical skills that could be useful for generating an income

*Machista/machismo* – the general perspective of men’s superiority over and domination of women (in the Nicaraguan context)

*Barrio* – local neighborhoods within the town/city

*Promotora (Facilitadora) Legal* – Voluntary legal counsellors

## **List of Abbreviations and some Clarifications**

AMNLAE (*Movimiento de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza*) - Luisa Amanda Espinoza’ Movement of Nicaraguan Women

CPCs (*Consejos del Poder Ciudadano*) - Councils of Citizen Power

FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*) - Former revolutionary army, current party

INIM (*Instituto Nicaragüense de la Mujer*) - a state institution: Nicaraguan Women’s Institute

MINSA (*Ministerio de Salud*) - National Health Department

MIFAMILIA (*Ministerio de la Familia, Adolescencia y Niñez*) - Child, Adolescent & Family Department

National Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional*) - The Nicaraguan Parliament

Public Defender (*Abogado de Oficio*) - a criminal defence lawyer appointed by the Public Ministry to represent an accused who cannot afford to pay for a lawyer

Public Ministry (*Ministerio Público*) - The Public Ministry refers to the cabinet-level agency that prosecutes criminal matters and handles other related functions.

Public Prosecutor/Prosecutor (*Fiscal*) - in Nicaragua the Prosecutor is an attorney provided by the Public Ministry representing the party pressing charges

RMCV / The Network (*Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia*) – The Women’s Network against Violence

Therapeutic abortion - an abortion induced for medical reasons or sometimes when pregnancy is the result of rape or incest

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# 1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

During the last two decades, the Nicaraguan women's movement has expanded its scope geographically and by including a vast diversity of women. This development has been the result of changing political regimes at the national level, and a global expansion of the women's liberation movement (Molyneux 2003; Santos 2005). As in the rest of the world, a major issue for the women's movement in Nicaragua has been violence against women, which is a problem that currently is getting increasing focus from several organizations. Some of these organizations focus on providing citizens with practical solutions to their problems, through for instance women's shelters, legal counselling and medical or psychological consultations. Others have added or specialized in the political aspect of the problem, focusing on the role of the state in its implementation of laws, policies and practices that concern women and advocating for change when these are perceived as unjust, discriminatory or directly dangerous for them. In this thesis I will focus on two women's organizations which each apply one of these two different approaches to the problem of violence against women.

The context of the struggle of the women's organizations in Nicaragua is the comeback to power of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), the party that led the revolution and managed to overthrow the Somoza dynasty under the leadership of Daniel Ortega. After regaining power in 2007, Ortega has been criticized by international and civil society for introducing and reforming laws and policies that increase his personal and the party's authority, blurring the borders between the legislative, judicial and executive powers. In addition, according to several civil society organizations, state-society cooperation has deteriorated and tensions are increasing (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). The strained relationship between the women's movement and the heroes of the revolution has roots back to the Sandinistas' first period in government (1979-1990) and the first following years, when many women broke out of the revolutionary party do to internal frictions. The tension increased in 1998 when Daniel Ortega's step-daughter publicly accused him of systematic sexual abuse (Padgett 1998). Until she withdrew the accusation in 2008, the feminist movement fully supported Ortega's step-daughter. Furthermore, the implementation of an extreme abortion law in 2007 did not contribute to relieve this tension (Kampwirth 2008). Currently, fierce critique from several civil society organizations is directed towards Ortega's intention of running for president in November 2011, an act prohibited by Nicaraguan constitutional law.

It is in this constantly changing but specific historical, cultural and political setting that my research regarding women's mobilization takes place.

For the purpose of introducing my research, I will start by providing a brief historical background of my field of study and a short introduction of the fieldwork area, including a presentation of the two women's organizations which constitute the main focus of my thesis. Next, I will give an overlook of the situation of violence against women in general terms and specifically in Nicaragua. Finally, I will present my research objectives and give an overview of the structure of my thesis.

### **1.1 Brief Political and Socio-Economic Background**

With its 5.8 million inhabitants, Nicaragua is a small country in terms of population (UNDP 2010). It has a turbulent political history, which together with externally imposed structural adjustment programmes and natural catastrophes has left the country as the second poorest nation in Latin-America<sup>1</sup>. As such, Nicaraguan women's organizations work in a socio-economic context characterized by high levels of under- and unemployment and widespread poverty. When it comes to the loss of achievements in human development due to inequality between genders<sup>2</sup>, Nicaragua also ranks second last in Latin America (UNDP 2010). As a consequence, gender specific issues and especially violence against women has become a main source for women's mobilization, but also a source of conflict between the women's movement and the state. Some feminists claim that the current situation is based on a constant struggle between women's specific needs and interests and the political and economic interests of the ones in power, including both liberal and socialist governments (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). Another hinder towards women's emancipation has been the role of the Catholic Church and the parties in power of reproducing traditional gender roles that give primacy to the man over the woman, and the union of the family over the security of the woman. Additionally, women's organizations claim to work in a context where patriarchal values are ingrained in local traditions and ways of life. Consequently, In order to understand the underlying reasons for the current political and economic environment in which the women's organizations develop their strategies and actions, I will give a brief outline of Nicaragua's recent history.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Development Index (HDI), 2010 Rankings: Nicaragua ranks 115 out of 169 countries worldwide. In Latin America, only Guatemala ranks lower, at 116. If including the Caribbean, Haiti ranks last at ranking 145.

<sup>2</sup> Gender Inequality Index (GII) – 2008.

Nicaragua is said to represent “one of the longest continuous examples of US intervention in the western hemisphere”, and as such, its history is coloured by the many struggles for freedom fought by the Nicaraguan people (Johansson 1999:15). In 1934, Augusto César Sandino together with his army of peasants managed to drive off US marines; only to be murdered by the US-supported head of National Guard, Anastasio Somoza (Close 1988). Honouring the murdered freedom fighter, the FSLN started referring to themselves as Sandinistas. In 1937 Somoza became president through a coup d'état, and managed to maintain power within the family until 1979 when the Sandinistas overthrew Anastasio's son, ending a 42 year long family dynasty. With Daniel Ortega on the top, the FSLN remained in power until 1990 when they lost in the polls against the conservative party *UNO* (The National Opposition Union) lead by Violeta Chamorro (Linkogle 1996). *UNO*'s politics entailed extensive implementation of neoliberal policies, resulting in the deterioration of public services and producing negative consequences especially for Nicaragua's poorest women (Mendez 2005; Wessel & Campbell 1997). However, this turn towards 'US-friendly' policies also opened up for external donors and international organizations, creating a boom of non-governmental organizations of which many specialized in women's needs (Alvarez 2001; Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). During the period of liberal governments, the FSLN suffered from internal disagreements. These problems included a questioning of the leadership of Ortega and the FSLN's national directorate, whom all refused to let go of their positions (Randall 1994). Nevertheless, due to an internal split also in the liberal party, FSLN managed to win the 2006 elections with 38% of the votes (UD 2010).

## **1.2 Presentation of Fieldwork Area**

In Nicaragua, the women's movement is wide and consists of a great number of women's organizations dispersed through the entire country. Even though these organizations specialize in different areas, a majority of them are in some way involved in the struggle against violence against women. In order to limit my area of study, as the primary focus of my thesis I chose two organizations, the RMCV (Women's Network against Violence) and AMNLAE ('Luisa Amanda Espinoza' Movement of Nicaraguan Women), and decided to compare their perspectives and strategies of mobilization. The two organizations emerged at very different periods in Nicaragua's political history. They also differ in other aspects such as their type of work and strategies, their target groups, the level of external economic support and their relationship with the government and state institutions. Furthermore, part of the reason why I chose AMNLAE and the RMCV is also the fact that these organizations represent two

different, but very typical traditions within the women's mobilization in Latin America as described by, among others, Maxine Molyneux (2003). One is the newer, feminist oriented and independent type of organization, such as the RMCV, which is very much concerned with public and political denunciation. The other type is often termed 'grassroots organization' based on popular participation often rooted in the history of a revolution, and as such, currently struggling to find its place and role in today's society. Organizations belonging to the latter type, including AMNLAE, tend to appeal to women from the lower classes, focusing their main work on women's practical needs.

All these differences made a comparison between the RMCV and AMNLAE especially interesting. However, my main focus will not be to compare the organizations as such, but to explore the different ways in which these organizations strategize in order to achieve their goals. Furthermore, I will compare how they conceptualize gender and violence against women, and the organizations' relationship to the state. For instance, because of AMNLAE's former close ties to Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas, I found it interesting to explore how Ortega's comeback influences their work in comparison to the more independent and critical RMCV. When it comes to their similarities, both AMNLAE and the RMCV can be characterized as networks, as they consist of multiple smaller locally based organizations, women's houses, shelters, and so on. Their extended size pushed me to make a strategic choice in relation to where to carry out my fieldwork within each organization. In AMNLAE I chose to focus on one of their local Women's Houses located in the small city of San Marcos, whereas within the RMCV, I decided to participate in the activities of the head office in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua. These choices were based on the intention of studying the main aspects that characterize and represent AMNLAE and the RMCV as organizations.

### **1.2.1 AMNLAE - 'Luisa Amanda Espinoza' Movement of Nicaraguan Women**

Until the late 1970s, the Nicaraguan women's movement was mainly concentrated under the revolutionary group FSLN (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). According to AMNLAE's official webpage (2009:Antecedentes y Contexto), it was only until 1977 that women decided to form their own organization under the name 'Association of Women confronted with the National Crisis' (*Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional -AMPRONAC*), but maintained its close ties to the FSLN. When the Sandinistas managed to overthrow Somoza in 1979, AMPRONAC, counting 8000 members, changed its name to 'Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women' (AMNLAE), honouring the first woman to die in the revolution (Molyneux 1985). As an extension of AMPRONAC's objectives, AMNLAE

continued the fight against imperialism, the country's economic and social dependence, and to work for women's rights. During the period that FSLN maintained power, from 1979 to 1990, AMNLAE played an important role in the reconstruction of the country and in the FSLN's struggle against the US supported counter-militia *Contras*. An example is AMNLAE's important role in the organization and execution of the successful National Crusade for Literacy in the 1980s, where the illiteracy rate was reduced from 50% to 12% (Johansson 1999:15). Towards the end of the 80's, AMNLAE's focus on women's specific rights and demands became stronger, so, in order to promote women's mobilization around their own interests, AMNLAE changed its name in 1987 from 'Association' to 'Movement'.

With the neoliberal victory in the 1990s and the implementation of structural adjustments, the economic, political and social context for AMNLAE deteriorated. Similarly, the lower classes suffered deeply under the extreme reduction of social services such as free day-care centres, education and health services. As a consequence, AMNLAE (2009) redefined their strategy to focus more on national and local activism advocating for state investment in social and economic life and the improvement of women's situation. Even though AMNLAE currently presents itself as a wide and independent organization, it has maintained its close ties to the FSLN, with its leaders and most of its members being Sandinistas. AMNLAE's current mission is to "reduce the gap between the genders by executing projects and programmes at a national level which empower women and benefit girls, adolescents and youths with the goal of equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life" (AMNLAE 2009:Misión). On a national level, AMNLAE consists of 63 local Women's Houses and two Maternal Houses.

### **1.2.2 RMCV - the Women's Network against Violence**

The *Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia* (RMCV) emerged in 1992 after seeing the need for an autonomous feminist network coordinating different initiatives and organizations regarding violence against women at a national level, without discriminating on reasons of age, ethnicity, political stand or religious views (RMCV 2011b). The network currently consists of approximately 150 associations, churches, women's shelters and labour unions, in addition to nearly 100 individual women. Their main work is done through political activism, feminist education and by strengthening women's mobilization. The RMCV's current mission is "to contribute to transform all power relations that the patriarchal system imposes on us and which are the base for all forms of violence against different women in Nicaragua within the public and private spheres" (2011b:Misión y Visión). As an important initiative-taker and actor in the fight against violence against women, the RMCV has promoted and participated

in several nation-wide and inter-institutional projects since its creation. A case in point was their great contribution to the starting up of the specialized police stations for women, the *Comisarías*, which were supposed to offer an integrated response to the problem of violence, including prevention, attention and empowerment. Today, their activism is mainly directed towards state institutions and the community through their strategy of public denunciation, using the media to advance their cases and exert pressure on decision makers.

### **1.3 Violence against Women**

There has been discussion among researchers on which concepts that are appropriate to use when referring to violence committed against women. The most common ones have been ‘domestic violence’, ‘gendered violence’ and ‘intra-familial violence’. Furthermore, it has been debated whether violence against women should be regarded as a personal matter or a cultural, health- or crime related problem, and consequently if it is a responsibility of the individual, the state, or the global community. In this thesis, for the purpose of including the different types of violence that women are exposed to at different levels of social life and to leave open the question of responsibility, I will make use of the more general term ‘violence against women’. My understanding of this problem is based on the United Nations’ (UN) definition of *violence against women* as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (1993: Art. 1). In the 1995 Platform for Action, the UN (1996) declared that violence against women is not only a private problem, but also a global health issue and a threat to equality, development, and peace at national level. Furthermore, the UN’s Secretary General stated that violence against women “is one of the most serious challenges of our time” (2006b:9).

Also in Nicaragua, violence against women is a serious problem, with a growing number of police reports of violence and murder of women. Figures presented in a detailed report by Nicaragua’s National Institute of Development Information (INIDE) in cooperation with the National Health Department (MINSa) show that nearly one in every three women in Nicaragua has experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (2007:382). The report further specifies that of all women who are or have been in a relationship or marriage, 48% reported having received verbal or psychological abuse, 27% physical abuse and 13% sexual abuse by their partner or ex-partner (INIDE & MINSa 2007:381). In addition, during the

years 2000-2005, femicides<sup>3</sup> have more than duplicated, and domestic violence and sexual offences have more than tripled (D'Angelo, Molina & Jubb 2008:11).

In 1997, after four years of running a pilot project of specialized women's police stations in some districts in Nicaragua, a *Women and Childhood Commissariat* was created as a subdivision to the National Criminal Investigation Department (D'Angelo, et al. 2008:13). In 2010 the Women's Commissariat encompassed 37 specialized police stations or *Comisarías* dispersed throughout the country (El 19 Digital 2010). The main goal of this Commissariat is to "Offer security, protection and a specialized attention to victims, investigate criminal actions [...] interfere to stop transgression and assist the victim, carry out urgent investigation and arrest the perpetrator if necessary" (D'Angelo, et al. 2008:20). According to a comparative study of women's access to justice in Latin America carried out by two international health and development organizations PATH<sup>4</sup> and CEPLAES<sup>5</sup>, only 15,7% of all the women being attended at the *Comisarías* in Nicaragua got their cases remitted to the judicial institutions (D'Angelo, et al. 2008:26). This low percentage illustrates that the existence of women's police stations is not equivalent to easy access to justice for women who have been victims of violence.

According to the numbers presented above, most cases of violence against women in Nicaragua end in impunity. Impunity is often used by the international community to address cases where perpetrators of crimes against humanity are not brought to justice. Lately, the word has become a popular concept for addressing the amount of cases of violence against women and femicides that go unpunished. The first goal of the UN's campaign *UNiTE to End Violence against Women* is to "adopt and enforce national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls" (Secretary-General 2008). Further it specifies that the state's lack of laws or lack of appropriate application of these laws reproduce impunity. It is in this sense of the word that the feminist movement in Nicaragua has adopted the concept and is using it in campaigns, political manifestations and in communications with the media. In April of 2010, a 'Regional Campaign for Women's Access to Justice and against Impunity' was launched in Mexico and Central America by groups of civil society supported by international institutions (RMCV 2010b). The purpose of the campaign is to sensitize state,

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<sup>3</sup> "The murder of women because they are women" (Secretary-General 2006b).

<sup>4</sup> Program for Appropriate Technology in Health

<sup>5</sup> Centro de Planificación y Estudios Sociales

civil society and national media, emphasizing that violence against women is not natural, but a cultural and health-related problem and a violation of human rights (RMCV 2010b).

In Nicaragua, there are several laws that punish violence against women. The principal law on the prevention and sanction of this crime came in 1996 with Law 230 concerning intra-familial violence and safety measures for the victim of violence (Asamblea Nacional 1996). Today these laws are included in the Penal Code, with Art.155 on “Domestic or intra-familial violence” and Art.111 on “Urgent security measures for the victim of domestic or intra-familial violence” (Asamblea Nacional 2008b:70-71,51-52). Furthermore, in 1996 Nicaragua recognised by Ministerial Decree that “intra-familial violence is a public health problem, which demands the creation of policies and strategies that contributes to its eradication” (MINSIA 2006:21). When it comes to international treaties, Nicaragua has signed most of the conventions concerning human rights in general and women’s rights specifically. The most important treaties in the struggle against violence against women are the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) and the *Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women* (Convention of Belém do Pará) (D’Angelo, et al. 2008:17). The main problem does therefore not lie in the lack of laws protecting women, but on the lack of compliance and exercise of these laws and conventions. Furthermore, the current development towards less state-society collaboration in Nicaragua goes against the recommendations from the UN of including civil society and especially women’s organizations for a more cohesive and successful approach towards eradicating violence against women (Secretary-General 2006a).

#### **1.4 Objectives**

Currently in Nicaragua, the cooperation between the government and the women’s movement is minimal. Additionally, state institutions and governmental policies and practices are blamed for reproducing patriarchal power relations. In this context, I find it interesting to look at how women activists defy these obstacles and find the courage and motivation to continue advocating for women’s rights. With the increasing number of reports regarding violence against women and knowing that the majority of these cases go unpunished, my purpose is to examine how two women’s organizations mobilize around these issues advocating for change. What are their strategies of mobilization? What do they see as the main reasons for violence against women and their limited access to justice? What concepts and categories do women’s organizations employ in their mobilization and critique? How do they understand their relationship to the current government and other state institutions? How does the political

situation affect the organizations' strategies, perspectives and opinions? These questions and reflections have directed me towards the following objectives:

### **My main research objectives consist of**

- exploring how women's organizations work and mobilize against what members perceive as the main obstacles towards a non-violent and more just society
- examining women's organizations' ideas about gender and their strategies of identity construction in relation to dominant discourses and state actors

### **More specifically, I wish to**

- compare how different women's organizations conceptualize the problem of violence against women, their goals and the strategies pursued to achieve them
- look at the different constructions of gender categories and identities at play in the project of preventing and responding to violence against women
- discuss the relationship between the government, state institutions and different women's organizations

## **1.5 The structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. In the following chapter, I will present my research methodology and the ethical considerations I encountered. In chapter 3 I will provide a brief overview of some of the literature relevant for my thesis, emphasizing gender debates, violence against women, and the women's movement and social mobilization in Latin America and Nicaragua. The theoretical tools which constitute the basis for my analysis are presented in chapter 4. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 comprise the empirical chapters, where the first two are a presentation of RMCV and AMNLAE respectively, their structure and strategies, and their relation to the government and state institutions. In chapter 7, I compare aspects within the two organizations, focusing on strategies, the member's perspectives on violence against women and its link to gender, their identity formation and the organizations' self-presentation outwards, and finally, how they approach, use and relate to the judicial system. To conclude, in chapter 8 I give a summary of my main findings, emphasizing the main challenges of the Nicaraguan women's movement.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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My fieldwork was carried out in Nicaragua from the midst of June to early September. During this period I volunteered mainly in two different women's organizations, 'Women's Network against Violence' (RMCV) in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, and in a local 'Women's House' in a small town called San Marcos and belonging to the 'Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women' (AMNLAE). Through the qualitative methods of interviews and participant observation, I wanted to study how two different women's organizations work and mobilize, and how they conceptualize questions of gender and violence against women in Nicaragua's current political context. In this chapter I will present the practical process of getting access to the field, the recruitment of informants, the methods I employed to gather the data and the limitations and ethical dilemmas I encountered during the process.

### **2.1 Access to and choice of Area of Study: Some methodological considerations**

My original plan was to conduct a major part of my research in a Nicaraguan feminist organization, namely the RMCV, volunteering in one of their member organizations working directly with women victims of violence in addition to participating in their feminist and political mobilization and education. I had been in contact with them before arrival, discovering their existence through Nicaraguan newspapers. When I got to Nicaragua, I decided to stay in Jinotepe, a town in the Carazo department an hour drive from the capital Managua. The reason behind this decision was that I used to live there as a child and the town has less criminality than Managua. During the initial period of waiting for a response from the RMCV, I became eager to explore what is being done about violence against women in Carazo. As I could not find any research about women's mobilization and violence against women in minor urban areas in Nicaragua, I decided to look for an organization among the small cities of Carazo. The RMCV assisted me with information about an individual member of theirs living in that department. She is a *promotora*, a legal advisor working as a volunteer in AMNLAE's Women's House in San Marcos, a ten minutes' drive from Jinotepe. She introduced me to the Director of the organization who welcomed me to stay with them for as long as I wanted. By that time, I had also received a confirmation from the RMCV, inviting me to participate in their different protests, seminars and other activities organized from their main office and taking place in the capital.

By doing my research at the Head Office of the RMCV and at one of AMNLAE's local Women's Houses my intention was to select "unique cases that are especially informative" and to gain "a deeper understanding" of these through in depth-study (Neuman 2007:143). By so doing, my goal was to get a varied perspective on the current political context and the history of Nicaragua in relation to women's mobilization and their struggle against violence. Since I will be presenting the two organizations in comparison to each other, there are some methodological considerations that have to be made. Firstly, it is important to be sensitive to the level of equivalence between the factors that are being compared (Etzioni-Halevy 1990). In my case, the fact that I focus on different levels within the organizations may limit the appropriateness of comparing them as organizations per se or in terms of their success or failure. It also sets restrictions for the comparable factors, being obvious that the different sections within an organization will naturally have different responsibilities and areas of focus.

Secondly, by 'slicing' a larger system into smaller parts and studying one of these specific sections may present the problem of "whether observing something narrower within a broader system in fact tells us anything significant about the system as a whole" (Etzioni-Halevy 1990:120). My choice of studying these organizations at different internal levels is partly a result of their current organizational structure, but more importantly a consequence of representing two major trends within the women's movement in Nicaragua and Latin America. The RMCV, being a coordinating organ and focusing their activism towards the state and civil society through big demonstrations and media coverage, is a typical example of newer feminist organizations in Latin America. In contrast, even though AMNLAE is also a network, in practice it is not functioning as one. Currently, their main office is not coordinating joint projects at lower levels and instead functions more as an independent organization in the capital. Consequently, the choice fell on one of AMNLAE's local women's houses, which with their 'hands-on' way of working and their roots back to the revolution, represents a characteristic type of women's initiatives within AMNLAE, Nicaragua and even Latin America. Consequently, even though comparisons between different levels may present some limitations, I believe that the 'sections' I have chosen reflect the more general aspects, positionalities and strategies of their organization as a whole. Furthermore, I find that the comparison of strategies, forms of mobilization and language use is useful, particularly due to the common interests of the organizations of reducing violence against women within Nicaragua's political, economic and historically specific context.

In addition to my fieldwork at the RMCV and AMNLAE San Marcos, AMNLAE's local Women's House in the neighbour town Diriamba invited me to stay with them for a week, an offer I accepted in order to get a broader understanding of AMNLAE's work in the area. Furthermore, as one of my objectives was to explore *the relationship between the government, state institutions and different women's organizations*, my initial intention was to interview workers from Women's Police Stations (*Comisarías*) and hopefully getting to do participatory observation at such an institution. At the *Comisaría* in Jinotepe I only managed to get an interview with their social worker and was allowed to participate in a therapy meeting with 'violent men'. Through the directors of the Women's Houses in Diriamba and San Marcos who knew the policewomen at the corresponding *Comisarías*, I was allowed to do some participant observation there, but less than I had hoped for.

## **2.2 Recruitment of Informants**

The selection of informants did not go exactly according to what I had planned in my project proposal due to practical reasons, lack of access and also to deliberate choices I made after arriving in Nicaragua. My main informants, constituting key personalities within the selected women's organizations, were chosen due to their valuable position and their experience with the topic of interest (Denscombe 2003). To understand and get a broader picture of the situation of violence against women in the department of Carazo, I also decided to contact representatives from other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with violence against women. Employing the method of snowballing where people are "asked to nominate others who meet certain criteria for choice" (Denscombe 2003:16), I solicited contact information from the Women's Houses, *Comisarías* and friends about other NGOs in the area working within my area of interest. In this way I got in contact with and interviewed the directors of two NGOs that were relevant for my research, a Women's Health Centre and an organization offering help to sex-workers and other vulnerable groups. The interviews at these two NGOs complement my findings and as such my understanding of the efforts to mobilize against violence against women in the region of Carazo.

Since I did not manage to interview policewomen at the *Comisarías*, I chose to interview two state employees. Firstly, after most of my informants mentioned the lack of preventive measures, emphasizing the importance of education and of changing values at an early age, I decided to find out what is being done at schools in the area of Carazo regarding violence against women. I showed up explaining my agenda at the offices of the Ministry of Education in Jinotepe and they arranged an interview for me with the Regional Advisor of the School

Counsellor Committee of Carazo. Secondly, after reading a newspaper article published during my fieldwork regarding a new programme aiming at sensitizing doctors attending victims of violence, I contacted the National Institute of Legal Medicine. Even though the Director of that institution scheduled a meeting with me several times, he never made it, and finally answered my questions through e-mail correspondence.

### 2.3 Qualitative Methodology

A qualitative methodology generally involves ‘field reseach’, which according to Lawrence Neuman consists of “looking at a small group of people over a length of time” (2007:21). Furthermore, Neuman (2007) explains that the goal of a qualitative research includes the study of social meanings and being able to grasp multiple viewpoints in a specific social setting. The field researcher gets directly involved with its study subjects, and as such needs to be able to switch perspective between the meaning system of the study subjects and his own ‘outsider’ or researcher standpoint. Neuman (2007) also describes the main methods for obtaining information within a qualitative research, emphasizing close observation with different levels of involvement, detailed note taking and open ended and informal interviews. In my case, I collected most of my data through the qualitative methods of participant observation and qualitative interviews among members of AMNLAE and the RMCV.

#### 2.3.1 Key Interviews in Main Organizations

Main informants				
	Org./Inst.	City	Position	Name
1	AMNLAE	San Marcos	Director	Yolanda Paladino
2	AMNLAE	San Marcos	Lawyer	Carla Zambrana
3	AMNLAE	San Marcos	Lawyer	Dina Sanchez Medrano
4	AMNLAE	San Marcos	Women’s Rights Promoters*	Anonymous
5	RMCV	Managua	Representative of the Coordinating Committee	Fátima Millón
6	RMCV	Managua	Responsible of the Area of Political Action	Virginia Meneses
7	AMNLAE	Diriamba	Director**	Fanny García Pinales
8	AMNLAE	Diriamba	Psychologist	Rossana E. Peugnet
9	Comisaría	Jinotepe	Social Worker	Rosa Elena M. Martinez

\*Interview, informal conversations and E-mail correspondence

\*\*Informal conversation

Since a major part of my objectives involve exploring my informants’ opinions and personal understanding regarding different topics, qualitative interviews were the proper resource for achieving these objectives. As stated by Kvale and Brinkmann, qualitative interviews should be used when trying “to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view” and to

uncover “the meaning of their experiences” (2009:1). I chose to apply semi-structured, in-depth interviews, consisting of an interview-guide which allows flexibility and at the same time goes deep into a small selection of topics (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). For my main informants, I prepared an interview-guide with five to eight topics depending on the organization/institution the informant belonged to. The main topics were: Personal background of the informant; History and structure of the organization and the informant’s position and responsibilities within it; Personal and professional standpoint on violence against women and the factors limiting women’s access to justice; The cooperation between civil society organizations and state institutions and; their relation to the current government.

### 2.3.2 Background interviews and Women Victims of Violence

Secondary Informants				
	NGO/Institution	City	Position	Name
1	MAM & Centre of Constitutional Rights	Managua	Lawyer and Women’s Rights Promoter	Azhalea Solís
2	National Institute of Legal Medicine	Managua	Director and Doctor*	Zacarías Duarte
3	Ministry of Education – Regional Counsellor Committee	Carazo Region	Regional Advisor and Psychologist	Mirna Vásquez Zúniga
4	Foundation Diaconía Nicaragua	Jinotepe	Director & Psychologist	Karla Salazar P.
5	Health Centre Xochipilli	Jinotepe	Director and Doctor	Ninoska Salazar

\*E-mail Interview

The background interviews are important in the sense that they expand my knowledge about the problem of violence against women in Nicaragua and the reasons behind the lack of access to justice. For these interviews the interview-guides differed from person to person, depending on what information I wanted to acquire. Common for all the interview-guides were questions about their institution/organization and their own role in the project of reducing violence against women and facilitating their access to justice.

The first informant is a member of the Autonomous Women’s Movement (*Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres - MAM*). She participated in the creation of the women’s movement in Nicaragua, in the formulation of Nicaragua’s first Constitution after the Dictatorship and in the drafting of some recent laws regarding violence against women. She also works at the NGO called Centre of Constitutional Rights “Carlos Núñez Téllez” which cooperates with the RMCV and supports several projects at the local Women’s House in San Marcos that I volunteered in. Even though the information she provided is not explicitly mentioned in the thesis, her perspective became very useful for my understanding of the general situation of women in the current political context in Nicaragua.

I did not plan to interview women who had experienced violence, mainly due to my lack of experience with this sensitive topic. But, while waiting at the Women's House, at the Police Station or talking to women at cafés, they started telling me their stories. I decided to ask them if I could record the conversations and use their stories in my research, something all of them accepted as long as it was anonymous. Since these interviews were far less formal in character, mostly a result of the spontaneity and the specific context in which they occurred, I will refer to them as conversations. During the first couple of conversations, I just let the women tell me what was on their heart. However, I decided to prepare some questions and brought this 'interview-guide' with me at all times so that whenever I had a conversation with someone who wanted to share their story with me, I could remember to ask the "right" questions. During the laps of my fieldwork I had eight such conversations with women victims of violence. Their stories are relevant because these women shared their perspectives on the reasons of violence, on why they reported to the police or not, about the help they have gotten there or at a Women's House/Centre and so on. Besides, their stories vary a lot in relation to the type of violence they have been exposed to and the measures they have taken, or not taken, to end this violence against them, providing me with a broader perspective to understand the problem.

### **2.3.3 Participant Observation**

According to James Spradley, the researcher engages in participant observation with two purposes: "(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation, and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (in Fife 2005:71). During my fieldwork I engaged in participant observation, however I did not always get personally involved in the activities I observed. Applying such a 'passive' participant observation required that I tried to act in a way that makes people go on with their business as usual (Fife 2005). This was easier after some time in the field when I got to know my informants and they got used to me being around. At the RMCV I both participated actively, by joining their protest marches and participating in their workshops, and as an observer at press conferences and lectures. At AMNLAE's local Women's House in San Marcos and Diriamba, I mostly observed while the director or the lawyers attended women who came seeking help. They also let me observe cases of mediation, child support demands, legal counselling, accompaniment to report violence at the Women's Police Station, the planning of seminars and a trial.

Fife argues that when doing observation it is necessary to be able to "remove yourself" from the "cultural immersion" to be able to put the experiences and observations in perspective and

reflect about it (2005:72). For this purpose, and as a way to ‘save’ observations and conversations, at the end of every day I wrote these down, together with personal reflections and impressions. According to Fife (2005), a good ethnographic research calls not only for an intellectual understanding, but also for emotional empathy from the researcher towards the informants. By spending time at the local Women’s House, I managed to get to know the people working there and thus felt that I could understand them better. I also engaged in informal conversations with the members of RMCV and AMNLAE, but mostly at AMNLAE San Marcos since it was here I spent most of my time. The informal conversations enriched my data by providing me with general information about people’s personal lives, beliefs, opinions and customs, allowing me to get to know my informants at a deeper level.

The method of participant observation was also applied in other circumstances, for instance at the different Women’s Police Stations – the *Comisarías*. However, despite my efforts, I only managed to get a couple of days with observation. In Jinotepe I stayed an entire day in their waiting room initially waiting for an interview, but finding myself having conversations with women victims of violence also waiting to be attended. In accordance with Neuman’s statement “wait time is not always wasted time” (2007:288), this experience provided me with a better understanding of how hard the process of access to justice can be. In Diriamba the police officer in charge let me spend the day with her in her office, observing the cases she handled, whereas in San Marcos I was only allowed to observe some particular cases. I also applied participant observation when participating at a forum about a ‘Project of Integral Attention to Victims of Gendered Violence’ sponsored by Spain. Here I learned about the different initiatives that are being taken by organizations and state institutions in the capital in order to give an integral response to the problem that they termed ‘Gendered Violence’.

#### **2.3.4 Research Instruments**

The methods applied to document my interviews consisted of the use of a voice recorder, in addition to note taking and remembering (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). Even though none of my informants had any objections to the use of a recorder, I chose not to use it in some circumstances due to practical reasons such as loud noise. However, all the interviews from my main informants, constituting such an important part of my research, were recorded. Since Spanish is not my first language, writing notes during the interviews would have been time-consuming and disturbing both for me and my informant. By recording the interview, I could better concentrate on the issue at hand and facilitate the free flow of conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). Additionally, being able to listen to the interviews later reduces the

probability of misunderstandings and thus strengthens the validity and reliability of the interviews. Furthermore, in order to prevent any interruption during the interview due to my lack of translation skills and to allow the natural flow between informant and researcher, I translated the English interview-guides into Spanish beforehand. In addition, a professional woman and old friend helped me looking over the interview-guides before using them in order to adjust them to the Nicaraguan context and ensure their comprehensibility. Another indispensable instrument during my fieldwork was the notebook. I always carried this with me in order to write down important observations and details, names of persons or organizations and issues I had to look deeper into later.

### **2.3.5 Secondary Data**

In all the organizations I received a lot of material that they use either for their own learning or to provide information about different relevant topics to the public. I collected these in order to see what kind of information is available both for the workers at the organization and their target groups. Some institutions and organizations also provided me with relevant statistical data. For instance, I received statistical information on femicides from the RMCV, and the National Ombudsman's Office gave me general statistics and information on laws and practices concerning gender. In addition I have acquired two Law books which include the laws and procedures in cases of violence against women. All these documents serve as a basis for data triangulation by confirming or contesting my initial impressions, observations and interviews, and as such improving the reliability of my data (Silverman 2010).

### **2.3.6 Data Analysis Process**

Since I have a great number of detailed field notes describing informal conversations, and my impressions and understandings of different situations, the first thing I had to do was to apply the method of *meaning condensation* in order to systematize my field notes. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), meaning condensation is mainly used in interviews to compress longer statements into briefer ones. I have used this same method to compress each field note, giving a brief summary of each of them, with the purpose of being able to go back later and easily identify the field note containing the specific information I need. Further, I have systematized the field notes and interviews by coding different segments of these texts "in order to permit later identification of a statement" (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009:202). Most of the codes have been concept-driven, meaning that I have developed them in advance taking as point of departure my objectives and the main topics of my interview-guide.

## **2.4 Research Ethics**

Before I departed to Nicaragua, I had to get clearance from the 'Norwegian Social Science Data Services' (NSD) and their division of Privacy Protection Committee for Research. In Nicaragua the women's organizations confirmed their willingness to share their workplace and information with me after I clarified the purpose and possible outcomes of the research. Regarding research ethics, I was expecting to have to deal with three main ethical concerns. I expected that the topic could be (1) personally sensitive and/or (2) politically sensitive and consequently I required an (3) informed consent from my informants.

Firstly, even though violence against women is a sensitive topic in itself, touching deep personal feelings and difficult experiences (Renzetti & Lee 1993), most of my informants did not seem to have any difficulties talking about it. As most of them are workers from different organizations and institutions handling problems of violence nearly every day, they are used to dealing with this topic. Some of the other women I had conversations with were a little bit more reserved, some clearly embarrassed or emotionally affected. These situations I found really hard, having no experience with dealing with such painful experiences, but I did my best in showing compassion and trying to give them some words of hope and consolation. Secondly, violence against women and access to justice are issues that often involve sharp critique of state institutions, politics, laws and practices, and might therefore constitute a politically sensitive topic for organizations working with these issues. Consequently, I have carefully considered what personal political opinions from informal conversations have been ethically sound to include in this thesis in order to protect the privacy of my informants and to avoid their political persecution or work related problems.

The third ethical concern and especially important aspect when dealing with sensitive topics, is to ensure informed consent and confidentiality (Davies 1999). My original plan was to use a written consent form for my informants to sign prior to the interview. However, I learned that people were happy to contribute, but were suspicious to sign a document, feeling that they were giving away their rights more than protecting them. Additionally and as argued by Murray Wax (1980), it is important to perceive consent as a process that is continually negotiated during the interview and during the course of the fieldwork. Yet, in order to follow the ethical standard of informed consent, prior to the interview I carefully informed my study subjects about the research procedure and its possible outcome, in addition to the voluntary aspect of their participation, being able to withdraw their consent at any time. When it comes to confidentiality, Davies (1999) emphasizes the importance of respecting the informants'

privacy and give assurances of anonymity if desired. With the exception of the *promotoras* at AMNLAE and the women who told me their stories of violence, most of my informants did not want contribute anonymously. I therefore use their original names, referring to them either by surname or given name depending on my personal relation to them and how they were 'known' in their context.

#### **2.4.1 Fieldwork Challenges and Self-Reflection**

My first challenge was to understand how things work in Nicaragua, finding myself surprised that I was not entirely prepared despite spending my childhood there. The biggest challenge during my fieldwork was without doubt to get in contact with the Women's Police Stations and to interview the workers there. Another challenge that followed me during the entire fieldwork was the personal challenge of being able to act as a determined and headstrong researcher. In the beginning I was too soft and naïve, but after a while I realized that I had to be more direct and even a bit pushy to get the information I needed. This problem was a big challenge to me, but by facing up to it I gained improved confidence and great experience.

During my fieldwork, I probably did not reflect enough about how being a Norwegian could influence my interviews and observations. Since I grew up in Nicaragua, when coming back, I almost felt Nicaraguan. But I soon realized that although my friends there saw me as 'a Nica', my informants did not. However, as argued by Jayati Lal (1996), sharing nationality does not always imply having a 'shared background'. She criticizes the assumption of the 'authentic' insider, emphasizing that as a researcher we must recognize our multiple and fluid positionalities in the practice of fieldwork, and reflect on the implications for this for our research (Lal 1996). In relation to my fieldwork and interviews, I think being a Norwegian student helped me in a positive way. As a Norwegian I attained impressions that I probably would not have had if I had been an 'insider'. Furthermore, since I was a young foreigner, my informants always carefully explained everything to me. People's main association with Norway was it being a rich country, resulting in many direct or more subtle questions for economic help either for themselves or for their organization. Sometimes they were disappointed when they understood that I was just a 'poor' student. However, this was not a big problem, and my colleagues at the organizations shared my hopes that maybe one day I can return backed up by an organization bringing financial support for their projects.

# 3 CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

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## GENDER, VIOLENCE AND WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION

In this chapter I will provide a brief presentation of the literature and research that have constituted the background for this thesis. I will also identify the gaps I found in relation to my field of interest, influencing my choice of geographical, political and thematic area of study. The chapter is divided into three parts: I will start by presenting the general traits to gender study in Latin America and Nicaragua, including the relationship between gender and violence against women. I will then narrow down the literature on gender to the specific research on Women's Mobilization in Latin America and Nicaragua that have been relevant for my own research. I will finalize by pointing at the interesting aspects and significance of my study in regards to the gap identified and Nicaragua's current political context.

### **3.1 Gender in Latin America**

With the predominance of the 'Women in Development' paradigm in academic and policy circles in the 1970s, research on gender in 'the Third World' was mostly concerned with the inclusion of women into development (Chant & Craske 2003; Welsh 2001). The focus was centred on the practical and 'measurable' aspects of women's lives, such as their health and fertility status, their participation in politics and in the labour market and their economic situation. The focus on women's practical needs and class relations when describing social and economic inequalities in Latin America can be seen in connection with the legacy of the Dependency Theory during this period. During the 90s the perspective of gender studies started changing from an exclusive focus on the woman, towards a more inclusive 'Gender and Development' approach, which involved two major effects for gender studies (Chant & Craske 2003). Firstly, there was a transformation of the view on women, especially 'Third World women', as a unified static group, towards seeing gender as "a dynamic social construct" (Chant & Craske 2003:8). Secondly, the 'practice' of gender was stressed, in addition to the importance of seeing gender as a relational concept, a constant negotiation between men and women embedded in all levels of social life.

In Nicaragua, literature about gender and especially women focuses on the period of the revolution, the years under the Sandinistas and the changes with the liberal government in the 1990s. Among some of these are several of Karen Kampwirth's (1993, 1996, 2008) and Maxine Molyneux's (1985, 2000, 2003, 2007) books and articles, and Stephanie Linkogle's (1996) and Anna Johansson's (1999) in depth-studies from Nicaragua. These provide me with

a background for understanding how changes at state level have influenced the family, women's political participation and the sources and intensity of their mobilization. Furthermore, they also point at the role of the state and the Catholic Church in forming men's and women's values and perceptions of each other and themselves.

Later, and especially the last ten years, the field of study of gender is increasingly including studies on men and masculinities, also in Latin America. As Chant and Craske emphasize, earlier studies presented men only through female authors and informants, which "arguably produced representations of men that were stereotypical, under-problematised, narrow and unhelpful" (2003:13; Scott 1994). Generally in Latin American literature, the man has often been characterized as 'the irresponsible husband' and the 'distant father', but comprehensive fieldwork has proved that these images of 'the typical man' are no more than stereotypes and as such, not representative for all Latin American men (Chant & Craske 2003). Furthermore, with the writings of authors such as Eduardo Archetti, Krohn-Hansen, Lorraine Nencel, Annick Prieur (in eds. Melhuus & Stølen 1996), Matthew Gutmann (1996) and others, the 'Latin American man' as a unitary category started to become dismantled. In Nicaragua, authors who have contributed to a more nuanced picture of men and gender relations by presenting Nicaraguan men from men's perspective are for instance Roger Lancaster (1992) and more recently Patric Welsh (2001) and Peter Sternberg (2000). Through this literature it becomes clear that the universality of the meanings of categories such as 'men' and 'masculinity' is no more real than a universal understanding of what it means to be a woman.

### **3.1.1 Gender Stereotypes and perspectives on Violence**

However, Melhuus and Stølen argue in their edited book '*Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas*' that "if there is one term which is unambiguously associated with Latin America, it is the term *macho*, and its derivatives *machismo* and *machista*" (1996:14). Machismo is described as "a cult of the male" or as "the cult of exaggerated masculinity", which values and encourages men's aggressiveness and dominance over women, but also their power and control over other men (Chant & Craske 2003; Ellsberg, Peña, Herrera, Liljestrand & Winkvist 2000; Sternberg 2000). The origin of the image of the Latin American *macho* man is much disputed, but according to Alfredo Mirandé (1997) there are three main views. The first is the idea that *machismo* developed as a response to the aggression men and their wives were subjected to from the Spanish conquerors. The second view is that *machismo* was brought to Latin America from Spain, where patriarchal culture was based on the idea of men's supremacy and domination and control over women. The third theory claims that *machismo* existed before

the conquest, deeply embedded in the native cultures of pre-Columbian times. However, several recent studies point out that indigenous communities in twentieth-century Latin America bear less signs of *machismo* than the *mestizo* society (Chant & Craske 2003; Ødegaard 2006). No matter its origins, *machismo* is a complicated concept involving different meanings and values depending on the setting and the person who applies it and as such cannot be used as an offhand concept (Johansson 1999). Besides, it is important to take into account that “the cultural values which surround *machismo* are constantly being redefined” with time and in different contexts (Sternberg 2000:92).

Authors like Lancaster (1992), Craske (1999) and Clare (2000) relate *machismo* to the issue of honour, where the *macho man* feels obliged to resort to violent means, or to threaten with it, when he feels that his honour is being challenged or disrespected. This relation between *machismo* and violence is not a new idea, and was given attention already in the 1970s and 1980s. Different academics shared the view that “*machismo*’s emphasis on male primacy, [the] belief in men’s rights to control women and a strong emphasis on male strength and sexual prowess [has] contributed to a polarisation of gender roles and provided cultural legitimation for the abuse of women” (Chant & Craske 2003:15; Stevens 1973). It was also claimed that poverty intensified the negative aspects of *machismo*, such as violence, financial irresponsibility and sexual infidelity, creating an especially negative stereotype of the poor, Latin American man (Chant & Craske 2003). Others argue that societies that find themselves undergoing bigger transformations, and especially in societies where women’s status is in flux and in dispute, are the ones with the highest levels of wife battering (Wessel & Campbell 1997). Even though studies on gender roles have been criticized for their generalization and lack of empirical base, authors such as Alison Scott argue that despite social variations, “the stress on male dominance and virility has remained unchallenged as the hegemonic gender ideology” (1994:79). Also more current studies emphasize the aspect of *machismo* as part of the Latin American and Nicaraguan understanding of being a man (Mendez 2005; Sternberg 2000; Welsh 2001). In a report from a development project aimed at violent men, Sternberg (2000) asserts that the hegemonic discourse on women’s and men’s traditional roles are still deeply embedded in all aspects of Nicaraguan social life.

An ideology that has been seen to reinforce the values underpinning *machismo* and considered complementary and opposite to it, is *marianismo* (Johansson 1999). The concept was introduced by Evelyn Stevens, defining it as “the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men”

(1973:91). It has its name from Virgin Mary (who embodies the ideals of maternity and chastity) and celebrates women as virgins and mothers and encourages their dependence on and submissive position to men (Ellsberg, et al. 2000). Within this model, according to Craske (1999), women are classified as good or ‘pure’ women when they follow the parameters within the dominant discourse for what is seen as ‘appropriate’ female behaviour. Those who do not comply with what is demanded for ‘a good woman’ within this discourse are often referred to and described as ‘loose’, promiscuous and even as *putas*<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, stepping over the line of what is deemed ‘acceptable’ becomes extremely hard, as it includes severe social sanctions. Even though the concept of *marianismo* is rarely used in popular discourses in Nicaragua, the mother is held in high regard, demonstrated for instance through the big celebration on Mother’s Day.

Stevens (1973) has argued that myths, values and beliefs construct women’s self-perception and self-identity, and posed the idea that women choose to live in submissiveness and even gain from it. Melhuus and Stølen criticize Stevens’ generalization of gender in Latin America and her neglect of the importance of the economic and political context in which the understandings of gender reside (1996). However, they argue that Stevens’ contribution is significant because it raises the following questions: “Are women merely passive victims of oppressive forces, or are they social agents who actively maintain the relations in which they are seemingly subordinate?” And more importantly, *why* would women purposively choose a subservient life? (Melhuus & Stølen 1996:12). According to different literature on violence against women, women who live in violent relationships are not merely passive victims {Arce, 2000 #83;Ellsberg, 2000 #159;Heise, 1998 #94;Santos, 2005 #74}. “What may seem to an observer to be lack of response to living with violence may in fact be a woman’s strategic assessment of what it takes to survive and to protect herself and her children” (Ellsberg & Heise 2005:26). In relation to my thesis, I want to assess what perceptions the workers in Nicaraguan women’s organizations have about violence against women and its underlying reasons. Additionally, the initiatives taken by the organizations may also reflect their opinions about the level of agency of women who experience violence.

According to Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux, the state, described as “a set of coercive and administrative institutions that have as their object the exercise of various forms of power”, is an important actor in shaping discourses and promoting or restricting social

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<sup>6</sup> Colloquial term for prostitute

transformation (2000:37). Generally in Latin America, the state has reproduced a discourse of the family where the relations and activities within it are perceived as private matters and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the state (Santos 2005). For instance, it is only until recently that laws concerning intra-familial violence and sexual abuse have become formalized. Even though this has changed to the better, at least regarding laws and policies, it is still widely held that what happens in the home is nobody else's business. With their mobilization against violence against women, the women's movement is lifting this sensitive issue out of the private domain, portraying it as a political, social and cultural problem. However, the state might counteract this achievement by for instance promoting traditional gender roles, often with reference to religious beliefs. According to Molyneux, the traditional family values of the Catholic Church are still present, not only within Christian discourses, but more generally in the "Latin American cultural constructions of femininity" (2007:36). Furthermore, many authors argue that the discourse of women's moral superiority and sanctity due to their motherly 'instincts' is still deeply embedded in different levels of social life, perpetuating the gendered differences in access to public goods, political participation, autonomy, rights and justice (Kampwirth 2007; Mendez 2005; Molyneux 2003, 2007).

### **3.2 Women's Mobilization in Latin America and Nicaragua**

Maxine Molyneux defines women's movements as "collective feminine action in defence of social and political objectives" (2003:11). The author explains that a women's movement gets its strength as much from its great numerical scope as from its capacity to provoke some kind of legal, cultural, social or political change. It can consist of a diverse range of organizations, a diversity of interests and differing modes of expression, where the majority of its members are women. Molyneux (2003) points out that to describe all women's movements in a single definition is problematic due to the scope of variation and changing nature of women's interests. She does however present three different 'ideals' within the women's movement in Latin America, categorized according to their level of autonomy and type of organizational strategy (Molyneux 2007:228-235). For the purpose of situating the organizations of my research, I will in the following give a brief description of the three types of women's movements described by Molyneux.

First we find the "independent movements", consisting of organizations that claim to be autonomous, deciding their own agenda, goals and strategies of struggle. Accordingly, they do not recognise any higher authorities, and neither do they answer to any political party. However, by adopting 'universal' feminist conceptualizations or accepting guidelines from

external donors, they are not completely politically neutral and free of external influences. The second type of 'ideal' model is one where the independent women's organizations adopt an "associative connection" to political organizations sharing similar goals. With this model, the organization maintains the control over its own agenda, while power and authority regarding the grounds of cooperation has to be negotiated between the parts. The problem is that asymmetries of power between the organizations might reduce the women's organization's capacity to establish their own agenda. The third type of women's movement presented by Molyneux is what she terms "guided mobilizations", characterized by their subordinated position in relation to an external authority (2003:232). The 'guided' organization or movement finds itself attached to a superior institution, generally a political organization or government. In relation to the Nicaraguan RMCV and AMNLAE, their structure, history and the country's current political context makes it hard to classify them into one of these particular models. Broadly speaking, the RMCV would fall in the category of the 'independent' type of organization. AMNLAE on the other hand, due to its current internal problems, its classification depends on whether we consider AMNLAE as a national network, defined by their main office or a specific Women's House. In addition, AMNLAE has changed position and structure consistent with the changes of the national political environment. For a closer understanding of this political context, I will in the following present some main characteristics of the development of the Nicaraguan women's movement.

The women's movement in Nicaragua is a young movement that dates back to the years of the revolution. Women's participation in Nicaragua's popular uprising, constituting 30 % of the revolutionary FLSN guerrilla movement, was probably only exceeded by the Vietnam revolution (Kampwirth 1993; Molyneux 1985). The women's movement in Nicaragua shares most of its history, especially of its emergence and first decade of existence, with the women's organization AMNLAE. Even though it was not originally part of the FLSN, in 1978 the members voted to unite with their *compañeras* in the FSLN and become a Sandinista organization (Craske 1999). After the triumph in 1979, AMNLAE continued to have close ties to the FSLN, acting to preserve the government's power and legitimacy and was increasingly accused of playing the role of the "submissive wife of the FLSN" (Kampwirth 1993:308). AMNLAE's strategy of improving women's social conditions by promoting their integration into the Sandinista revolutionary process is one example of their close relations (Randall 1994). When the Sandinistas lost at the polls in 1990, a great number of women left

AMNLAE in favour of non-partisan organizations, resulting in a restructuring of the Nicaraguan women's movement.

A research report made by the Dutch ISS<sup>7</sup> and Hivos<sup>8</sup> in cooperation with the Nicaraguan women's movement and the local academics Elvira Cuadra and Juana Jiménez (2010), presents the Nicaraguan Women's Movement's development since 1998 to 2008, its obstacles, strategies and goals for the future. According to this study, the women's movement, which now includes a great diversity of organizations, consolidated its autonomy and its strength as a political and social actor in the period from 1998 to 2006. Further, the report specifies that the period from 2007 has been characterized by an increasingly problematic relationship between the state and the women's movement. This period started with the FSLN's penalization of therapeutic abortion, causing immense resistance among women's organizations (Kampwirth 2008). In addition, a government institution filed a complaint against nine feminist leaders for being involved in a nine year old girl's abortion after having been raped by her stepfather (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). Some feminist leaders claim that the government's attitude towards them is partly based on the president's own interests. They believe Daniel Ortega has a personal vendetta against them as a consequence of their support to his stepdaughter when she reported him for sexual abuse in 1998 (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). Due to Ortega's parliamentary immunity, which is extremely criticized by the feminist movement, he has never had to stand trial (Randall 2000).

The history of the Nicaraguan women's movement is an example of Maxine Molyneux's (1985, 2003, 2007) argument of how women's movements' demands and the strategies they pursue in order to achieve them, varies according to the political and historical context. She claims that since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, poverty relief programmes and social policies have mostly been directed towards women as mothers and often also implemented by women themselves (2007). The programmes "were commonly associated with paternalist notions of care and charity" where the State and the Church perceived women's participation in social projects as a natural extension of their family responsibilities and suitable for their 'special attributes' and interests (Molyneux 2003; 2007:41). Many have argued that governments through these projects often exploit and take advantage of women's volunteer work, placing an overload of work on women's shoulders, serving to "feminize the responsibility of poverty" (Molyneux 2007:42). Additionally, Molyneux finds that programmes that only

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<sup>7</sup> ISS: Institute of Social Studies

<sup>8</sup> Hivos: Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation

supply women with money or food “do little do reduce their vulnerability” (2007:41). However, these social projects are often very popular, especially among women with scarce resources, because they answer to their immediate and practical needs (Molyneux 1985).

The historical and political context of the Nicaragua’s women’s movement also illustrate how women’s strategy of mobilization and organization is influenced by the state’s ideological orientation and its politics of co-optation or marginalization of women’s specific demands. Recent studies focusing on citizenship have revealed that “changing relations between state and society generate processes of inclusion and exclusion” (Franceschet & Macdonald 2004:4). Rousseau argues that the problem arises when political leaders adopt discourses of women’s participation and gender equality, as in the case of Fujimori in Peru, as a means of enhancing their party’s legitimacy and claims of democratic credentials “while at the same time their politics goes in the opposite direction” (2009:155). This is similar to what many feminists in Nicaragua are claiming that Nicaraguan governments have been doing by trying to co-opt and control the women’s movement. Political parties “generally approach the movement in times of elections, only to obtain women’s votes [...] However, their platforms and electoral programs do not include their [women’s] specific interests” (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010:55). Further they claim that the women and organizations that are not excluded are those who “do not question women’s ‘status quo’, do not critique the rules of the game and are prepared to defend party interests over strategic gender interests” (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010:55).

In the history of Nicaragua, equally to most countries of Latin America, it has been evidenced that not only the state but women themselves have used arguments regarding women’s ‘natural’ roles and dispositions. Women’s movements have successfully used the image of ‘the mother’ in order to identify with the majority of the Latin American female population and to appeal to the “patriarchal state” for protecting their rights as reproducers of the nation (Mendez 2005; Molyneux 2003). As such, *maternalism* came to be the main common reference of women’s mobilization, often by using “motherhood to justify political activism” (González & Kampwirth 2001:25). In Nicaragua, the early AMNLAE used the image of the mother in order to motivate women to join the ‘cause’ of the revolution (Randall 1981). According to Anna Johansson (1999) and her dissertation built on the narratives of Nicaraguan women, the discourse on the ‘suffering mother’ or *mater dolorosa*, always making reference to Virgin Mary, received a specific meaning in Nicaraguan. In order to serve its purpose during the revolution, Virgin Mary became a symbol for other values than

purity, patience and passivity. She “becomes an active, historical figure, a poor and dedicated mother, working to support her son, protecting him from his oppressors” (Johansson 1999:53). In this way, women participating in the revolution argued that their role as mothers made them more prone to understand and relate to the ‘suffering’ that Nicaragua was going through under its foreign oppressors.

We can see that there are many factors that influence how women’s movements organize and function, ranging from the political context, the authority of the Church and the specific economic and social situation of women themselves. Other factors that influence the nature of women’s mobilization are “the nature of the transition to democracy, the internal coherence of women’s movements in each country, the nature of alliances with other civil society actors...the form of women’s agency within the state, and the nature of the neoliberal economic reforms” (Franceschet & Macdonald 2004:4). All these different factors have created a great variety within the women’s movement, which in the case of Nicaragua can be summarized as a consequence of the transformations during the last decades of the structures of women’s opportunities.

### **3.3 What they did not write about**

My intention is to compare a local women’s house’s way of mobilizing and conceptualizing around the issue of violence against women with the autonomous and outspoken national network RMCV in the capital. I find it especially interesting in the current context with the comeback of the revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega and his seemingly insatiable pursue for power and control, and the recent alleged persecution of sections of the women’s movement. As I could not find any research involving the RMCV and its somehow risky approach to the problem of violence against women under the current political conditions, I became motivated to carry out such research myself. When it comes to AMNLAE, its history as close allies with the Sandinista movement since the times of the revolution has been closely researched; however, the nature of their current relationship remains unclear. In addition, the state’s implementation of contradictory laws, some which are meant to promote women’s rights and protect them, and new restricting laws, as for instance the penalization of therapeutic abortion, makes this specific period of time particularly interesting. Regarding violence against women, there are some reports done by international and local organizations, but nothing in particular about the worker’s own perceptions regarding the problem of violence against women and their approach to it, especially after the recent political transformations.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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In order to understand why women's organizations in Nicaragua work as they do in relation to violence against women, I think it is necessary to explore their members' understanding of this problem and what, in their opinion, causes it. In this respect, I want to analyse within which dimensions, e.g. structural, community, relationship or personal, the causes mentioned lie. I will also examine what measures these organizations are taking themselves and what they see as the state's responsibilities in order to prevent gendered violence. These women's understanding of violence against women, a problem regarded inter-personal and due to its scope also social, necessarily builds on their view of what it means to be a man and a woman, the relations between genders and their place in society. Such understandings will often reflect the dominant cultural models of gender, but it might also bring into light alternative understandings, projections or ideals of how men and women are or should be.

### 4.1 Discourse, 'Multiple Subject Positions' and Gender

The "particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)", for instance talking about and understanding gender, is often referred to as *discourse* (Phillips & Jørgensen 2004:1). Discourse analysis is primarily associated with the French sociologist Michel Foucault and his interpreters<sup>9</sup>. A discourse is, according to Foucault, "a historically, institutionally, and socially specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs" in which meaning is constructed and contested and where power relations are defined (Arce & Long 2000:67). Foucault argued that we cannot experience reality 'outside' discourse (language), because the concepts and categories we know of and use to think and talk with, structure how we interpret our reality. Consequently, he believed that there is no objective truth, but that "each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault 1984:73). Even though Foucault argued that the power to define what statements count as 'true' lies in the hands "of a few great political and economic apparatuses", he emphasized that the function of these apparatuses is only possible based on other, already existing power relations (1984:73). From his point of view, power does not operate as a unified agency of power, but intimately and diffusely through the institutionalization of dominant discourses in a society (Connell 2009; Foucault 1984). Moreover, Foucault argued that power is especially reflected in how

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault's own literary work around the concept of *discursive power* is comprehensive and has led to a considerable production of literature that interprets and criticizes his work. I will confine myself to explaining some central concepts and perspectives which I find relevant for my argument.

we categorize people. In this perspective, the *dominant cultural models of gender* are categories which are naturalized and persist because they serve a certain group of people, mostly the dominant and powerful groups (Moore 1994). However, the hegemonic understandings of reality may be challenged by counter-discourses through which reality is perceived differently (Arce & Long 2000). When it comes to feminist perspectives on gender, these are often regarded as counter-discourses because they may challenge the dominant cultural models of gender.

When Henrietta Moore (1994) talks about ‘subject positions’, she refers to how the individual positions itself in relation to the discourses and discursive practices available in a specific culture, society or group of people, shaping an individual’s identity and actions. Her argument is that an individual’s subjectivity is not “singular, fixed and coherent”, but is rather “composed of, or exists as, a set of multiple and contradictory positionings and subjectivities” (Moore 1994:55). As Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, indicates, gender is not something ‘natural’ or given, but constructed (1972:16). According to Connell (2009), gender identity is not a unitary conception, but an inherently plural one. Additionally, “gender relations always work in context [and] always interact with other dynamics in social life” (Connell 2009:87). He makes reference to the theory of ‘intersectionality’ which claims that in order to study and understand individual identity and actions, one must pay attention to the constant interweaving of social relations such as race, age, class (Crenshaw 1989, 1994). Furthermore, ‘gender’ should be understood as a historical concept as studies have revealed that the meaning of being a man or a woman is transformed through historical processes of change (Connell 2009). Considering ‘gender’ as a historical, dynamic system, Connell (2009) argues that change happens based on both external pressures (i.e. capitalism, imperialism) and internal tendencies (i.e. changes in discourse, internal contradictions forcing change).

Consequently, in order to understand how the individual’s gender identity and practice is bound up with dominant discourses of gender, it is crucial to take into account its wider cultural background and immediate social context. As Kristi Anne Stølen (1996) argues, there is a link between gender discourses and social relations which mutually reinforce each other. Since gender discourses are created within women’s and men’s social reality, these contextual conditions become influential in the production of gender representations. Furthermore, the outplay of the gendered stereotypes and ideas about women’s and men’s roles in different circumstances in their daily lives “helps to reinforce the social and economic conditions

within which they are developed and used” (Stølen 1996:160). The consequent reason why dominant discourses are so hard to challenge is grounded in this mutual relation between the represented and the lived, that is, between discourse and practice. Accordingly, in order to study social processes and understand social life, it is necessary to be aware of how discourses inform social practice and how the latter reproduces or challenges dominant discourses. According to Connell, social practice and relations cannot exist ‘outside’ discourse because “society is unavoidably a world of meanings [... which] bear the traces of the social processes by which they were made” (2009:83). These social processes refer to systems of particular social interests that through history form our society’s culture. This means that individuals’ current social relations within a specific society depend on and are moulded by their cultural heritage and its embedded systems of social interests. In relation to gender, our understanding of being a man or a woman depends on our cultural history, and as such on the specific interests that have given these concepts their ‘accepted meaning’ within our culture.

However, as argued by Connell (2009) and similarly stated by Moore, gender identity is not a “direct consequence of exposure to and compliance with cultural categories” (1994:54). The relationship between gender identity and collective discourses is one of mutual influence, where “social representations of gender affect subjective constructions, and subjective representation or self-representation of gender affects its social construction” (Moore 1994:53). With the construction of the individual as a ‘multiple constituted subject’, Moore (1994) opened up for an understanding of the variations within cultures, in addition to the differences between them. She argued that social research on gender often “stressed inter-cultural at the expense of intra-cultural variation” because the general understanding was that “each culture had its own distinctive gender system” (Moore 1994:55). However, a great number of studies have evidenced that the reproduction of dominant discourses and categories in a society coexist with “instances of non-reproduction, resistance and change” (Moore 1994:52). Furthermore, these multiple models of the person and types of agency will always be marked by structures of difference such as gender, ethnicity, race, class and religion (Moore 1994; Ødegaard 2006). However, these differences, and their importance and relevance, cannot be set a priori, but must be specified in context.

As I have now proposed, gender must be seen as a historical and dynamic concept, one that is expressed through and influenced by cultural discourses, but at the same time producing changes in these social constructions. Additionally, since what it means to be a man/masculine and a woman/feminine is not given and might show internal variations within

the same country, culture, community or group of people, gender has to be carefully analysed within its own specific context. It is important to be aware of the differences within cultures, to look for the particularities of each specific situation and to pay attention to the role of the individual human being and its practices for the production and reproduction of gender discourses. This complex understanding of gender and gender relations constitutes the basis for my analysis of the dominant and the alternative understandings of gender and consequent practices in the two women's organizations in Nicaragua where I did my fieldwork.

#### **4.2 Cultural Politics and Social Movements**

Following Connell's argument that societies are in constant flux, and to understand this incessant process of change, one must acknowledge and be attentive to the continuous struggle over meaning and representation that happens at different levels of society. In order to understand how and why social change happens, and how such transformations may affect and also change the political structures of a given society, I will present Alvarez and colleagues' (1998) concept of 'Cultural Politics'. Alvarez et al. build on Jordan and Weedon's definition, stating that cultural politics is concerned with "the legitimation of social relations of inequality, and the struggle to transform them" (1995, in Alvarez, et al. 1998:5). Furthermore, cultural politics determine what meanings social practices have and who hold the power to define these meanings. Furthermore, Jordan and Weedon emphasize that cultural politics also include the aspects of subjectivity and identity because "the forms of subjectivity that we inhabit play a crucial part in determining whether we accept or contest existing power relations" (1995, in Alvarez, et al. 1998:5-6). Nevertheless, Alvarez and colleagues (1998) find that it is in the collective struggles, especially in the interventions of social movements, that the strong links between the politics of representation and the exercise of power become apparent. More importantly, they argue that social movements show clear evidence of the resistance to and challenge of the dominant power of representation, and consequently, of the exercise of cultural politics. In short, the concept of cultural politics captures the importance of both the individual and the collective in struggles for changing unequal relations of power inherent in most cultures.

Politics in this regard has to be understood as more than only what happens within the limited structures of the government, political parties and state institutions. Politics also encompasses power struggles in private, social, economic and cultural spaces, and thus also the work of women's organizations working to change power relations. For example, when women's organizations start using alternative conceptions of 'woman' which disturb the dominant

cultural discourses, they are challenging existing power relations and as such, performing cultural politics. Facing power inequalities and the state's role in maintaining these, social movements and organizations, due to their often broad appeal, can be important actors of change through enacting in cultural politics.

Movements can subvert traditional givens of the political system - state, power, political parties, formal institutions - by contesting the legitimacy and apparently normal and natural functioning of their effects within society. But, also, the role of some social movements has been to reveal the concealed meaning of the political encased in the social.

(Alvarez, et al. 1998:11)

Furthermore, cultural politics are also performed when movements attempt to give new meaning to dominant cultural interpretations of politics or challenge prevailing political practices, but also by simply intervening in policy debates (Alvarez, et al. 1998). This applies to the Nicaraguan context where history shows that most women's organizations relate to the political system in one way or another, often either by directly supporting or opposing the party in power (Linkogle 1996). Currently, several women's organizations are involved in some sort of confrontation directed towards policies and political practices, criticizing the Nicaraguan state for reproducing structures of patriarchy, undermining democracy and ignoring women's specific demands (Cuadra & Jiménez 2010). Furthermore, since the work of the women's organizations in this research evolves around the issues of violence against women and women's access to justice, I wish to look at the way in which they relate to the state through the judicial system. To explore this relationship, I will use Deborah Pool's questioning of the role of the state as simultaneously part of but yet removed from local systems of justice, leaving its citizens with an ambiguous sense of threat and guarantee.

When people come together to struggle collectively towards a common goal, a shared sense of identity is often constructed. Connell defines this as 'identity politics', where a subject "becomes a member of a social movement by claiming the identity...that the movement represents" (2009:107). However in practice and as with 'cultural identities', variations will exist within and between these 'collective identities', such as within and between different organizations. In relation to AMNLAE and the RMCV, I find it interesting to explore how the members construct and conceptualize a 'collective identity' and what this identity involves. In this regard, I will develop on Lynn Stephen's (2005) examination of identity formation within a movement and the corresponding tension between internal differences and the projection as a homogenous group outwards. But first I will give a short introduction to June Nash's (2005)

description and critique of studies on 'new social movements' and their member's motivation for mobilization.

Traditionally, social movements have been studied alongside class-based politics, focusing exclusively on economic issues in specific labour contexts (Linkogle 1996; Nash 2005). During the 1960s and 70s, the nature of the increasing political and economic collective protests and different forms of activism proved the traditional focus on class insufficient.

The faceless masses and the suppression of difference in the interest of promoting unity were no longer viable strategies. The new leaders embodied the muted demands of diverse groups as women, ethnic and religious groups contested repressive conditions. In the course of their struggles, they expanded the cultural potential for symbolizing their objectives and embodying their concerns. (Nash 2005:10)

According to June Nash, the need for more complex analyses of social movements was responded to by theorists on "new social movements", who incorporated other cultural aspects as sources of motivation for mobilization (2005:10). Issues such as ethnicity, gender and race received major attention, emphasizing pluralism, identity and autonomy and seeing the individual as an important actor and protagonist of social change.

The Nicaraguan women's movement can be seen in relation to such a development, from being part of the 'faceless', unified popular revolution, to becoming a movement based on women's own interests. However, with the theory of new social movements Nash (2005) argues that the importance of the individual actor and its opportunity for producing social transformation is at times over-emphasized. Furthermore, the focus on the individual cannot explain why these women decide to organize collectively in the first place. Nash (2005) highlights that the source of inspiration that cause women to unite in different organizations and advocate for or against specific issues, the women's movement's common cause, might be overlooked or minimized. This collective base of the movement often coincides and builds on the 'collective identity' of its members, an identity often essentialized and simplified by the members for the purpose of their struggle. For instance, indigenous groups and movements often adopt the reductionist categories and terms applied to them in order to advocate for their rights as an ethnic group. Likewise, women's movements and organizations have traditionally used motherhood as a unifying ground, as was the case in AMNLAE in Nicaragua (Linkogle 1996; Nash 2005). Nash also underlines the negative consequences that such essentialization may have, for instance by distancing women from public life by organizing as 'mothers'. Furthermore, even though movements and organizations tend to

operate with unitary identities that may result in essentialization, when studying these, it is important to avoid essentialization and look inside this outer 'shell' of projected sameness (Warren 1998 in Ødegaard 2006).

The new social movements "have been characterized as dynamic, 'democratized' organizations that operate outside the parameters of an exclusively class-based politics" and often adopting an oppositional relationship to the state (Linkogle 1996:112). The revolution in Nicaragua fits into this description as it cannot be described as exclusively class-based, even though influenced by Marxist theory. It must be seen as a collaborative initiative of what Linkogle term "the third force", referring to the middle class, the petit bourgeoisie, intellectuals, the economically marginalised and social movements (1996:114). The women who participated in the revolution and in the creation of the Nicaraguan women's movement had all types of backgrounds, middle- and upper class, working-class and peasant women, professionals, students, self-employed market sellers, and so on (Molyneux 1985; Randall 1981, 1994). However, the women's movement represented by AMNLAE differed from the definition of new social movements in keeping a collaborative, instead of an oppositional, relationship with the state, and was even accused of being submissive to the FSLN (Linkogle 1996). Today, the women's movement is divided into a plurality of organizations, which all, including AMNLAE, claim autonomy from the state. However, and as I will discuss later, AMNLAE's autonomy from the state can be questioned.

Both AMNLAE and RMCV are national organizations representing a broad spectre of women, and as such, include a variety of identities. Lynn Stephen uses the idea of "the process of identification", based on Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as a construction and never-ending process, to explain how identity is constructed and negotiated within a movement (2005:66). She argues that "organizing requires the projection of 'sameness' to outsiders" and as a consequence, members of the women's movements find themselves in a constant process of negotiating difference, creating "unitary names, symbols and goals [which] can result in the essentialization of women" (Stephen 2005:66). Stephen's study shows that although women's- and indigenous' movements might appear homogenous from the outside, the background of the participants is complex and their reasons for participating differ for each particular member. The essentialization and homogenization of the group, which according to Stephen (2005) is a constructed and discursive process, have to be seen as a strategy of movements that regularly bargain with the state. Stephen's statements support what Gayatri Spivak (1993) terms 'strategic essentialism', whereby suppressed groups

exercise their rights as citizens through acting on an imagined unity of identity. That is, they ‘choose’ a collective identity as a strategy to pursue a political project. Stephen claims that “essentialist categories are alive and well in the political arenas of Latin America”, and thus the “political recognition of women [...] requires political action on the basis of essentialized identity categories” (2005:75). However, these assumptions appear quite generalizing, and might not be accurate for the situation in Nicaragua. Yet, Stephen’s observations will assist me in exploring how AMNLAE and the RMCV construct their ‘self-presentation’ outwards and how they negotiate difference within. Do they for instance apply ‘strategic essentialism’, that is, essentialization of identities as part of their organizational strategy, when appealing to the public and the state?

### 4.3 The Ecological Model – An Integrated Framework

In order to understand the organizations’ strategies and practices in relation to the different aspects that may cause violence against women, I will employ Lori Heise’s (1998) *Ecological framework for explaining gender-based violence* (Fig.1): In this framework, violence against women is seen to result from the interaction of factors at different levels of social life (Ellsberg & Heise 2005). Specifically, the model indicates that violence against women stems from an interplay of factors at the level of the individual (the aggressor or victim themselves), their family and close relationships, the community and the structures of social life. By using this model in cross-cultural studies, Ellsberg and Heise (2005) argue that it may provide some insight to the question of why some societies and individuals are more violent than others. Additionally, it may help explain “why women, especially wives, are so much more likely to be the victims of violence within the family” (Ellsberg & Heise 2005:24).

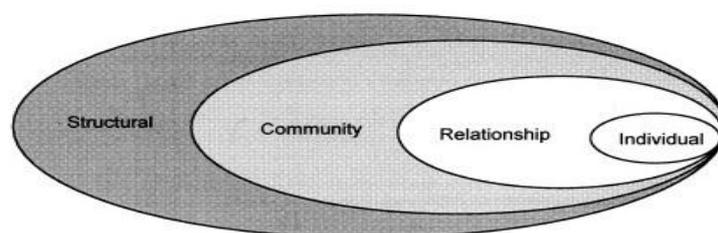


Fig. 1. An integrated framework for understanding violence against women (Ellsberg & Heise 2005:26)

Based on “a wide range of studies”, Ellsberg and Heise claim that on the *individual level*, if the aggressor was abused or witnessed violence in his family as a child, if his own father was absent or rejected him, or if he consumes too much alcohol, he might easier resort to violence (2005:24). Another comparative study of nine developing countries including Nicaragua,

shows that also the woman's previous experiences influence the probability for her to become a victim of violence (Kishor & Johnson 2004). The study found that factors such as low education, low socio-economic status, being under the age of 25, residing in an urban area and having witnessed violence as a child increase the risk of abuse. Considering the *relationship and family dimension*, Ellsberg and Heise (2005) argue that violence is more frequent when the man controls wealth and decision making. However, recent studies have discovered that the increasing inclusion of women to the area of production in countries characterized by traditional gender roles, often create situations of increased domestic violence (Counts, Brown & Campbell 1992; Mendez 2005). Within the *community level*, following Ellsberg and Heise's (2005) arguments, the critical factors are women's isolation and lack of support from family and friends, in addition to the acceptance and legitimatization of violence against women within male peer groups. When it comes to the *structural dimension*, the authors argue that violence against women is more common in societies where "the concept of masculinity is linked to toughness, male honour, or dominance" and when "the prevailing culture tolerates [...] and perpetuates the notion that men 'own' women" (Ellsberg & Heise 2005:24). Accordingly, the factors that might protect women from abuse appear to be stronger when combined at different levels – the personal (having power outside the family), the community (family members and friends who intervene promptly), and the social (family affairs open to public scrutiny).

The factors presented by Ellsberg and Heise (2005) are prominent traits found through cross-cultural studies and are therefore not representative for every society. Different societies will have great variations as to what factors might contribute to actions of violence against women. Consequently, when departing from the ecological model, it is important to look at both the specificities and the broader cultural and historical context of the specific organization, group of people or community. For my purpose, Ellsberg and Heise's lack of emphasis on the agency of the state within the structural dimension presents a limitation. I will therefore include the state in that dimension and depart from the view that the state is an important actor when it comes to defining dominant discourses and practices that reproduce or challenge violence against women. In practice, the ecological framework will be used as a tool for categorizing and systematizing how the organizations conceptualize and mobilize in relation the different aspects they perceive as *the main obstacles towards a non-violent and more just society*. When it comes to the RMCV, as presented in their 'Conceptual Framework', it emphasizes that the causes of violence against women are complex and multi-

dimensional, and are related to “personal, situational and socio-cultural” factors (2011b:Marco Conceptual). Under the same section, the RMCV explicitly states that it builds its understanding of violence against women on an “ecological model of human development”, making reference to Heise’s model. Consequently, I believe the ecological framework will be particularly interesting for exploring the RMCV’s work, strategies and official discourse, in addition to the members’ own conceptualizations. Likewise, the model will be helpful when studying AMNLAE’s strategies, its workers understandings of the problem of violence and the initiatives they take against it. In general, I believe that by having Heise’s integrated model in mind, I will be more attentive to the complexity of the different dimensions that cause violence against women and the subsequent levels that are being addressed in order to prevent and reduce the rate of this problem.

#### **4.4 Summarizing**

In my thesis, I depart from an understanding of ‘gender’ as a socially constructed concept, where its meaning is specific to a particular time and context. Additionally, the individual variations existent in every culture, leads me to explore and not take for granted the ‘subject positions’ that the workers in the different organizations might take up and through which they might challenge their ‘given’ roles. Furthermore, in order to understand how women’s movements might contribute to a wider change of unequal power balance between the genders, I apply Alvarez and colleagues’ concept of ‘cultural politics’. With this concept it is not my intention to try to measure the degree of ‘success’ of the RMCV or AMNLAE through whether or not they are able to redefine social power in the Nicaraguan context. However, I believe the concept will shed light on the organizations’ strategies and alternative discourses which can destabilize the current power balance, especially when it comes to the discriminatory and violent practices towards women. By adding the perspective of ‘collective identities’ and the idea of ‘strategic essentialism’, I wish to explore how AMNLAE and the RMCV construct categories of gender identity and the implications that these constructions may have. Furthermore, I also find it relevant to assess how the RMCV and AMNLAE position themselves as organizations in relation to the dominant discourses on gender, for instance by using counter-discourses to challenge these, and how it relates to their work and strategies. Additionally, with Heise’s Ecological Model as a basis, I will explore the organizations’ strategic and practical areas of focus with regard to the factors at different levels in society that cause violence against women.

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: RMCV - A NATIONAL NETWORK

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The Women's Network against Violence (RMCV) – *Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia* – is a relatively young organization. Several of their current members participated in the creation of the RMCV in 1992. Their foundation was grounded in the struggle to overcome women's subordination and abuse, building on principles of autonomy and diversity, and pursuing their goals through mobilization, public denunciation and promotion of public policies. As a coordinating network, consisting of almost a 100 individual women members in addition to around 150 associated groups and organizations, the RMCV's main office is conveniently situated in the capital. From there they plan their activities, including the organization and execution of everything from minor protests to major mass demonstrations, they hold seminars and press conferences, and they conduct data collection and investigations. In this chapter I will briefly present the RMCV's structure, its principles of participation and strategies and my main informants. I will also illustrate how the RMCV works in practice, discussing their approaches and looking at their cooperation with other institutions. Finally, I will explore the RMCV's historical relationship to the Sandinista government.

### 5.1 The Network - Its Structure

The RMCV's Main Office is divided into different sections with respect to their different areas of responsibility. The Coordinating Committee is the network's main coordinating organ, integrated by 11 women who are elected for a three years period. The current Coordinating Committee was elected for the period of 2007 to 2010. Within the Committee, the chosen official representative, who is the RMCV's official spokesperson, rotates after a six months period. In this way, each of the members of the Committee will function as the official representative for one period, except for the two members who have permanent responsibilities within the Coordinating Committee: The one responsible for the 'Area of Political Action' and the responsible for the 'Area of Strategic Development'. The RMCV's structure also incorporates a support system divided into two areas, "Communications and Publication" and "Administrative Support". Furthermore, even though the Coordinating Committee is regarded the 'head' of the RMCV, all decisions have to go through their Women's Assembly<sup>10</sup>. The Assembly, including all RMCV members who participate on an individual basis and a representative from each of the member organizations, meets every two months to discuss and decide the RMCV's agenda. The Coordinating Committee proposes

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<sup>10</sup> The only requisite to be part of the Assembly is to register as an RMCV member - no membership fee.

suggestions, but it is the Assembly that decides which issues they want to support and the priority the different cases should have.

### **5.1.1 Fátima Millón and Virginia Meneses – The RMCV’s Public Faces**

My two main informants in the RMCV are Fátima Millón, the official spokesperson of the Network<sup>11</sup> from 2007-2010, and Virginia Meneses, the responsible for the Area of Political Action during this same period. These two women are busy activists, with several responsibilities and always in the forefront of the RMCV’s activities and protests, expressing their opinions in the media, always demanding justice for women victims of violence.

**Fátima Millón** is a woman who stands out in the crowd of Nicaraguan women, with her tall body structure and her short hair. Since our first meeting, at a joint conference with different organizations, I got the impression that this was a strong woman, a woman not afraid of expressing herself, defending what she believes in. I discovered when meeting her personally in her office at the RMCV that Fátima Millón is also an open, warm and happy person. Greeting me with a smile, she told me that I was welcome to interview her and to visit the Women’s Centre she represents within the RMCV. Millón explained that most of the members of the RMCV work in organizations ‘on the ground’ which are affiliated to the network of the RMCV. She herself participates in the RMCV in representation of the Women’s Centre ISNIN. She started working at the Centre when she was 14 years, almost 18 years ago. *“In this team, I currently hold the position as responsible for projects concerning ‘capacitación’, but I am always involved in the direct attention of women who suffer violence, any type of violence”*. When it comes to her education, Millón clarified that she started her higher education, taking courses in graphic design and technical media, but never completed it. However, she finds that it has been useful in her work at the Women’s Centre:

*Since I am the educator and I work with capacitación [referring here to her work at ISNIN], I relate the subject of communication to [those activities]. Anyway, it is through my participation as a representative from ISNIN that I have strengthened my leadership as an active member of the Network.*

Fátima Millón revealed that her motivation for her work at organizations dealing with violence against women is grounded in her own life history. She knows how it is to live with violence, experiencing it first during her childhood with her father, and later with her partner. She told me that most of the violence she has experienced has been related to the problem of

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<sup>11</sup> the members referred to the RMCV only as *La Red*, meaning ‘the Network’

alcoholism. These negative experiences, she argued, provide a good foundation for her work with women who find themselves in the same situation.

*In my life history, I have been a woman who has experienced situations of violence, and therefore also sometimes I see the problems with a sense of frustration. But it also allows me to 'put myself in the shoes' of the other woman. And along the way I have learned that each woman [decides] her own process and [...] the route she wants to take. I, my role here is to give her information, give her the possible alternatives.*

In 1992 Millón participated with her co-workers from the Women's Centre at the conference 'United in Diversity' where the RMCV was created. After that, her local organization chose her as their representative within the RMCV, where she has been a member since. *"These last years my participation have been more active, [...especially] after I was elected to the Coordinating Committee"*, and added that her three years period as member in the Committee is soon coming to an end. Then, her main focus will again be on her work at the small Women's Centre in one of Managua's many poor neighbourhoods.

**Virginia Meneses** is the current representative for the Area of Political Action and has been a part of the RMCV for 16 years. She started out as a *promotora legal* (legal counsellor), working directly with women victims of violence at different women's centres and shelters. She was even part of the initiative toward the creation of the specialized police stations for women and worked at the pilot project of the first *Comisaría* in Managua. She has always been active in the Network, and three years ago she was elected to become the responsible for the RMCV's political activities. She has recently finalized her Law degree which has resulted very relevant for her work at the RMCV. Appearing as a fearless, enthusiastic and strong woman, I was surprised when Meneses told me that *"When I first joined the Network, I remember that I did not know how to talk [...] I could not express my ideas. I was the person in the Network who never said a word. I was afraid of talking"*. She said that one of the reasons for choosing to stay with the RMCV for such a long time is precisely because the Network is a space that *"allows you to grow. And I am very grateful to the Network for helping me in my development towards my leadership, for strengthening my leadership"*. As a consequence, she had the courage to participate in the elections in 2007 as a candidate for the position as representative for the Area of Political Action, which she won.

Similarly to Meneses, several members of the RMCV expressed the importance of the RMCV for raising their awareness and confidence and as such, allowing their personal development. As argued by Nikki Craske, an important role of women's mobilization has consisted of

encouraging “women to develop their political skills”, allowing them the space necessary to strengthen their self-esteem and to have the courage and be able to speak up, both in the private and public spheres (1999:133). Through their horizontal mode of organization, the rotation of leadership and their focus on providing *capacitaciones* for their members, the RMCV can be said to be playing out this vital role as described by Craske.

### **5.1.2 Diverse but United; Political but not Partisan**

The RMCV’s horizontal, non-hierarchical organization has been considered a more adequate solution by many feminist organizations as a means to guarantee the principles of democracy, open debate and wide participation (Molyneux 2003). Following this model, RMCV members consider the Women’s Assembly to be their most important organ, because it is here where the RMCV members make the decisions about the organization’s political standpoint and its strategies. Fátima Millón explained that the Assembly decides whether “*to start or promote a campaign, what the content of the campaign should be, the content of the radio programme we have, the content of our news releases and what activities we want to organize*”. The decision making is done through “*debate, consensus, [and] finally, by vote*”, Millón explained. “*We believe we have to open up for a free debate, including how we want to function internally in the organization, establishing norms of cooperation and principles of participation*”. Regarding the latter, the fundamental principle of participation in the RMCV is *diversity*, meaning that women with different types of backgrounds, including differences of age, ethnicity, political stand or religious views, can be members. For instance, the Women’s Assembly consists of all the RMCV members, which includes a great variety of women from different organizations. Millón pointed out that this diversity does not make it easy to get consensus on an issue, adding that “*there has to be a lot of debate, so the Assembly meetings almost always last for two days*”. Nevertheless, the RMCV defend and maintain their principles of debate and consensus, and resort only to voting if full agreement results impossible.

It is important to take into account that even though the RMCV emphasizes diversity as a main principle of participation, the actual scope of difference of their members in terms of age, class and political and religious stand, might not reflect such diversity. Because the RMCV itself does not actively go around recruiting members, the problems that might arise by emphasizing diversity as a principle of participation are reduced or might even be avoided. This diversity, united under the collective identity ‘women’, illustrates Lynn Stephen’s debate on the strategy of essentialization employed by many movements. However, an urgent issue

that often does arise in organizations following a democratic and non-hierarchical model is how to reconcile the principle of democratic participation with “effective leadership” (Molyneux 2003:228). The RMCV has implemented two measures as a means to overcome this dilemma and ensure both wide participation and a successful leadership. The first measure is concerned with situations where an urgent matter has to be decided and there is no time to gather the Assembly members. In such situations the Coordinating Committee makes use of its vote of confidence given to it by the Assembly, and takes on the responsibility and the risk of making a decision. The second measure is the fixed period of time of three years that the Coordinating Committee is elected for, being perceived as long enough to pursue and carry out the RMCV’s goals efficiently but not as long as to give a handful individuals too much power.

Another principle of organization agreed upon through consensus is the principle of autonomy. Millón emphasized that autonomy is important, *“because [even though] we are political, we do not carry out partisan politics”*. The RMCV’s political activities, including all the initiatives directed towards civil society, state institutions and the government, are coordinated through the Area of Political Action which *“acts as the network’s public face”*. One of Meneses’ most important responsibilities is to organize public campaigns and press conferences, delegating the practicalities around the different campaigns and activities to the committees and support systems. These support groups are constituted by RMCV members who make it possible to produce and distribute banners, posters and flyers, in addition to publishing information in newspapers, on the radio and the TV. Another important function of the Area of Political Action, according to Meneses, has been their direct participation in the political sphere through their inclusion in state driven committees. However, since the comeback of Daniel Ortega, their political activity has been limited to public denunciation and protests.

The RMCV’s principle of autonomy, as I have mentioned earlier, resulted out of the necessity of forming a network that was not subordinated to a political party or any other external structures for the development of a feminist agenda with their specific demands. Many women experienced that they were not allowed to promote women’s specific interests within AMNLAE, due to the Sandinista government’s strong control and their prioritization of other political issues which did not specifically concern women. Therefore, their choice of becoming an ‘autonomous’ network, or what Molyneux (2003) terms “independent movement”, can be seen as a natural outcome of the former history of the FSLN government

of completely co-opting the women's movement, limiting their radical and specific demands. As Franceschet and Macdonald state, "movements that are autonomous may be freer to make demands that political parties are unwilling to make given their desire to attract voters" (2004:6). The result is that the RMCV has taken a forefront position within civil society's criticism towards different governments and their policies, especially regarding the issues which concern women's wellbeing.

## **5.2 Preventing and Responding to Violence against Women**

In Fátima Millón's opinion, violence against women *"is any act, [whether] omission or action, that results in physical, psychological or verbal harm"*. She explained that she talks about omission, because she believes it is also an act of violence when men fail to fulfil their responsibilities towards their partner or children. Millón clarified that one of her objectives as responsible for *capacitación* at the Women Centre ISNIN is to make women realize that omission can also be a violation of their rights:

*In all situations, we have made a huge effort so that women realize that omission is also an act of violence. When a man does not take on his responsibility with his children, as for instance paying child support, it is an act of omission – an act of economic violence.*

The underlying cause for this violence against women is according to Millón grounded in *machismo*, *"which sadly continues to have deep roots here"*. She explained that a man who is *macho* *"will not tolerate to be dependent on his woman or that she insinuates that they are keeping up [economically] thanks to her"*. Furthermore, Millón stressed that it is when the woman decides to take control and to decide over her own body and life that the violence against her starts or gets worse. Still, she believes that women should strive for becoming economically independent, arguing that this *"will always give her power"* and that it *"is a part of her process of empowerment"*. Even though Millón finds the reasons for violence mainly at the individual level, when asked about what should be done to prevent it, she immediately mentioned the restitution of the National Committee against Violence – an initiative at a completely different level social life.

Virginia Meneses explained that violence against women is a problem that has always been there, but that it was not officially acknowledged as a public problem and a crime until 1996, when the Law 230 was created. Meneses claimed that the current increase in reported cases of violence can be seen in connection to the RMCV's work of monitoring the murder of women and their activism and campaigns, insisting that women should report the violence committed against them. *"What is happening now"* she said, *"is that when the RMCV starts to gather*

*statistical data and proves that we are being assassinated, this boost [of accusations] is created*". Meneses emphasized that it is not necessarily the violence in itself that is increasing, but that the number of women who dare to report such actions and reveal their private life to the public, has increased. When talking to me, Meneses always made references to the work of the RMCV and used a discourse very much in coherence with the general discourse promoted by the RMCV in their official publications and in the media. The latter might be a result of Meneses' position within the organization, which gives her the possibility to influence and even create part of the RMCV's public discourse.

### **5.2.1 Public Denunciation: Three Cases**

The Women's Network against Violence (RMCV), as can be understood from their name, has as a main goal to eradicate all types of violence against women. In the interview with the representative of the Coordinating Committee, Fátima Millón, she informed me that the RMCV's strategy towards accomplishing their goal is mainly through mobilization, public denunciation and promotion of public policies that benefit women. These strategies have been the fundamental characteristics of their work and might not be as easy to separate because in many circumstances, the use of one of these strategies will include the other. Millón pointed out that public denunciation can mean protests, critiques and demands that are presented to the public through the media or by organizing campaigns and demonstrations in the streets. This strategy is often used when protesting against a new law or a reform, or to demand justice for a specific case of violence. The latter point is evidenced in the many individual cases that the RMCV chooses to support and what they referred to as their 'emblematic' cases, meaning that they are representative and symbolic, reflecting the experiences of many women who have been victims of violence. Public denunciation also involves a process of on-going support to the woman during her judicial process, accompanying her at her trial, and presenting her story in newspapers, radio and sometimes even on national television. Virginia Meneses clarified that when women or family of women choose to contact the RMCV, it is generally because they feel that their rights have been neglected and therefore want go public with the case in order to exert pressure on the authorities. "*This is the case with Dina's situation*", Meneses pointed out.

#### **DINA'S ALLEGED SUICIDE**

Dina Alexandra Carrión Gonzalez died April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010. According to the Police Report, Dina died from a shot in the chest that she inflicted on herself. So, according to her ex-husband, his family and the Public Ministry, Dina committed suicide. The family of the victim on the other

hand, believes that Dina's ex-husband killed her, and therefore asked the RMCV to support them in their public denunciation demanding justice for their daughter and sister. On July 30<sup>th</sup> the same year, I participated at the first public appearance of Dina's family in relation to this case. Together with the RMCV they arranged a press conference, where reporters and journalists from national television, radio stations and newspapers participated. As an opening to the press conference, the RMCV showed a Power Point presentation with pictures and names of women who have been victims of femicide in 2010, while simultaneously playing the song *Por Ser Mujeres*<sup>12</sup> - 'Because We are Women'. This is a song with a strong and moving text about women who die in the hands of their 'loved' ones, stating that 'they kill us because we are women'. With this introduction, the RMCV managed to place Dina's specific case in a context, showing that it is not a unique case, but rather one of many. Consequently, the press conference appeared not only as a protest of this single case, but as a call to stop the further increase of the murder of women and to end impunity by ensuring conviction of these women's murderers.

Virginia Meneses from the Area of Political Action introduced the press conference by presenting the RMCV's official statement on Dina's case, accusing the Police, the Institute of Legal Medicine and the Public Ministry of acting with negligence:

*The police never cared to do the criminal investigation, they just went with the story of 'Pedro' [the victim's ex-husband and alleged murderer]. In the report from the police investigator, there are several inconsistencies. For instance, the weapon was found in some distance from Dina's body, she presents signs of beating [and] the statement from 'Pedro' is very brief. He does not explain, neither is he asked about the blood found on his t-shirt, shorts, pillow and shoe that he was wearing that day and which according to the conclusions of the Institute of Legal Medicine [was] human blood.*

In this same conclusion, it is stated that "*the blood type is not possible to reveal due to the few samples collected and the lack of chemical analysis of the blood*". With all these flaws in the police investigation, "*it is clear that this is a cover-up of a murder. [Dina's] family is soliciting justice for this crime, and the worst thing is that the only child that Dina left is being denied permission to have any relation with his maternal grandparents and aunts*", Meneses concluded.

Dina's sisters and mother also talked to the press, expressing their frustration and desperation regarding this injustice they have experienced. Similarly to Meneses' claims, they accused the police for covering up a murder. They maintained that the father of Dina's ex-husband had

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<sup>12</sup> Music and Lyrics by Yeco Hernández, song by Karla Lara.

‘fixed’ the case through his influence as former Secretary General of the National Assembly, in addition to his past job at the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security. *“He is definitely manipulating the situation and did not let the police do their work, leaving the murder of my sister in impunity”*, Dina’s sister told the journalists in tears. Dina’s family’s lawyer was also very clear in his accusations, stating that *“There is no doubt that she was murdered”*. He accused the Public Ministry, the authorities in charge and everyone involved of acting with negligence and playing the role of accomplice by not doing a proper investigation. The lawyer described how he believed the scene of the crime had been staged and declared: *“evidence [shows that] she was beaten, put on her knees and shot”*.

#### **FÁTIMA’S HUNGER-STRIKE FOR JUSTICE**

The second example of a case that the RMCV chose to support has been the long process towards justice for Fátima Hernandez. She accused her co-worker at the Department of Immigration and Foreign Services of rape in June 2009. Fátima’s case has caused an immense response from the media and the public, showing a great division between those who support her and believe in her story, and those who give their entire support to the man accused of the crime against her. I find this case very interesting, because during my stay in Nicaragua, this case was often brought up as a case where justice finally triumphed (before the appeal). However, as the case was ‘on wait’ during my fieldwork, I have collected relevant information from news articles and from the RMCV’s statements and publications. The news articles recount how Fátima had to put up with six months of struggle and persistence before she managed to obtain a formal accusation from the Public Ministry. When the hearings were postponed several times, something Fátima considered to be a dilatory strategy, she decided to start a hunger-strike (Cruz 2010c). She maintained the hunger-strike over a week, performed as a ‘sit-in’ in front of the Supreme Court of Justice in order to demand a fair trial. Finally, the 21<sup>st</sup> of June of 2010, almost a year after the criminal incident, the trial was held and the defendant was sentenced to 8 years imprisonment. Immediately, the defendant’s attorney appealed the verdict.

At the appeal hearing four months later, the Public Prosecutor who is supposed to defend Fátima, contradicted all his colleagues’ accusations against the accused and requested a review of the case, claiming the innocence of Fátima’s co-worker (Cruz 2010b). Fearing that the accused would go free, Fátima began a new hunger-strike with her father, always in front of the Court in order to attract more attention and exercise more pressure. She affirmed that all she wants “is that the Magistrates [...] act in compliance with the law according to the

evidence of the case” (Cruz 2010a). The RMCV informed me that Fátima solicited their urgent support in order to exercise stronger pressure on the Magistrates. The RMCV provided Fátima with a bed, a pop-up gazebo and other essential things so that she would have the minimal conditions covered in order to hang on until the judgment was publicly announced, supposedly five days after the appeal hearing. The RMCV members also expressed their support in the media, stating that “from the RMCV we will continue supporting her and all women who are struggling for the access to justice [...] and we demand that the State fulfil their role in defence of women’s human right to live without violence” (Cruz 2010a).

At the eighth day of her hunger-strike, Fátima was rushed to the hospital in critical conditions but returned to her ‘sit-in’ after five days, reaching her thirteenth day of strike. Fátima’s father expressed that “we want the people of Nicaragua to know that we cannot continue allowing the manipulation of Fátima’s legal proceedings...or of any Nicaraguan woman...we want to set a precedent in this country, so that the manipulation of justice stops” (Guillén 2010). Two weeks after the appeal hearing was held, the Magistrates announced their verdict, declaring Fátima’s suspected rapist guilty, but modifying the sentence from 8 to 6 years. The RMCV, the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights<sup>13</sup> and Fátima herself were relieved that the defendant was declared guilty, but questioned the penalty reduction, as the minimal sentence for rape in Nicaragua is eight years (Lara 2010).

#### **‘MARÍA’ FROM DIRIAMBÁ – REPUTATION OR JUSTICE?**

The third case is the story of ‘María’ from Diriamba, my neighbour town at that time. Her father and a lawyer came to the *Comisaría* in Jinotepe one day I was there, looking for information on how to contact the RMCV. I told them that I had been working together with the Network’s main office in Managua, and that I could try to make the connections. They started telling me about the young girl’s case:

At the age of 17 ‘María’ was raped by a neighbour and became pregnant as a result. Her family chose not to report it, following the wishes of the girl and because, as their lawyer put it, “*they are a Christian family*”. Now, at the age of 22, history repeated itself. The same man raped this girl again, but this time he was more violent, beating her severely and intimidating her with a knife. He also stole the money that the girl had been putting aside for her child. This time the girl’s father had enough, and wanted to take measures into his own hands. A lawyer, who is a friend of the family, convinced the father and daughter to report the crime

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<sup>13</sup> Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH)

and let the police handle the case. Consequently, the sex offender was detained and placed under arrest while waiting for the trial. However, when the family asked the public prosecutor if he wanted to talk to the witnesses, he said that it was not necessary, claiming that the forensic report, the formal charges and the girl's statement was sufficient.

The father told me that the problem now was that the defendant was presenting several witnesses who were *"willing to lie about the worst things for a small amount of money"*. Consequently, the prosecutor had informed them that he was not sure if they could win the case, and blamed 'María's' family for not 'giving' him enough. The witnesses who initially had been willing to testify against the defendant were now afraid of doing so because, according to the family friend and lawyer, *"he has threatened to kill the girl and everyone who helps her"*. The father and the lawyer feared that as a result, the perpetrator was not going to receive the sentence he deserved, or even worse, that he would go free. Consequently, they had decided to go public with the case in order to put pressure on the prosecutor and the judge, advocating for a fair trial and an appropriate sentence for the defendant. The father told me that *"If he goes free, I promise you that I will take measures into my own hands and kill the bastard"*. His statement stayed in my head for days, and I was therefore very relieved when the RMCV answered positively to the request, and decided to support the girl and her family by attending the trial. I participated at the preliminary hearing (06.09.2010), but I had to leave before the trial as it was postponed due to technical (!) reasons. I later contacted the lawyer and he informed me that the trial had been suspended several times, but in November 2010 the perpetrator was finally declared guilty and sentenced to twelve years imprisonment.

### **5.2.2 'We support all women' – Credibility at risk?**

These three cases presented, Dina's alleged suicide, Fátima's long and very public judicial process, and "María's" local case in Diriamba, are examples of cases that the RMCV supports. Indeed Meneses specified that the RMCV supports any woman who have experienced violence and who are struggling to achieve justice. However, the more controversial the case is, for instance when people in power or belonging to the upper class are accused, the more publicity the case, the RMCV and the general situation of violence against women gets. Consequently, the RMCV often adopts these types of cases, profiling them as a symbol of a general problem in society, and supports them till the end. Nevertheless, the RMCV might sometimes put their credibility at risk supporting cases such as Dina and Fátima's, despite the lack of conclusive evidence against the accused and in

favour of the victim. The dilemma for the RMCV then becomes to choose whether to protect their credibility at all times, or to support whoever request their help. Their choice of ‘supporting all women’ becomes very clear in the case of Dina’s alleged suicide. During the press conference, Meneses, Dina’s family and their lawyer all expressed themselves as it was already proved that Dina’s ex-husband actually killed her. They did not seem to mind using strong words as ‘murderer’, ‘killer’ and ‘murder-cover up’ when talking about the ex-husband and the case. Pictures and full names of Dina and her son were shown at the press conference, and also the full name of her suspected murderer, her ex-husband, was revealed. Later, I also got to think about Dina’s son and how this might affect him. He is a ten year old boy, who for the time being is living with a father exposed on national television as his mother’s killer. The question that arises is whether their tactical strategy of supporting every woman (or woman’s family) who requests their help should have restrictions in order to protect the family members of the accused?

However, if the RMCV had not wanted to support cases where the evidence in favour of the woman and against the alleged perpetrator was minimal, it would probably be hard to find cases at all, due to the sometimes weak investigative police work. Additionally, cases involving violence against women or rape, does rarely have any witnesses at all and the material or visible evidence might be minimal. Consequently, it is understandable that the RMCV chooses to trust women and believe in them, no matter how little evidence exists in their favour. In addition, if the RMCV started to reject cases, it would probably result in women being reluctant to report their case and share their story. The women who request the RMCV’s help have often already been rejected at a public institution, have lost their case due to unfair circumstances or have had their case in the system for a long time without results. If the RMCV starts picking out their cases in order to protect their integrity, they could become ‘just another institution’ that turn their back on women. Getting a rejection could mean taking away the last hint of hope from women who see no other solution to their situation.

### **5.2.3 ‘Women Breaking Silence’ – and then what?**

Virginia Meneses, from RMCV’s Area of Political Action, clarified that even though one of the RMCV’s main strategies is political action, the most important part of their work focuses on women in general. Meneses explained:

*Women now are starting to break silence, and that is caused by – remember that in the former years this [problem] was concealed – our work as we started to organize the public campaigns. [Our] advocacy is not only directed towards the state, but also towards society,*

*and above all, towards women. We manage to make women break silence and report, which is what is happening now. But unfortunately, the answer that is given to them is a very weak one.*

Meneses blames the patriarchal system for the limited access to justice, claiming that it has come to infiltrate every level of social and public life, perpetuating itself, resulting in increased impunity. She argued that in the judicial system, the cases concerning women and especially those involving some sort of violence are given much less focus than other cases. *“It is not the same legal power they invest, as they do when it is a cattle theft [or...] a property, when the case concerns the life of a woman. Of course, the judicial structure is completely debilitated when it is dealing with situations of violence against women”*. In her opinion, Nicaragua has many good laws that in theory protect women, but the problem lies in the lack of practice of these laws. Referring to Dina’s case, Meneses argued that *“even though the criminal sanction of ‘femicide’ does not exist, ‘homicide’ does! [...] So, even if we had ‘femicide’, it would still not have been investigated”*.

When asked about the factors limiting women’s access to justice, Fátima Millón from the Coordinating Committee, pointed out the attitudes of the public officials as one of the main obstacles towards justice. She told me that at ‘her’ local Women’s Centre, they are currently giving support to a woman who has a huge scar on her chin, collar bone and arms, after her husband attacked her with a knife. The woman is accusing him of ‘attempted murder’, but he might get away with only a charge of violence because the injury did not put the woman’s life in danger. Millón argued that the intention of murder was there, and that this is what should be the foundation for the defendant’s sentence.

*The intention is what counts. The fact that he attempted [...] and that he threatened her with a knife, means that he already had the intention of killing. In his statement [he] says that she provoked him, because she had another man in her bed. So, in such situations the public functionaries often give credit to that [kind of ‘excuses’], which should not be the case, since the Penal Law describes this as a crime. Well, it is unfortunate that we find ourselves with this difficulty, isn’t it? Because there is a discrepancy between what the law says and the actions of the civil servant.*

Another problem Millón frequently encountered was that the defendant made use of different tactics to drag out time, what she termed ‘a strategy of prolongation’. She explained that *“There is a legal period of three months [and] that without a trial [...] he cannot continue in custody for more than three months. The period ends, [and] this man might be set free”*. For instance, in some cases the defendant shows up to the hearing only to say that *“I do not have money to pay anymore. I have come to tell you that I do not have a lawyer”*, Millón

recounted. Then the judge has to appoint him with a public defender and the hearing is postponed. She points out that sometimes a defendant changes lawyers several times in order to postpone the trial. In addition to the flaw of the legal procedure, in her opinion this problem has a lot to do with the attitude of the judge, because the judge has the authority to tell the defendant that *“I have already arranged several hearings, so now you have to decide. You either keep your current lawyer, or I appoint you with a public defender right away”*. Instead, what often happens according to Millón is that the judge just accepts to postpone the trial to save themselves the trouble. Furthermore, she pointed out that *“a lot of the times, sadly, it is women who exercise this kind of professions”* and who end up violating other women’s rights.

At a different occasion, Fátima Millón followed a woman, wife of a powerful and rich man, to four hearings, each time postponed, until the judge finally decided to declare the defendant free of all charges. According to Millón, there was probably money ‘under the table’ in order for the defendant to be declared ‘not guilty’. She argued that the negligence, bad attitudes, corruption and manipulation can be found at all levels of the legal process. The result, she claimed, is the creation of ‘a spiral of negligence’, starting

*when the civil servant attending [the victims] sees that the judge dismisses the charge, and as a consequence, you will encounter reactions that say ‘I am killing myself here [and] he [the judge] does not give it any attention’, or, ‘I am making an effort here at the ‘Comisaría’, investigating, but when I get to the Public Prosecutor, he dismisses [the case], he dumps it, he annuls my work’. Or the Prosecutor makes an effort, but the police in charge of the investigation [...] do not do anything. Or they both make an effort [and the case goes to trial] and the judge simply says ‘ah, [the case] does not have any grounds’, so...*

This illustrates Deborah Pool’s (2004) discussion regarding the conflict between the limited trust that exists towards the Judicial Apparatus and the System of Law, and the fact that the RMCV depend on these state structures. Millón explained that the RMCV on several occasions has provided *capacitación* to the employees at different public institutions such as the police, the Public Ministry and the Institute of Legal Medicine. This has been done in order to improve these institutions’ weak response to the problem of violence against women, and with that facilitate women’ access to justice.

The other crucial element that is lacking and that reinforces impunity, is the lack of economic resources at the state institutions providing services for women victims of violence, for instance the *Comisarías*. Virginia Meneses asserted that *“there has to be a budget! - a budget at state level that distributes funds to authorities at lower levels, so that resources are available”*. She continued referring to Dina’s case, asking: *“How is it possible that they did*

*not have reagents, [in order] to know if the blood that this man had on his clothes, to know if it was Dina's blood or not*"? From her statements and general observations I have done, I get the impression that negligence and lack of economic resources go hand in hand, reinforcing each other, causing the high incidences of impunity. Supply funds

#### **5.2.4 Cooperation with other Organizations and State Institutions**

In general, the RMCV cooperates with several other feminist- and human rights organizations, especially when organizing bigger protests and special events. Currently, they are cooperating with other feminist groups from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in a campaign entitled *Access to Justice and No to Impunity*. These countries are coordinating different activities across boundaries in order to create awareness and provoke action with regards to the problem of violence against women, the increase of femicides and the lack of access to justice in this region. Meneses explained that the main focus is to make the problem of the murder of women publicly visible, that the murders are investigated properly, and finally, that they stop taking place.

When it comes to the relationship between the RMCV and the *Comisaría de la Mujer*, the members of the RMCV emphasized that it has been complicated and at times even problematic. In 1996, the RMCV began its cooperation with the Women's Police Stations, the *Comisariás*, through the cross-sector and inter-institutional *National Committee against Violence* which coordinated the different initiatives towards the eradication of violence against women. From 2001, the RMCV, the *Comisariás* and the Nicaraguan Women's Institute (INIM) participated in an externally sponsored project named "Model of Integral Services", with the goal of addressing all the aspects involved in violence against women, including "prevention, attention and empowerment" (D'Angelo, et al. 2008:21). When I asked Virginia Meneses, the responsible for the Area of Political Action, about the reason for the prevalence of violence against women in Nicaragua despite this seemingly good initiative, she explained:

*To [understand] that, you need to know the history of the Women's Police Stations: The women's 'Comisariás' is born out of the ideas of the feminists in Nicaragua. We managed to push for and establish a pilot, the first Women's Police Station, in which I was a part, because at that time I was working in District 5<sup>14</sup>. At that time I was only a 'promotora legal', supporting and accompanying women. This was around 93-95. After this, the RMCV takes on the [project of the] Women's Police Stations and gives them a boost, and the three institutions,*

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<sup>14</sup> District 5 is one of Managua's seven districts

*the INIM, the Women's Police Station and the Network manage to converge in a collective agreement and we start working to make the Comisarías strong.*

Meneses stated that to begin with this project was in fact a good initiative, a project that was supported by Norway. But in 2004, after many difficulties and disagreements, the cooperation completely ruptured, and the RMCV finally withdrew. The problems started when the international cooperation and support for the project ended, and the three institutions found themselves with new donors, each with new ideas and different perspectives. Meneses said that their cooperation ended completely when the *Comisarías* implemented a Swedish supported project directed towards men who exercise violence. Millón explained the procedure of this project, emphasizing that it starts with a mediating session between the parts, where the man can agree to attend group therapy meetings instead of getting a sentence. He signs the papers, committing himself to participate at all the 27 therapy meetings. Millón argued that the problem is that since *“the mediation is already done, if he does not comply, nothing happens. [Consequently], it should have been the other way around”*. The RMCV criticized this project because it is offered as an alternative to a sentence to men who have committed criminal acts against women. Consequently, the RMCV argued, the project is restricting women's access to justice and even violating their right to live a life without violence. The RMCV's official standpoint of this project, in Millón's words, is that

*Nicaragua is not ready to attend to aggressors within the judicial system. I mean, there can be attention [to aggressors], but as a private initiative, either individual or in organizations. If Nicaragua is not prepared to attend to women and to empower women victims of violence, [it is] much less prepared to attend to aggressors, especially when it has become evident that the aggressors do it to evade justice.*

### **5.3 The RMCV's past and current relationship with the FSLN**

The RMCV, acting on their view that the state is responsible for women's safety, has always had a tense relationship with the governments in office. However, there has always been a minimal cooperation, if not directly with the government, at least with state institutions. But, since 2007, this relationship has worsened and according to the RMCV the Sandinista government is making any cooperation between state institutions' and feminist organizations difficult. Additionally, the RMCV claims that the FSLN is trying to incorporate their politics at all levels of social life. For instance, when applying for a job in the Public Sector, your chances increase if you have an *Aval Político*, a document that basically states your support to the Sandinista party. However, the relationship between the RMCV and the FSLN was not always this tense, as many of the members of the RMCV at some time were devoted

supporters of the Sandinista revolutionary army and later the political party. Some even participated in the revolution that led to the fall of the Somoza dictatorship. But along the way, since the victory of the revolution in 1979 and up until today, many feminists have retracted their support after their numerous propositions and demands have been rejected. By the time of the return of Ortega in 2006, with the penalization of therapeutic abortion and his pendant accusation of sexual abuse of his step-daughter, most of the organizations affiliated to the Feminist Movement, including the RMCV, had turned their back to him and his party. Millón and Meneses characterized Ortega's return as *"terrible, terrible"*, *"unfavourable for the organization"*, *"unfavourable for women"*, because the Sandinistas *"are not acting right [and are] completely violating our human rights"*.

When government policies, reflected in its functionaries' attitudes and actions, are seen as the main obstacles in order to reduce violence against women and ensure their access to justice, it is no wonder that the promotion of public policies constitute an important part of the RMCV's work. Nevertheless, both Millón and Meneses emphasized that the promotion of public policies has been difficult during their period in the Coordinating Committee. The main reason for this is the dissolution of the 'National Commission for the Fight against Violence' by the sitting government. This Commission was created by the Presidential Decree 116 in 2000 in order "to improve the coordination between different sectors and supervise the advancements in the creation of plans and national policies related to the area of violence" (Torres & Alvarado 2005:7). The National Commission was responsible for the formulation of a 'National Plan against Violence', an integral response to the problem of violence against women in Nicaragua (Asamblea Nacional 2000). Millón explained that the RMCV had a permanent seat in the Commission until the Sandinista government dissolved it in 2007. Meneses and Millón also argued that the re-establishment of the National Commission is crucial in order to be able to influence the institutions concerned with violence against women. In the RMCV's quarterly report about feminicides, they end their conclusion calling for "an urgent reactivation of the National Commission for the Fight against Violence in order to eradicate the high rates of violence against women" (2010a:6).

Virginia Meneses expressed that as things are right now, there is no cooperation between the RMCV and the authorities. According to her, this is not the RMCV's choice, but the FSLN's strategy of keeping them out of the 'game'. Meneses stated that *"if we want to eradicate the violence, we have to be in dialogue with the state. Some sort of, maybe not directly with them, but with the public functionaries. And that absence is deliberate"*. She clarified that in some

parts of the country, there is certain cooperation between local state institutions and RMCV's member organizations. But this is not the case in the capital where according to Meneses the *Comisariías*' National Head Office has 'declared war' against the RMCV. Emphasizing the importance of doing something about the growing numbers of femicide before it gets worse, Meneses expressed:

*The important thing is that they do not see us as enemies of the state, I mean, we have to cooperate, because neither civil society by itself is going to [...] eradicate violence, and much less [will] they [the state]. And when we are united, Nicaragua is still in time to eradicate [and to] avoid that femicides establish themselves as they have done in Ciudad Juarez, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where the women [killed] are thousands. Do we want to repeat this in Nicaragua? Of course not. We know who the women killers are, and those killers have to be in jail!*

Also Millón blame the state for the many women killed in the hands of their partner, emphasizing that it has become worse after 2005, that is, after the FSLN gained power.

*The Network has strengthened the strategy of public denunciation both nationally, and internationally. We have not stopped demonstrating the consequences of the lack of promotion of these types of policies by the state. [We are demonstrating...] that from 2005 and forward, 2007, 2008, 2009, the increase of women murdered is a consequence of the lack of clear policies from the state to empower women, and [because] the public institutions that deal with this problem [do not] give it proper attention.*

The clear strategy of the RMCV of challenging dominant practices at different levels of society, and especially those at the top of society's political structure, is an example of how women's organizations enact in what Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998) term 'cultural politics'. Through their standpoint of the state's responsibilities regarding violence against women and women's wellbeing in general, their criticism of prevailing political practices, and their involvement in policy debates, the RMCV is aiming for a "transformation of the dominant political culture in which they have to move and constitute themselves as social actors with political pretensions" (1998:8). From the perspective of the RMCV, the dominant political culture in Nicaragua is a patriarchal society characterized by a government that has exceeded their limits of power and control over its population, excluding some groups and co-opting others. Therefore, by emphasizing the importance of promoting cooperation between the government, state institutions and an autonomous civil society, the RMCV is attempting to "resignify dominant cultural interpretations of politics" (Alvarez, et al. 1998:7). Their radical articulations and strategies, aiming at both immediate change and deeper structural transformations, are further examples of how the RMCV enacts in cultural politics by intending to redefine social power. Consequently, I argue that the RMCV is exercising

cultural politics challenging the government and state institutions by “contesting the legitimacy and apparently normal and natural functioning of their effects within society” (Alvarez, et al. 1998:11).

Furthermore, according to members of the RMCV, Daniel Ortega and his government is also the main responsible for their limited economic support from abroad. For instance, the FSLN intended to implement a law that placed restrictions on NGOs external cooperation. Due to massive opposition both from local and international NGOs, the law was put ‘on ice’ (Jarquín 2009). Actions like these will probably make donors more sceptical about supporting Nicaraguan organizations. Millón explained that the RMCV is currently financed by international NGOs, but emphasized that before the Sandinistas came to power, “*the movement was [also] supported by state agencies, such as the Norwegian state and Forum Syd – the Swedish state*”. In Millón’s opinion, the state donors withdraw their support in order to avoid diplomatic problems: “*They withdraw or prefer - in quotes - moving their resources to other countries or to other priorities*”. Millón explained that their current limited economic resources makes their work difficult, because the Network “*has been characterized and known for having strong campaigns, both at publicity level and with their mobilizations*” and “*these are expensive activities*”. As such, even though being a politically autonomous organization, the current government’s relation with other states and organizations still affects the RMCV’s work.

State donors are most probably also being influenced by the current tendency among the international community to redirect their initiatives and financial resources towards other geographical and thematic areas. For instance, while Sweden already closed down their Embassy in Nicaragua, Norway and Denmark are shutting down theirs during 2011 and 2013, respectively. In an e-mail correspondence with the Norwegian Embassy in Nicaragua the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2010, I was informed that in contrast to their neighbouring countries, Norway will continue their support to Nicaragua, however organized from their Regional Embassy in Guatemala. They also emphasized that the reason behind the close-down is a “political resolution in Norway, where it has been decided that priority will be given to the strengthening of Norwegian diplomatic presence in the bigger and up-and-coming economies, such as China, India, Russia, Brazil and Indonesia”. They regret the negative effect this restructuring will have for the contribution to other ‘smaller’ areas and countries, and pointed out that it is not a sign of less need for help in Nicaragua.

#### **5.4 Summarizing and Concluding Remarks**

According to Molyneux, the “process of taking feminine interests from the personal, private and non-political sphere to the public area of political demands, and then pose it as a redefined general interest” can be an effective strategy for managing to incorporate women’s issues within a broader agenda and appealing to a larger crowd (2003:249). Even though Molyneux states her argument in a much broader sense, I find it applicable to explain the RMCV’s approach towards the problem of violence against women. The presented cases of public denunciation show that the RMCV often uses emblematic cases as a means to attract attention to the overall situation of violence against women, feminicide and impunity. In addition to advancing the specific demands related to a case, the particular case in itself becomes an instrument for posing more general demands to the authorities. These broader demands involve advocating for laws regarding violence against women, demanding fair and correct application of the law by state functionaries and insisting on improved cooperation between state and civil society.

For the RMCV, the practices and attitudes of the authorities and public functionaries, in addition to the lack of economic resources provided by the state, comprise some of the main obstacles towards women’s access to justice. At the same time, it becomes clear that the RMCV sees the state as the main protagonist for change towards a future where women can live a life free of violence and with access to justice. Consequently, one of the RMCV’s main strategies has been to direct their activism towards the government, demanding to take this problem seriously. Furthermore, both Millón and Meneses mentioned the need for clear public guidelines for state institutions to follow, especially for those dealing with violence against women. The judicial system as it works today, leaving so many cases in impunity, is in the eyes of the RMCV one of the biggest hinders for women’s possibility of ending the violence against them. *“It is important to create policies of criminal persecution against these aggressors, rapists and murderers of women”*, Meneses declared and added that *“until there is a clear policy, the situation will be the same”*. Furthermore, Meneses and Millón believe that a National Commission which includes both state institutions and civil society organizations is the best starting point for implementing clear national policies and for finding a sustainable answer to violence against women, feminicides and the poor access to justice.

## 6 CHAPTER SIX: AMNLAE - A LOCAL WOMEN'S HOUSE

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The 'Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women' (AMNLAE) – *Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses "Luisa Amanda Espinoza"* – is an organization dating back to the times of revolution. Most of its oldest members, especially the leaders, devoted many years of their lives to the Sandinista revolutionary war, either directly involved in combat, or supporting the cause by providing food and other services to the combatants and helping the families 'left behind'. Lately, the organization concentrates on specific issues affecting women, for instance by providing legal counselling and support, *capacitaciones*, practical courses (dressmaking, hairdresser) and some even provide medical services to poor women. Additionally, the local Women's Houses offer different activities to youth and children. In this chapter I will give an overview of the structure, the workers and the funded projects of one of AMNLAE's local Women's Houses. Then I wish to present their strategies in their struggle against violence against women and their cooperation with and perceptions on the *Comisaría*. Lastly, I will explore AMNLAE and the Women's House's complex relationship to the FSLN.

### 6.1 A National Network of Local Women's Houses – Its structure

Even though AMNLAE also is a national network such as the RMCV, its structure is quite different. The RMCV was created to coordinate the unpartisan local organizations working with violence against women, and give impulse to new initiatives chosen by its members. In contrast, AMNLAE was created by women within the FSLN in order to recruit women to the 'cause' – the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. Lately, AMNLAE's main office has been much less visible and has coordinated very few initiatives between its local Women's Houses, for instance through joint national campaigns. However, the central office does provide five main guidelines for what areas of focus the local houses ideally should cover. These include (1)gender-based violence, (2)power and leadership, (3)integral health education and services, (4) women's economic autonomy and protection of the natural environment and (5)the integral development of adolescents and youth (AMNLAE 2009:'Programa'). Currently, the Women's Houses work mostly independently from each other and from the National Office, focusing on the problems which appear most pressuring in their specific local community. This is also the case in the small local Women's House in San Marcos, 'Casa de la Mujer Sayda Gonzales', in the department of Carazo.

### **6.1.1 Doña Yolanda – *La Directora* and ‘Judicial Facilitator’**

Yolanda Paladino Murillo, popularly known as ‘Doña Yolanda’ or ‘*La Directora*’, is the managing director of AMNLAE’s local Women House in San Marcos and the Coordinator of AMNLAE’s Women Houses and activities in the Carazo department. She is a 61 year old charming and talkative lady who has been very active in the women’s movement, specifically within AMNLAE, and in the Sandinista Revolution and local politics. She is the mother of five, four boys and one girl, who today are grownups. Some have their own families, while two of them still live at home. Her daughter Monica has some responsibilities in the Women’s House, mostly with the projects for the youth and helping her mother arranging different seminars and activities. Doña Yolanda does not have any professional preparation, which according to her resides in the fact that she got children at an early age and had to prioritize family life over a professional career.

When I asked Doña Yolanda why she became a protagonist of women’s rights, she answered by telling me about her life story and her personal experiences.

*I have dedicated much of my life to the defence of women’s rights, of children, of girls and the youth. This has been kind of my hobby, you see, to defend women’s rights and to look at the issue of violence, because I have been a victim of violence [myself]. So, when I was young, in my youth, I experienced much psychological violence [and finally] abandonment from my partner. So, I suffered a lot, and I think that allowed me to, when the opportunity presented itself, to help women. In this way, in the years [around] 78, the popular Sandinista revolution opened up the opportunity for women to go out in the streets, to participate, to ‘capacitarnos’. From that moment on I became a women’s leader. And [...] every woman that I saw suffering from the problem of abuse, of violence or [that had been] abandoned by her partner, I felt myself reflected in that woman. Therefore, I am very interested in, let’s say, the issue of laws, rights, of talking to women about their self-esteem, talking to them about their behaviour, and that is how I started my development within the organization AMNLAE.*

Doña Yolanda has been very active in different spheres of political and social life. This became very clear during my conversations with her, as she was well informed and had an opinion on everything, no matter the subject. She was active during the revolution and with the recruitment of women to “the cause” during the years when FSLN maintained power. Currently, she is active in FSLN’s local Citizens Power Council and Women’s Council in San Marcos, which meaning and implications I will come back to. Her active life has made Doña Yolanda a well-known person in the small town of San Marcos. When I was walking down the street with her, she always made several stops to talk to people or shouted back an ‘adios’ – a typical Nicaraguan greeting – to friends and acquaintances as we were walking by. Even when I participated in activities in the capital with other organizations, I would run into

people who knew who she was. *“Ah, yes. We participated together at an international feminist conference in Costa Rica in 1992”*, the former RMCV leader Klemen Altamirano recalled. Since May 8<sup>th</sup> 1984, when Doña Yolanda founded the local Women’s House ‘Sayda Gonzales’ in San Marcos together with other AMNLAE women, most of her time and energy have been spent in this house, devoted to her work for AMNLAE and ‘the party’.

*First we had... ‘The Association of Women confronted with the National Crisis’, [where] women helped gathering medication, money and other stuff for the combatants. After the triumph of the revolution, we changed [our name] to ‘Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women’ (AMNLAE), the name of a woman who fell fighting in León ... this is when I joined the organization. Since then I have been a part [of AMNLAE], even though I have participated in other community activities, but it was here that I found my place and decided to stay. This allowed me to learn a lot, to understand ... that as women we have to, that we should not stay in our homes, but as women we have to be part of the public life, as much social as economical. In this way I started to grow, to develop, right, and became here in my municipality, in San Marcos where I am now, one of the founders of ‘La Casa de la Mujer Sayda Gonzales’ in 1984.*

According to Doña Yolanda, the house that comprises AMNLAE’s local Women’s House in San Marcos used to be the town’s jail during the years under the Somoza dictatorship. When the National Guard (Somosa’s men) had to pull out due to the Sandinista victory, AMNLAE women made a request to take over the building. *“We founded the [women’s] house with flowers, with palm leaves and with women, because we didn’t have anything else”*, Doña Yolanda recalled. *“Our objective was to create a reference point for women, where women could tell their problems, enjoy themselves, talk to each other [and] learn some work-related skills at the workshops that we organized”*. She explained that they took the name of a woman combatant who was the first female pilot that Nicaragua and *“the popular Sandinista revolution”* had. The pilot Sayda Gonzales<sup>15</sup> died in Carazo’s territory, and is therefore a heroic character for the women of AMNLAE Carazo.

This current year, 2010, Doña Yolanda was designated *Facilitadora Judicial* (Judicial Facilitator) by the Supreme Court of Law, *“on the request of the population”*, she declared. The Judicial Facilitator is sworn in by the Court, and can therefore act more or less as a lawyer. She can deal with minor civil and criminal offenses, arranging mediations between the parts, write demands for child support and also give legal counselling, accompaniment of the victim in her legal process, and so on. The programme of Judicial Facilitators started off in 2003 as a project aimed mainly towards rural communities, in order to facilitate the access

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<sup>15</sup> Not to be confused with the combatant *Luisa Amanda Espinoza* whom AMNLAE is named after

to justice in the remote areas of the country (Poder Judicial 2011). In 2007, seeing the positive impacts and achievements of the project, the Organization of American States (OAS) along with the cooperation of The Swedish International Development Cooperation (SIDA) decided to give it their support, in order to provide national coverage (Vuskovic 2007). Such projects, promoting traditional conflict resolution<sup>16</sup>, exist in several countries in Latin America, including Peru, Panama, and Paraguay (OAS 2011; Poole 2004).

### 6.1.2 The Lawyers: Dina and Carla

In addition to Doña Yolanda, there are two fulltime lawyers working at the Local Women's House in San Marcos, also them without a fixed salary. **Dina Sanchez Medrano** has been there the longest, starting as a receptionist (secretary), later becoming a *promotora legal* – a legal advisor – and finally deciding to go to law school to become the lawyer she is today. Dina is 35 years old and currently a single mother to a 16 year old girl. The father of the girl is Doña Yolanda's son. According to some, even though Dina did not mention this herself, the family tie is the reason why she began working in the Women's House in the first place. She lived for some years in Doña Yolanda's house, but moved out when she separated from the father of her child and now lives with her mother. Due to Dina's history with Doña Yolanda's son, the relationship between Dina and Doña Yolanda is today merely professional, and even as such, a very limited and tense one. Communication between them did mostly go through the other lawyer and the current receptionist. However, this did not seem to affect the efficiency of the work at the Women's House, probably because of their clearly separated responsibilities and tasks within the organization.

Dina recounted that while working as a receptionist, she saw so many cases of women coming to report abuse and violence, which often included “*shouting, humiliations and beatings*”. These experiences motivated her to assist some of AMNLAE's *capacitaciones* in order to become *promotora legal* and provide legal counselling. Dina said that it was through the *capacitaciones*, that is, the many seminars and workshops on the topic of violence that she discovered that “*it is not until you learn about violence that you manage to see that you live it yourself*”. She also learned that violence is not necessarily only physical. “*I discovered that I was also a victim of violence, that I was living intra-familial violence; that words are aggressions, words that hurt, which is what causes most damage – the psychological violence*”. She said that “*I experienced physical violence a few times*”, but emphasized that

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<sup>16</sup> Method based on community- or indigenous dispute tradition, where the appointment of local judges/judicial facilitators has formalized the leadership of many local and indigenous leaders (Poole 2004).

these actions were only an escalation of the prolonged psychological abuse she had suffered. Her own experience is the reason why she underlined the importance of *capacitaciones*, empowering women by improving their self-esteem and teaching them about violence and their rights. According to Dina, there are many women who, like her, are not aware that what they are living is violence and that it is not something they have to accept and keep up with.

**Carla Zambrana** is also a lawyer at the Women's House in San Marcos, where she started working five years ago. She is a 30 year old woman, married, and mother to an 11 year old girl. After finishing law-school, she started working with a lawyer in one of the city's many private law-offices. Carla was soon disappointed when discovering that this lawyer, who had many years of experience in the field, did not seem interested in sharing his knowledge with her. Feeling that she lacked the experience and knowledge to work without any guidance, she became very content when she was introduced to Dina Sanchez, who offered her a 'job' at the Women's House. *"Through this job, I learned what it means to work helping women [...] especially women with scarce resources"*. Carla specified that the main difference between her former job and working here is that *"the vision is quite different, because the focus here is the woman"* and *"you cannot charge as much as a private lawyer, because there are women who do not have any cash at all or they depend entirely on their man, who barely gives them money for food"*.

Carla told me that she comes from a peaceful family and did never experience any physical violence as a child. But, she grew up learning that a woman has to be submissive to her husband, showing him respect and obedience. When Carla got married, this was exactly the role she undertook and played for many years.

*When I started working here, I did not have any male friends, not even women, because I thought it was 'bad' [...] or if I went somewhere, I always had to tell him [her husband] where I was going [...] I could not talk to people neither, because he would not like it and I was afraid he would start a fight. But I thought this was normal, that he was jealous or something. But the truth is that it is not normal, it is violence. Since I am a lawyer, I have to meet other people, judges, lawyers, and sometimes after work they went out to eat dinner or supper together, and I could not do this. I felt that 'ni quiera Dios', someone will tell him and I do not want something to happen. Today I can see that this is wrong, that all of this is caused by men's machismo. Today I understand that it was all a product of violence, of machismo, of men's need of control.*

Currently, these things are changing for Carla, and she argued that it was her work at the Women's House that has made this transformation possible. Here she had learned that her role of the 'submissive wife' was not given and that this could change if she acted upon it. She

now feels freer than before and can have acquaintances and go out with them once in a while, but always in a responsible manner. “*If you are together with a person, he has to trust you, and he has to know that if you relate to different people through your work, it does not mean anything*”. These changes in her personal life encourage her to help other women and have made her see the importance of working with the problem of violence. According to Carla, many women in Nicaragua share her previous understanding of a woman’s role in a relationship. I experienced myself that even young girls often acted with a rather fearful respect towards their boyfriend or husband. This varied of course, mainly influenced by their standpoint or family background in relation to religion and social class. Carla further explained that the positive changes in her own life are part of her motivation for staying at the Women’s House, in spite of the low economic remuneration for her contribution.

*Sometimes my family tells me that I should try finding another job; that I should look for a job where I can earn a salary [...] and sometimes I think about this, and think that with a salary I would not have to worry how to pay this or that. Also, something may happen to you and then you feel like your hands are tied, right. Therefore, the thought of finding something better is always there. But at the same time, working with these women is also very important.*

### **6.1.3 ‘Promotora Legal’ – Legal Advisors**

Some of the women who receive *capacitación* continue their cooperation with the Women’s House as its extended arm into the community. Their title as *Promotora-* or *Facilitadora Legal*, meaning legal ‘promoter/supporter’ or ‘facilitator’, is a good description of the work these women do, ‘facilitating’ knowledge about the laws that concern women, about how to proceed to report a violent partner and the further legal process. As opposed to a ‘judicial facilitator’, such as Doña Yolanda, the *promotoras* do not hold legal jurisdiction. These *promotoras* make up a network of women whom from time to time receive *capacitaciones* at the Women’s House. The main goal is that each of the *promotoras* will be active in her community, in her ‘barrio’- her neighbourhood and her family, by helping, supporting and advising women. The idea is that women suffering from violence or having other problems might find it easier to approach a woman in her neighbourhood, a friend or a family-member, than going to the Women’s House or to the Specialized Police Station. The woman victim of violence can then receive guidance from this person who is trained in women’s legal rights, and who can tell her who she should contact, what the process is like, what she should demand and expect.

During my fieldwork at the Women’s House, I got the opportunity to meet some of these *promotoras*. Those who were seen as responsible and committed were often challenged to

hold their own *capacitaciones* in order to teach other women what they themselves have learned and prepare new *promotoras*. Carla gave an example:

*First, we had a seminar for a group of 20 [women] and then for other 20 [...] Out of [each of] those 20, around four received the title 'Promotora'. Each of these four then held their own seminar for 15 other women, so they also would know the laws concerning child support payment [...] maternal and paternal responsibility, domestic violence, the course of access [to justice], and so on. The objective is then for each of these 15 women to pass their new knowledge on to other women in their neighbourhood.*

One of the faithful and more experienced *promotoras* told me that she has attended a great number of *capacitaciones* and is therefore entrusted with and capable of “*forming and directing self-help groups, [holding] capacitaciones for new promotoras, [and giving] family counselling*”. The *promotoras* might also be offered to attend seminars or *capacitaciones* at other organizations and institutions, sometimes representing the director when she cannot participate herself. “*Doña Yolanda has a lot of confidence in me and sends me to all the activities held outside town*”, one of the *promotoras* shared, adding that this comprise mostly the RMCV activities where Doña Yolanda will not participate in order to prevent problems with the FSLN. Other *promotoras* emphasized that even though they are encouraged to participate in these external events, when “*it is convenient for her [Doña Yolanda] or when money is involved, she goes herself and everything is treated with secrecy*”. Some of the *promotoras* claimed that the director has prioritized her own family when it comes to positions within the Women’s House and in programmes which have been economically remunerated. However, they all agreed that the House “*has helped a lot of women to end the violence they have lived throughout their lives, achieving a positive development as dignified individuals and rights-bearing subjects*”. They stated that they were very happy and proud to be a part of the Women’s House, finding their role as *promotoras* to be very meaningful.

## **6.2 Projects and Financial Support**

AMNLAE does not deal exclusively with violence against women, not even exclusively with women. As the local women’s houses work more or less autonomous from AMNLAE National, the projects they decide to run are chosen according to the needs in their specific community and the financial donors they manage to get. Projects directed towards children and youth have been an important part of the work at the local Women’s House in San Marcos. Still, the major focus has always been on women. These last years, *capacitación* (education for women in the barrios), legal counselling and other judicial services have become the main activities in this local Women’s House. Influenced by the political context,

and as a consequence of their dependence on external support, the projects and activities have varied in form and intensity since their inauguration in 1984.

In 1990 the FSLN lost the elections, and in Doña Yolanda's words, "*an era of neoliberal politics*" began. Nonetheless, AMNLAE managed to stay active during this entire period, and they even did so with "*a lot of support*", Doña Yolanda claimed. She explained that during this period, the local Women's House in San Marcos had two important periods of support from abroad. First in 1990, international election observers from Norway accepted a request from AMNLAE and decided to support the projects at the Women's House in San Marcos. "*They supported us two or three years and that is how we managed to buy these chairs, that furniture, those things [pointing]. I started to get a salary which I did not have before*", she explained. These couple of years were very important to the House, because "*it opened up the opportunity for the development organizationally and of its leadership*". The support meant that the House could arrange more activities, expanding their *escuela laboral* for women, intensifying their area of *capacitación*, their work with children at risk (e.g. street-vendors) and improving the premises. The second donor the Women's House received support from was a Finnish organization that helped installing a medical clinic for women and funded the salary of a doctor. But when the Finnish support ended, the Women's House did not manage to continue with the free medical services and could not charge enough to pay the doctor's salary. The clinic was closed a couple of years ago, but Doña Yolanda stressed that "*we have plans of reopening it*".

The Women's House has had many activities during the years, but as they are directed towards the poor sector of the community, this has not brought with it any financial profit. Since the external support goes to specific projects and is only meant for a limited period of time, Doña Yolanda underlined that "*we have to develop economically, because when we receive [money], we spend what they give us [...] and then what? We are therefore always trying to invest in something in order to have a financial source*". For instance, two of the Women's House's rooms that face the street and the city park are rented out to a small bakery and a cyber-café. With this money, they pay electricity and water bills, the street guard<sup>17</sup> and other recurrent expenses. But it is not enough to give a salary to any of the House's workers.

Since the 1990s, the local Women's Houses have not received economic financing from AMNLAE's National Office, except for the support to some specific projects. Doña Yolanda

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<sup>17</sup> It is common for the owners of shops to collaborate on the payment for a night guard.

described one of AMNLAE's major projects, 'The Program of Legal Offices for Women', in which almost half of the Women's Houses were included. The objective of the project was to install small Legal Offices in the Women's Houses where appointed lawyers could provide women with free legal counselling, helping them with demands of child support or arrange 'extra-judicial'<sup>18</sup> mediations. The National Office funded the project for a year, providing a small sum in order to pay the lawyers a minor salary. When the project ended, in order to keep providing the services of the lawyers, the Women's House decided to charge a small fee for these legal services. "*With what we charge, the lawyers support themselves [and] even though it is not much, they have for survival*". Additionally, Doña Yolanda emphasized that women who do not have resources to pay are still given the help they need.

These last years, the Women's House in San Marcos has been cooperating with the 'Nicaraguan Centre of Constitutional Rights Carlos Núñez Téllez', receiving financial support to cover the expenses associated with the projects. In 2009, the Centre arranged a Legal Rights School for women in the Carazo district and coordinated by the Women's House in San Marcos. The project consisted of a series of seminars about laws that concern women, where those who completed became *promotoras legales*. Additionally, earlier trained *promotoras* participated to learn about the relevant articles of the new Penal Code, receiving a title as 'leaders'. Out of these, some got the opportunity to enrol in a seminar about 'Human Rights and Gender' at the University of Managua. In addition to their access to financing, the different projects that the Women's House has executed throughout the years are intimately connected to AMNLAE's general strategies and perspectives on violence against women.

### **6.2.1 Violence against Women – Perceptions, Strategies and Limitations**

The lawyer Dina explained that "*violence against the woman happens in all settings, at home, at work, in the street*". Through the *capacitaciones* she has attended and her work at AMNLAE, she has realized that violence is not only physical, but can also be psychological, which she claims leaves the worst damage. The lawyer Carla is of the same opinion, emphasizing that 'verbal violence' affects women "*more than one should think*". By attending women at the Women's House, she has experienced that psychological and physical violence are very much connected. Carla explained that violence often starts with some demeaning words and then escalates, until the woman suddenly finds herself taking punches from her partner, telling herself to *aguantar* – to 'hang in there' for her children. Doña

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<sup>18</sup> Extra-judicial: Referring to conciliation arrangements that lawyers are allowed to do, where the parts sign an agreement in order to prevent judiciary measures (Poder Judicial 2011).

Yolanda added to this ‘abandonment’ and ‘economic violence’, explaining that a lot of women are left alone with their children and the economic burden that this implies. The men “*just leave in an irresponsible manner, and go marry someone else. They leave the woman who often is dependent on her husband [...] and then, she has to figure out what to do. Consequently, the major demand [here] is child support*”. Carla added to this that child support demands and violence are often interrelated. “*When there is a demand for child support [...] it is because they [the couple] have already separated, and the reason is often violence*”.

In order to help women who experience violence, AMNLAE’s local Women’s House provides *capacitaciones*, legal services at reduced charge, conflict resolution through mediations and legal counselling by the *promotoras* in the neighbourhood. Even though Doña Yolanda and the lawyers expressed their scepticism towards mediations, they do resort to this method themselves. The lawyers arrange extra-judicial mediations for the type of cases that would never have been accepted in the formal judicial system. These cases include quarrels between neighbours, a mother who is tired of her grown-up son taking advantage of her earnings or a child from a divorced marriage who no longer wants to live with his father. In one of the mediations I attended, a woman had called in her mother-in-law in order to make her sign a document stating that she would stop spreading gossip about her. However, if the case is of the more serious kind, the lawyers or Doña Yolanda inform the person of its rights, how to proceed and if necessary, follow him or her to the police station. Doña Yolanda explained that after being appointed Judicial Facilitator “*I can do legally what I have always done*”; implying that mediating family and neighbourhood disagreements has always been a part of her role at the Woman’s House. As such, she has a lot of practice with mediations, in addition to her extensive knowledge of Nicaraguan Laws after years of experience working with lawyers and attending countless *capacitaciones*. When observing mediations, I evidenced that Doña Yolanda was very open to the opinions of the affected parties, letting each one tell the problem from their point of view. Furthermore, she appeared to be well respected and was very much solicited. Even Dina, who was very critical to the appointment of Judicial Facilitators, expressed that “*the only person who is very qualified to do this [job] is the director of this centre*”.

When working with violence against women, the workers at the Women’s House have to relate to the police, and then especially to the *Comisaría* – the women’s police station. Doña Yolanda is mainly happy with the services of these, and works extensively in cooperation

with them. Especially after being appointed Judicial Facilitator, she performs several mediations together with the female officer responsible for the specialized women's division at the local police station in San Marcos. Dina and Carla are generally negative to the Comisaría, arguing that the policewomen working there are not *sensibilizadas* - sensitized - about the problem of violence. They used the concept '*sensibilizada*' when referring to the level of knowledge someone has about violence against women and the ability of approaching this problem and addressing the victims the 'right' way. They recalled how a former officer at the Comisaría did a good job, but only after attending the training and seminars given at the Women's House. Dina recounted that "*In the beginning, she was very hard, but after a while, with the 'capacitaciones' that she participated at here, we managed to 'sensibilizar' her and after this, she was a positive element working in cooperation with us with women victims of violence*". However, after two years, this policewoman was moved to the Comisaría of Jinotepe, the neighbour city. The lawyers expressed that this kind of rotation is not uncommon, resulting in lack of continuity of the cases, the women become tired and unmotivated, or their case just get lost in the processes of exchange of personnel.

Dina remembered that before the existence of the *Comisarías*, women who reported abuse were given a better response. "*If a woman was to press charges, she would do it through our institution. Then we would go directly to the police, they would take their statement, they would provide protection for the victim and sent the case directly to trial.*" Now, according to Dina, the women go directly to the Comisaría to report, and are met with insensitive and unqualified officers who just mediate the case and send the women back to their misery:

*In a majority of the Comisarías the [police] women are rude. When a woman goes there to report [...] they treat her badly. Sometimes, the woman comes in crying, thinking that they will be attended by a person 'sensibilizada' with the problem and who will help them. Instead they end up feeling more abused than what they already did. Now the woman won't dare to say what she feels. She loses the courage to make the complaint. Maybe she just mentions a couple of things, but not the way she had planned it, because of being met by this rude person.*

In contrast, Dina and Carla emphasized that they are very *sensibilizadas* themselves, having attended a great number of *capacitaciones* and because their personal experiences help them to better understand the situation of women suffering from violence (the importance of personal experience is emphasized by Wessel & Campbell (1997) and Heise, Pitanguy & Germain (1994)). They therefore argued that the policewomen and others working with violence against women should attend more *capacitaciones*, preferably at the Woman's House. As they work today, Dina believes that everyone is better off without these specialized

women's police stations and proposed that the *Comisariás* should be an entity completely separate from the police, but working in close cooperation with them.

At the Women's House, the workers deal directly with the women, trying to resolve their immediate problems. It is therefore not surprising that they also find the causes of violence at the level of the individual and its immediate surroundings (Heise 1998). They maintained that the aggressor's and the victim's self-perception is developed as a result of their own upbringing and education. Carla mentioned that one must "teach kids about what violence is and that it is not acceptable", emphasizing that it is important to start at an early age. According to her, this education should be done at the schools, "*preferably through a class teaching about gender and violence*", but also at home where "*you start forming their mentality*". Her arguments, similarly to those of her colleagues at the Women's House, are indications of the importance AMNLAE gives to the transformation of values, attitudes and actions at a personal level. Therefore, I will argue that AMNLAE workers are enacting in 'cultural politics' by contesting people's values, in addition to challenging and redefining the meaning of their actions (Alvarez, et al. 1998). For instance, by emphasizing self-esteem in their *capacitaciones* and individual counselling, AMNLAE challenge women to step out of their 'traditional role' and take power over their own lives. Furthermore, their critique of policewomen's lack of *sensibilización* and need of *capacitación*, is also a way of promoting transformation of the social relations of inequality (Alvarez, et al. 1998).

AMNLAE workers experienced that many years with abuse tend to weaken women's self-esteem, causing passivity and as such propagating an understanding towards their children and society in general that abuse towards women is 'acceptable'. Consequently, Doña Yolanda, Carla and Dina emphasized the importance of improving women's self-esteem in order to be able to come out of a violent relationship. "*Only you yourself can put a stop to the situation that you are living. There is no other remedy more than your own decision*", Dina assured me. She explained that a woman who finds herself in a violent relationship is rarely able to "*open her eyes from the start, and therefore lives through the entire cycle [of violence]*". In this cycle "*first comes the violence, then the forgiveness and a period of 'honeymoon', then comes the violence again, and it continues like this until the woman decides to put an end to this situation*". Without 'therapy', she claimed, women are going to continue having these perceptions about themselves which prevent them from getting out of the violent relationship they are living.

AMNLAE's use of 'therapy' as strategy is also a clear example of their individualistic approach to the problem of violence against women, an approach that implies an ascription of agency to women, but also a burden. By emphasizing empowerment and positing women as agents of change, they work to enable women to change their situation of abuse. However, if the women do not manage to do this, they may end up blaming themselves and consequently, with an even lower self-esteem. By individualizing the responsibility of their suffering, there is also a danger of simplifying the reasons of violence against women and as such, the responses given to end this problem. By considering Moore's theory of the individual's multiple subjectivities, I will argue that focusing almost exclusively on the individual might limit the effectiveness of AMNLAE's otherwise well-intended approaches. On one side, Moore's argument about the possibility of an individual to choose alternative and even multiple subject positions within the discourses and models available provides room for personal agency within certain social constraints. For instance, through AMNLAE's effort of informing women about their rights and alternatives, they are providing women with an alternative subject position.

### **6.2.2 Child Support Demands**

The majority of the cases attended in the Women's House in San Marcos were child support demands and I experienced that this was also the case in the Women's House in the neighbour town of Diriamba. During a 'regular' day at the Women's House around five to twenty people, mostly women, could drop by. Sometimes they would come alone; others would bring their baby, all their kids or even their sister, mother, grandmother or mother-in-law. If their partner or father of their child/children had been called in for mediation, it was not uncommon for him to be accompanied by his sister or mother. They would all sit in the waiting room, a big room with wooden benches and a couple of rocking chairs. The noise level there would always be high as the kids would be nagging their mother, running around, playing in the garden, drinking water from the tap, yelling at each other, laughing and crying. One day, a young girl with a one year old on her arm came to the Women's House looking for the lawyers. As they were out eating, she waited with me in one of the rocking chairs. The girl told me that the one year old kid was her son and that the lawyers had called in her and his father in order for her to demand child support. The lawyers came half an hour late, and the father, a young boy around the age of 20, came an hour later together with his sister. To start with, he denied that the kid was his, with his sister supporting him. But when the lawyers demanded a DNA-test which he would have to pay for (250\$!) if the kid turned out to be his,

he changed opinion and immediately acknowledged to be the boy's father. He then signed a document recognizing paternity; he committed himself to pay a monthly sum and accepted that the transaction would be done by the lawyers at the women's house.

When I later asked the AMNLAE workers why there were so many single mothers like this young girl, they argued that it resides in the same reasons as violence against women – men's irresponsibility and *machismo*. Doña Yolanda also emphasized that it is now more accepted to demand support from the father of your children, whereas before this would be perceived as an issue of honour and pride. However, change in perceptions takes a long time, and I experienced that the fear of 'losing honour' still influenced many mothers' determination to manage on their own. One of the women I talked to at the Women's House had three kids around the ages of 5-15 with the same father. Even though the man had never provided for his children, the mother had not wanted to 'degrade' herself, as she put it, to demand economic support from him. She explained that was there to report the father of the children, because he now had started hitting the children in addition to her. The lawyers brought up the issue of child support and explained that there was nothing shameful about demanding what was rightfully hers. Therefore, she had now also put in a demand for child support. The lawyers' statement, challenging the dominant judgment on demanding child support, is another example of how they in their day-to-day work exercise 'cultural politics'.

As mentioned in the literature review when discussing the chastity of women and *marianismo*, women will often be classified in relation to whether they comply with women's traditional responsibilities or not. However, in accordance with Johansson's (1999) findings, I experienced that women's purity is not as primordial for Nicaraguan women as the discourses on *Mater Dolorosa* might imply. This varies of course in relation to women's socio-economic status and religious conviction, but it seems to be correct for the overwhelming majority of women who I observed coming to AMNLAE's Women House both in San Marcos and Diriamba and to the *Comisarías*. My observations, the conversations with women and workers there and the great number of child support demands, left me with the impression that having children out of marriage and even with different men, was more often the 'rule' than the exception. Furthermore, AMNLAE workers explained that children outside marriage were a result of many women's acceptance of the popular belief that 'men cannot help their sexual drive and therefore it is natural for them to have several women'.

Furthermore, many men appeared to embody the dominant discourse of men's general irresponsibility and their dominance over women, believing that woman's primary role is to become a mother and take care of her family. Still, it is important to keep in mind, as Nikki Craske emphasizes, that "these characteristics do not reflect the attitudes of all Latin American men [however] they do indicate certain parameters of acceptable behaviour and the lack of sanctions for behaviour which is prejudicial to women's welfare" (1999:12). For instance, Doña Yolanda expressed her frustration over the common acceptance of men having multiple 'families', sometimes in the same neighbourhood and even in the same street. These families, and especially the mothers, would naturally have a difficult relationship with each other, often acting as bitter rivals. Doña Yolanda had mediated several cases like these, where the man often fled all his responsibilities and yet was seldom blamed by his partners. Participating at these mediations left me with the impression that women's 'acceptance' of men's affairs and the consequent 'normality' of having kids out of marriage also has a class dimension to it. When I asked Doña Yolanda why these women accepted men's unscrupulous behaviour, she stated that poor women do not have the 'luxury' of demanding too much from the man who provides for them and their children.

In this respect, it appears that both men and women have adopted a discourse that allows the stereotypical images of men and women to be reproduced through their day to day practices. Furthermore, and as Carla pointed out, Nicaraguan boys and girls are brought up learning that becoming a man and a woman are two very different things, and as such include quite different roles and responsibilities. This illustrates Melhuus and Stølen's (1996) argument that the dominance of a certain discourse is often achieved through hegemony rather than coercion. In my case, it is easily observable how dominant discourses 'naturalize' certain social practices, giving men and women specific roles within society and the family. It can therefore be argued that dominance is connected with the notion of complicity "based on common values or shared meaning" (Melhuus & Stølen 1996:20). Furthermore, also political structures reproduce or may challenge gender roles, and as we shall see next, may also influence the work of a women's organization.

### **6.3 AMNLAE – FSLN's 'Submissive wife'?**

As mentioned when presenting the history of AMNLAE, this organization has been closely linked to the Sandinista Party since the times of the revolution. Now, when Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas are back in power, the question is if AMNLAE still functions as the "submissive wife of the FLSN" (Kampwirth 1993:308). When confronted with this, Doña

Yolanda, Dina and Carla all emphasized that AMNLAE and the local Women's House work independently from any party. Dina explained that *"Our organization does not support a political ideology. We don't have a partisan flag. We attend all types of women [...] we don't care what ideology she has"*. My observations confirm Dina's statement, as I never heard any talk about political standpoint at the Women's House at all. However, most of the women who are attended at the Women's House belong to the lower social classes, the same groups that the FLSN appeals to. Even so, the common characteristic of women who seek help at AMNLAE's local house seems to be their economic background rather than their political conviction.

Although Doña Yolanda argued that the FSLN is the party that has done most for poor people of Nicaragua while at power, when it comes to AMNLAE and the local Women's House in San Marcos, she finds that the period under the liberal governments was the most prosperous. This is related to the opening up to foreign investments in the 90s, when the neoliberal party UNO won the election. The liberal governments and the state institutions also cooperated with AMNLAE in some projects (Linkogle 1996). Furthermore, women from AMNLAE and from other groups of civil society were allowed to participate in discussion forums when a new law or a reform concerning women was considered. For instance, leaders from AMNLAE participated when the "National Plan against Violence" was created.

Doña Yolanda further pointed out that after the FSLN won the elections in 2006, it has become more difficult to get support from abroad. Additionally, it has become almost impossible to cooperate with organizations that do not identify with the current Sandinista values. So, even though Dina argued that *"the relation between our organization and the state is neutral"*, this seems to be the case only at an official level. 'Behind the scenes' it appears that the FSLN has retained some of their power to interfere in AMNLAE's matters. An example is the supposedly voluntary resignation of AMNLAE's National Leader, which according to Doña Yolanda was fired for disagreeing with the FSLN and for her cooperation with organizations that publicly criticize the government. As such, Doña Yolanda's support from the 'Nicaraguan Centre for Constitutional Rights' is somewhat risky, due to the fact that the leaders there are fierce opponents of Daniel Ortega and his politics.

Even though the local Women's House now works 'autonomously' from the FSLN, the history of AMNLAE with the Sandinistas from the times of the revolution, *"when we were born and developed"*, as Doña Yolanda explained, is still deeply rooted in the memory of

AMNLAE's members. *"Many in our organization [...] at least the leaders, the 'directoras', the majority of us are, we opt for the party currently in power"*, Doña Yolanda admitted, referring to the FSLN. Most of the leaders and several of AMNLAE's members participate in different activities and initiatives of the FSLN. Many are active in the local Women's Councils, which the government has created as a subsection to the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the purpose of organizing women, inviting them to annual congresses, *capacitaciones* and other events. As good as this idea might appear, many are not convinced, including some of the *promotoras* at AMNLAE. One of them recounted from her own experience.

*The women are not listened to. It's true that the FSLN arranges conventions for women, but that is just a set-up. When you come to participate, and you bring new proposals, they already have everything written down, and [later] they present it as if it was the women attending the congress that came up with it. And that was not the case!*

Also Doña Yolanda gave examples of some negative aspects with the project of the Women's Councils, explaining that the initial idea was that each local government would have a Women's Affairs office. *"The office would be responsible for developing projects, [always] including women's active participation. Some places it has been implemented, in others not"*. Most of the leaders of AMNLAE are also active in the Councils of Citizen Power, known as CPCs, created by decree by President Ortega as part of his promise of giving 'Power to the People' (Asamblea Nacional 2007). The goal with the CPCs is to provide a space for Nicaraguan citizens to organize and participate in the integral development of the country, as a part of FSLN's idea of a participative and direct democracy. The councils are also bound to support the plans and politics of the President, where the participation in the CPCs is on voluntary basis, without any economic remuneration (Asamblea Nacional 2007). Several of the *promotoras* are also members of the CPCs, occupying different posts with specific areas of focus within the councils. Doña Yolanda herself sits in both an educational- and a health board. *"Many of us actively participate in the different organisms that the party has. The reason why is that when we see that the party in power is going to develop women's well-being, we have to strengthen and support it"*. The problem that many critics see with the CPCs is that it easily becomes the state's extended arm in terms of controlling the population (McKinley Jr. 2008). The CPCs may turn into organisms of surveillance, reporting about disagreements and rebellion upwards in the political hierarchy.

Dina and Doña Yolanda shared the opinion that the FSLN has done good things for poor women and workers since they won the elections. *"The current government has many*

*projects that benefit people with scarce resources. He [Daniel Ortega] has given more benefits to workers, increasing the minimum wage of the labour unions”,* Dina stated. Doña Yolanda pointed at social projects such as *‘Usura Cero’* – a project offering small loans to women, *‘Plan Techo’* – providing free ceiling to poor women, *‘Viviendas para el Pueblo’* – building free houses for the poorest. But a current problem that was much mentioned by non-Sandinistas was the prioritization of FSLN- and especially CPC-members, their family and friends when it came to benefiting from the social programmes that the state is promoting. As the CPCs are in charge of the execution of some of these projects, for instance when choosing who are ‘poor enough’ to receive free roof, somehow the family and friends of the CPCs often ‘win’.

Even though Doña Yolanda is satisfied with what the state is doing for women generally, she feels disappointed as leader of the Women’s House, and in relation to the organization’s expectations towards the FSLN. According to her, AMNLAE expected the FSLN to *“prioritize the Women’s Houses as a gesture of gratitude for all these years ...and for having endured 16 years with liberal politics”*. Also Dina mentioned that *“we thought that with this government we would receive more support. That they would give us more social projects...But until this day, we have not received any support from them”*. AMNLAE has made proposals to the FSLN of supporting them, and Doña Yolanda emphasized that the ‘First Lady’ – Daniel Ortega’s wife – Rosario Murillo did promise them this. Last year, Murillo publicly acknowledged AMNLAE’s important role in the FSLN’s long struggle, and stated that *“we will develop your local houses, we will strengthen them”* (Reciting Doña Yolanda) and giving promises they still have not fulfilled.

Dina also argues that even though the state *“has succeeded by offering small loans, free roofing sheets [and] scholarships...when it comes to the legal system, there is still a lot to be done I think”*. She mentioned that a significant impediment to women’s access to justice is the corruption practiced within the legal system, a problem that according to Dina is the responsibility of the state. Several times she referred to corruption as *“a big monster that is hard to defeat”* and emphasized that *“the consequence is that a great number of cases end in impunity”*. In Doña Yolanda’s opinion, corruption is not a significant limitation for women’s access to justice anymore due to the government’s programme against it. She admits that there are still some cases of corruption: *“People still complain about the secretaries at the Court. They have to give them ‘small bites’, as they say, to speed up the process”*. However, Doña Yolanda believes that the situation has improved significantly, especially after the penalty for

corruption was augmented. I find that Doña Yolanda and the AMNLAE workers' general positivity towards the projects of the FSLN have to be seen in relation to AMNLAE's history with the Sandinista government.

I will argue that the strategy of AMNLAE has been, and to some extent is, one of "double militancy", defined by Beckwith as "the location of activist women in two political venues, with participatory, collective identity and ideological commitments to both" (2000 in Franceschet & Macdonald 2004:6). Similar to Doña Yolanda, the majority of the 'older' AMNLAE members have remained faithful to both the FSLN and AMNLAE since the days of the revolution. The strategy of 'double militancy' can be said to have had a double effect for women's emancipation, situating women's issues within the political agenda, but at the same time limiting their radical demands in order to conform with FSLN policies. The latter is evidenced by their complete absence from controversial public debates and political issues. For instance, they remained neutral when Daniel Ortega's daughter accused him of sexual abuse. It also seems as if being in opposition to government policies can mean the end of your career, as experienced by AMNLAE's former *Directora* Dora Zeledón who spoke up against the penalization of therapeutic abortion, the public sexual education and the government's involvement in civil society organizations (Potosme 2008). After Zeledón's 'renunciation', the Sandinista Women's Movement headed by the First Lady Rosario Murillo (Ortega's wife) have taken over the management of AMNLAE's Head Office, reclaiming the organization's support to the current government's public policies and to the candidature of Daniel Ortega for a new period as president (AMNLAE 2011; Potosme 2008).

In relation to Molyneux's (2003) classification of the different types of women's movements described in chapter 3, AMNLAE can be said to have belonged to all the three types at different periods in Nicaragua's political history. During the revolution and the first year after the victory, AMNLAE played a double role adhering both to women's demands and to the FSLN's 'national cause' as illustrated by their slogan: "No revolution without women's emancipation: no emancipation without revolution" (Molyneux 1985:237). Consequently, I will argue that AMNLAE maintained an 'associative connection' with the FSLN, however, leaning towards what Molyneux (2003) termed a 'guided organization'. When it comes to the Sandinistas' first period in government, AMNLAE's "efforts to promote women's emancipation were scaled down or redefined" as a result of their focus on recruiting women to the militia and the struggle against the *Contras* (Molyneux 1985:238). During this period, characterized by its subordinated position in relation to an external 'force', AMNLAE's

relationship to the FSLN can clearly be described as ‘guided’ (Molyneux 2003:232). Finally, if assuming that my informants’ arguments about AMNLAE’s current autonomy from the FSLN are correct, AMNLAE could now be classified as an ‘independent movement’. However, in terms of the Women’s House in San Marcos I find it somewhat problematic to classify it as such due to their political history, their attachment to AMNLAE National and Doña Yolanda’s participation in FSLN’s local politics. Additionally, if considering AMNLAE’s main office, currently under control of the FSLN’s women’s movement, it is more appropriate to place it under the category of ‘associative’ or ‘guided movement’.

#### **6.4 Summarizing and Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I have presented how the Women’s House in San Marcos works mainly as an individual entity, despite belonging to a wider network organized under AMNLAE’s National Office. I have argued that AMNLAE’s mobilization during the years of the revolution and its current programmes have, in conformity with many Latin American grass-roots movements, been centred around “women’s traditional identity as mothers and spouses responsible for the welfare of their families and communities, giving priority to what could be termed ‘practical gender interests’” (Rousseau 2009:165). Furthermore, its relation to the Sandinistas has had an influence on the management and strategies of the organization both nationally and locally. As a consequence of its history, in addition to their community- and individualistic approach, the strategies of AMNLAE do not officially challenge any political structures. While Doña Yolanda was extremely careful with criticizing current public policies, the lawyers shared their negative perspectives on some structural aspects. These included the flaws of the Comisarías, the limitations of mediations and their scepticism towards the appointment of Judicial Facilitators. Additionally, the political context also appeared to influence the level of economic support of the Women’s House.

Considering all these factors, the strategy of ‘double militancy’ appropriated by AMNLAE and several of its members implicates serious consequences for the strategies and projects at the local Women’s House. However, in relation to their work with violence against women at a local and individual level, and for the women seeking help at the Women’s House or receiving support from a *promotora*, the question of political autonomy is probably perceived as quite irrelevant.

# 7 CHAPTER SEVEN: SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES

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## COMPARING STRATEGIES, PERCEPTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

In this chapter I will draw a comparison between different aspects within AMNLAE and the RMCV. Due to methodological concerns and limited time and space, I have chosen to focus on three main aspects in this comparison: (1) Their strategies and methods of organization, (2) their perceptions on violence against women and the way violence relates to gender, and (3) their perspectives on and use of the Nicaraguan legal system.

### **7.1 Comparing Strategies: Defending Women's Interests?**

An important distinction between the RMCV and AMNLAE is in terms of their goals and strategies for promoting change. I find their goals and strategies especially distinguished by the specific levels of society towards which they appeal to and direct their practical work. The RMCV's mission of transforming all power relations imposed by the patriarchal system appears as a very broad and general one. Departing from the Ecological Model presented in chapter three, I will argue that the RMCV's main target area in order to achieve change lies at the structural level of society (Heise 1998). Even though constituted by a great number of women's centres that work directly with women victims of violence, the RMCV concentrate most of their initiatives at promoting political activism directed towards the state and the public. Their frequent use of the media to broadcast their protests, serves the purpose of giving their cases increased focus, appealing to a great number of people and as a result augmenting the pressure on the government and state institutions. Additionally, they employ the media and their public events as a means to present violence against women not only as a private problem, but as a public and social one, denouncing the lack of interest from the state to eradicate this breach against women's human rights and to install preventive measures. This illustrates how the RMCV engages in cultural politics by conveying "an alternative vision of what counts as political" (Alvarez, et al. 1998:57).

AMNLAE on the other hand, especially the local Women's Houses, works mostly towards the local community, providing immediate problem resolutions for the individual woman. Looking through Heise's (1998) ecological framework, AMNLAE's strategies are directed mainly towards changing aspects at the personal, family and relationship level, and the community. In the latter, AMNLAE is for instance present through its volunteer programme of legal-advisors, the *promotoras*. This strategy speaks clearly about their vision of "*being close to where the women are*", as the director puts it. One of the women from the network of

*promotoras* told me that “a lot of women come looking for me at my house in order to receive some sort of guidance, because many women do not like going all the way to the Women’s House”. Furthermore, I got the impression that Nicaraguans are generally very sceptical of professionals. Many people argued that client confidentiality and professional secrecy is not practiced. As a consequence, women are reluctant of going to the police, the psychologist, the doctor or for instance the lawyer at AMNLAE to tell them about what they regard as their private problems. This may also have roots in the long held view that “problems within the house should stay within family” (INIDE & MINSa 2007:368). When breaking with this cultural norm, it might be easier going to someone closer, someone you trust, than to a professional. Consequently, the *promotoras* make the Women’s House extremely significant at a community level, appealing directly to the women in the ‘barrios’ by being ‘one of them’.

Family and relationship dimensions are targeted by AMNLAE mainly through mediations between the conflicting parts and through *capacitaciones* on good values and communication skills within the family. At the personal level, the Women’s House focuses on improving women’s self-esteem, teaching them about their rights so that they can take informed decisions and giving courses on practical skills so that they can be economically independent. Furthermore, if a woman victim of violence works up the courage to act upon her problem, it is crucial, as Doña Yolanda and the lawyers emphasized, to offer them support, accompanying her to the police and being present at the trial, at least if she does not have anybody else supporting her. As Dina stated, the lack of support that victims experience, as much from family and friends as from the legal system, is one of the reasons why so many women never report the abuse or why they withdraw during the legal process. Dina’s argument reflects the general argument of Ellsberg and Heise (2005) about how the lack of support from family and friends makes women extremely vulnerable. This underlines the importance of the work that the *promotoras* and the lawyers do by giving the victim moral and psychological support and to the ‘lonely victim’.

Following Maxine Molyneux’ (1985) argument, women can be seen to share some general interests, dividing these into two categories: Strategic and practical gender interests. Strategic gender interests are those that demand a more satisfactory ‘set of arrangements’ in order to overcome women’s subordination, involving goals such as gender equality and women’s emancipation (Molyneux 1985). Practical gender interests are seen to be a consequence of women’s immediate needs, caused by the concrete conditions of the gender division of labour (Molyneux 1985). As such, practical interests are generally “formulated by women

themselves in relation to their everyday lives” (Linkogle 1996:21). Furthermore, the different types of women’s gender interests, strategic and practical, are closely intertwined with social class, clearly illustrated by the many popular movements all over the world constituted mainly by poor women (class) motivated by ‘survival’ necessities (practical interests). The relationship between women’s interests and their social class imply that one woman’s interest is not necessarily another’s. Consequently, as Molyneux argues, it is hard to answer the question “of whether the state is or is not acting in the interests of women” (1985:235). When it comes to the problem of violence against women, depending on what response it is given, its elimination classifies either as a practical or a strategic interest. For instance, AMNLAE’s direct and ‘hands-on’ approach to the problem of violence would be classified as practical, while the RMCV’s goal of ‘changing the structures of power inequality’ in order to overcome violence against women is a strategic response.

According to Molyneux (1985), focusing exclusively on one of these types of gender interests will come with some restrictions in order to improve women’s general well-being. She argues that “practical interests do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination”, but might do so if politicized and transformed into a general strategic claim (Molyneux 1985:233). As for women’s strategic gender interests, it is not automatically said that all women will accept these due to their often abstract nature and consequently not responding to or even threatening women’s immediate and critical needs. Therefore, “the formulation of strategic interests can only be effective as a form of intervention when fully account is taken of these practical interests” (Molyneux 1985:234). The argument of the inappropriateness of strategic interests was posed by my informants and other women at AMNLAE’s Women’s House, seeing the RMCV’s claims and demands to the state as too ‘far-fetched’ and irrelevant to their real-life situation. Likewise, the RMCV did not hide their critical opinions towards AMNLAE’s regarding their role of downplaying or even ignoring government’s actions that do not benefit women.

One example of their different strategy is the way that AMNLAE emphasized the importance of women’s self-esteem in order to overcome their situation of violence, to have the courage to file a report and to manage emotionally and economically without her partner. Their solution is providing these women with *capacitaciones* (self-help seminars and other courses) and therapy. This solution raises the question posed by Henrietta Moore regarding how women can change their perceptions about themselves when the categories and discourses they use to think and talk with are the same as the ones used by their abusers (1994:75).

Moore (1994) finds that Pierre Bourdieu's theory includes precisely the relationship between people's self-images and the dominant cultural ideologies. He does this through recognizing the structural inequalities that create social divisions which again produce a "set of structuring principles and common schemes of perception and conception that generate practices and representations" (Bourdieu 1990:53 in Moore 1994:78).

Opposite to Evelyn Stevens' (1973) argument concerning women's own decision to stay in an abusive relationship due to personal gains in the form of social approval or sanctions, Bourdieu (2004) does not see this as a 'choice' at all. He claims that staying in an abusive relationship is in "itself an effect of power through schemes of perceptions", that is, the naturalized categories an individual uses to talk and think about him or herself (2004:341). Furthermore, he argues that these schemes of perceptions are a result of "the social conditions of production of the disposition that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves" (Bourdieu 2004). This entails that women 'accept' their submissiveness as a consequence of the social constructions that creates the cognitive structures and dispositions such as to respect, love and admire. Consequently, Bourdieu criticizes the 'easy' strategy of the 'raising of consciousness' as a solution for women in order to overcome violence.

With Bourdieu's argument in mind, AMNLAE's response to the problem of violence through precisely consciousness raising might appear quite simplistic. Furthermore, based on Bourdieu's point, the importance of changing the structures that leads the dominated to embody the 'naturalized' classifications becomes even more evident. Consequently, the RMCV's strategy of directing their work towards the general public, but also to the governments and state institutions which control the reproduction of some of these dominant classifications, is very important. Yet, I will argue that the picture is not that simple. Even though the RMCV's strategies, directed towards the structural dimensions of society, are important; there are also some problems related to how they, through their extremely politicized public discourse, appear to be more critical to the current government than to the general state structure. That is, and as argued by AMNLAE workers, the RMCV appears to have made their quest a political one, but particularly against the FSLN and Daniel Ortega. Although this may be a result of the specific history of the FSLN in Nicaragua, it does raise some questions regarding their main focus. For the general population, it might be perceived as if more than challenging the dominant model of gender and fighting for women's rights, the RMCV's major goal is to 'paint black' the current government. Furthermore, even though

the RMCV does reach out to many people through their public campaigns and the attention from the media, I am not convinced that they achieve to challenge the balance of power when it comes to women's private and relationship dimensions – that is, the dimensions where violence against women is most salient. From this perspective, I am inclined to argue that AMNLAE is enacting in cultural politics by challenging dominant discourses in a more direct way. Through their work, they are influencing the individual woman to defy local conventions and social sanctions and through her own actions, do something with her life.

### **7.1.1 Gender Categories and Identity Formation**

Postmodern deconstructionist critiques tends to denounce some movement's and organization's strategic use of "essentializing language to unite distinct groups around common elements of group consciousness" (Nash 2005:11). However, and as illustrated by Lynn Stephen (2005) in her studies of women's mobilization in El Salvador and Mexico, these 'constructed emblems of identity' are sometimes pivotal as a means of organization for an excluded group in order to seek respect and fight for their common cause. Stephen argue that the form of unity that a movement or organization exhibits is both constructed and discursive, and often expressed through "essentialized categories" (2005:75). In relation to AMNLAE and the RMCV there are several differences in the way that they use essentialized categories as a means of presenting the organization to the public.

The RMCV is very conscious about their use of categories and concepts when they talk about violence, emphasizing the necessity of talking about 'violence against *women*', and not intra-familiar or domestic violence. By claiming to represent all women, the RMCV constructs a common identity based on no other features than being a female. They are pursuing a political project by acting on an imagined unity of identity, or in Gayatri Spivak's words, they are exercising "strategic essentialism" (1993). However, this essentialization does not mean that the RMCV consists of women with a homogenous identity. As in Stephen's (2005) study, the incentive of members for joining the RMCV varies greatly. Some were motivated by personal experiences of violence, or joined in their struggle towards justice for themselves, a family member or a friend. And then there are those who work at the RMCV merely due to their profession or to personal connections. Furthermore, the RMCV members' social background also varies, ranging from highly educated and high to middle-class women; to women with a very humble background and no education at all. Additionally, the RMCV also includes organizations from the eastern Nicaragua, constituted mainly by indigenous and Afro-Caribbean groups. In their intent to represent all these women, the RMCV states that: "The

RMCV works as a space that unites a diversity of women with different identities, interests, conditions, positions and necessities who share a common mission” (2011b: 'Principios Funcionales'). The RMCV emphasized that their principle of respect and recognition of diversity demands a constant balance between tolerance and negotiation of difference in order to execute common proposals and actions. This relates to Stephen’s argument about how a group’s “political identity formation” involves a tension between “the constant and contingent negotiation of difference within organizations and the need to project unitary identities that usually result in essentialization” (2005:66-67).

Although the RMCV emphasizes difference within, they ‘simplify’ their identity toward the public by using the discourse of the ‘woman’ as opposite to that of the ‘man’. As such, they construct a discourse of difference predicated on the mutual exclusion of these two categories (Moore 1994). As argued by Moore, this may be problematic because there are other “axes of difference” which can be equally or more defining than gender, such as class, religion and political conviction (1994:57). Consequently, some women will probably feel to have more in common with men from their same social, political or ethnic background than with women with a different background. So, despite the RMCV’s principles of wide representation, in practice, there will be women who do not feel represented by the RMCV. For instance, with their pro-abortion discourse and their open support to gay-rights, the RMCV does not appeal to Catholics, Christians or other conservative groups. Furthermore, their strong critique towards the current government will certainly chase away most FSLN sympathizers. Women from these groups will neither seek to become RMCV members, neither feel represented by them. Additionally, the focus of the RMCV on strategic interests and advocating for structural change may appear distant and irrelevant for the individual woman suffering violence and hoping desperately for an immediate change to her situation.

Similar to the RMCV, AMNLAE workers’ reasons for working at the Women’s House, as well as their social and religious backgrounds also varies. However, they all mentioned their personal experiences with violence as their main motivation for their continuous dedication to AMNLAE’s work. They emphasized that the Women’s House is an autonomous organization that attends women from different religious, economic and political backgrounds. Similarly AMNLAE National (2009) emphasizes, as the name suggests, that AMNLAE is ‘a movement for Nicaraguan women’. However, due to their history as part of a ‘popular movement’ and their relationship to the former Sandinista revolutionary front and current party, AMNLAE does probably not appeal to women who strongly oppose Sandinista politics and/or belong to

higher social class. As such, AMNLAE's political and social 'label' entails that the workers are also categorized by 'outsiders' under the same labels, regardless of whether the AMNLAE workers identify by them. Additionally, the social aspect of the local Women's Houses services, such as free legal counselling and mediations, their activities for children and adolescents, and the *promotoras* in the *barrios*, AMNLAE mainly appeals to lower social classes and especially to poor mothers. I found that the workers sometimes used their identity and roles as mothers and wives when relating to the women who came to the House seeking help. Yet, I will argue that they did not employ 'essentialized categories' such as 'motherhood' with the same strength and as a means of 'attracting' and mobilizing women as AMNLAE did during the revolution and the subsequent civil war.

I find that the lack of pursuing 'strategic essentialism' as means of organizing within AMNLAE is caused by their present situation characterized by internal division more than communal mobilization. Additionally, the current function of the local Women's Houses as independent offices providing different social and judicial services more than as organizations mobilizing around a common cause might also be a reason for their limited strategy of common identity construction. Lynn Stephen's state that "bargaining with the state and holding it accountable requires the deployment of essentialist identities and categories" (2005:75). Based on her argument, the fact that public political criticism and demands are not part of the local Women's House's strategies might be decisive for the workers lack of negotiation of difference in order to project a 'collective-identity' outwards.

## **7.2 Discourses on Gender and Violence against Women**

I have argued that due to the RMCV's and AMNLAE's different strategies, areas of focus and their relationship to the authorities, they exercise 'cultural politics' at very different levels of society. In the following, I will present the different ways in which the members of these two organizations might contribute to transform dominant discourses and practices through their own approaches to questions of violence and gender.

### **7.2.1 Comparing RMCV's and AMNLAE's perspectives on Violence**

AMNLAE workers' understanding of violence against women and its reasons appear to be grounded in their experiences at the Women's House and their personal life. But, it is also clear that the concepts they use, as for instance 'psychological violence', 'verbal violence' and 'economic violence', have been appropriated through the many *capacitaciones* they have attended. These are recurring concepts in feminist literature dealing with the topic of violence,

and also much used by the different organizations and institutions working with this issue in Nicaragua. I found that the workers at AMNLAE saw violence as more than only physical harm, regarding violence as the reason for most unhappy marriages, separations and child support demands. When Carla, Dina and Doña Yolanda talked about violence, they mostly referred to violence between couples and intra-familial violence. This has clear connections to the fact that most of the cases they deal with at the Women's House involve violence within the family.

In contrast, RMCV members' understanding of violence and the RMCV's official definition is more abstract, as it also includes 'institutional violence', involving all acts of discrimination, corruption and neglect from the institutions of the state during and after the judicial process of seeking justice (RMCV 2011b:'Marco Conceptual'). It also refers to the lack of appropriate laws, and more importantly, the general acceptance in all institutions of 'going around' the laws, especially when it comes to cases dealing with violence against women. The RMCV makes a deeper analysis of the underlying reasons of violence, and they make use of Heise's (1998) theory of the combination of factors at different interrelated dimensions of personal, relational and socio-cultural life in order to explain violence against women. The RMCV argues that "violence against women is a complex consequence of the mechanisms developed by the patriarchal system", referring to the "relationships of unequal power that infiltrate all social relations" (2011b:'Marco Conceptual'). For instance, in one of the RMCV' seminars that I attended, a woman participant spoke up saying that "*we have to insist on calling it 'violence against women', and not 'domestic violence', or 'intra-familial violence', because the latter does not include the abuse and subordination we as women experience in so many other areas*". Consequently and as mentioned in chapter 6, the government and state institutions are publicly attacked by the RMCV claiming that these, directly and indirectly, are responsible for the persistence and increase of cases of violence and murder of women.

Both organizations work with a broad and inclusive definition of violence. Their understanding of violence, including psychological, physical and sexual abuse and deprivation from economic resources and social life, is in consistency with the United Nation's (1993: Art. 1) definition of what constitutes violence against women. Even though acts of 'economic violence' are not explicitly described by the Nicaraguan law, the latter gives mothers the right to receive child support from the father of her children. Both organizations used the concept of 'violence' to describe this act of omission, perhaps as a way

of emphasizing that it is a violation of their rights. 'Omission' then becomes an extension of the use of the term 'violence'. Compared to the RMCV, however, AMNLAE's workers' understanding of violence is clearly influenced by their personal work with women, and mostly mothers, from the neighbourhood. For instance, Dina's understanding of violence as a cycle is based on her experience that the violence in a relationship alternate with periods of forgiveness and 'peace', but that with time violence tend to escalate, happening more frequently and becoming more extreme. Therefore, the consequences might be fatal if the woman does not manage to come out of the cycle. As such, their inclusive but practical understanding of violence is fruitful in their work, because it is not only an abstract idea, but it points to specific situations in the life of women who come to the centre seeking help. It is a hands-on understanding that can easily be applied in their day to day work. The RMCV on the other hand, aims mainly at the top of the social structure, towards the highest levels of political and institutional authorities, including the government, the Court of Law and the head of *Comisarías* and the Public Ministry. Consequently, it is in their interest to include another aspect to the concept of violence against women, namely structural violence. Their broad understanding of violence against women seems appropriate when their mission also is a broad one, that is, to change the structures of subordination of all women by transforming the relations of unequal power imposed by the patriarchal system (RMCV 2011b:'Misión y Visión').

### **7.2.2 Comparing Perspectives on the Murder of Women**

Currently, the RMCV's discourse on violence against women is centred on the murder of women and on the factors ingrained or institutionalized in the structures of the Nicaraguan society which allow this phenomenon to be reproduced. Specifically, the RMCV focuses on the increasing number of murders of women by men, the poor resolutions of these cases and the limited efforts by the state to slow down this negative trend. When going over my fieldwork material, I noticed that my informants from the RMCV, and especially Virginia Meneses, always referred to this specific action as 'femicide'. In contrast, other organizations and institutions mostly use 'femicide' or simply 'the murder of women', as the case of the AMNLAE workers. I assumed first that the uses of these concepts were random and insignificant, but I discovered later that there is an important discursive difference between the two terms 'femicide' and 'feminicide'.

The concept of 'femicide' has been used in criminology and feminist literature to describe the murder of women. Arguing that "the murder of women must be problematized within larger

structures of patriarchy and misogyny<sup>19</sup>”, and since a sexist aspect is almost always involved, Diana Russell defines femicide as “the killing of females by males because they are female” (In Sanford 2008:112). The problem with this concept is that it is often used to characterize all women’s murders, and therefore, some argue, it has lost its power of advocacy against this crime (Martin 2002). Victoria Sanford, a professor of anthropology who has studied the murder of women in Guatemala, develops further on the idea of Diana Russell. She sees the high mortality rates of women as a result of both the nation’s history of violence, the reluctance of the authorities to prevent and deal with this problem and the limited initiatives to criminally pursue the murderers (Sanford 2008). In order to include and hold responsible “not only the male perpetrators, but also the state and judicial structures that normalize misogyny”, Sanford (2008:112) argues that it is necessary with a new concept, namely ‘femicide’.

The concept of femicide helps to disarticulate belief systems that place violence based on gender inequality within the private sphere... and reveals the very social character of the killing of women as a product of relations of power between men and women. It also allows for an interrogation of legal, political, and cultural analyses of institutional and societal responses to the phenomena. Femicide leads us back to the structures of power and implicates the state as a responsible party, whether by commission, toleration, or omission.

(Sanford 2008:112-113)

It is clear that at the time of the interview, Virginia Meneses from the RMCV’s Area of Political Action was focusing on ‘femicides’. For instance, during the laps of the interview, she repeatedly referred to Dina’s case - a case of alleged femicide. Furthermore, as the RMCV’s ‘public face’, her focus also illustrates the current attention of the RMCV on the problem of femicides. Meneses and the RMCV (2009, 2010a, 2010c) blame the patriarchal system for the high levels of impunity, and see the increasing level of murder of women as a consequence of the authorities’ attitudes of indifference allowing “*impunity itself to gain body*”, in Meneses words. This is in consistency with Sanford’s view, claiming that “impunity, silence and indifference each play a role in femicide” (2008:112). Virginia Meneses later confirmed that she personally prefers the concept of ‘femicide’, because it is the broadest one, encompassing all the aspects that produces and perpetuates this crime.

In accordance with Sanford’s (2008) reflections, the RMCV as an organization is also very clear about their opinion on the responsibility of the state, especially regarding institutional responses or lack of such, when it comes to the tragedy of femicides. In their report from January-August 2010 the RMCV stated that femicide “is the maximum expression of the

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<sup>19</sup> Misogyny: Hatred of women.

effect of the patriarchy, since behind this violence is the desire of power and control over women's body, their subjectivity, sexuality and life" (2010a). In this report and their following '2010 Annual Report', the RMCV (2011a) pointed at the negative effects of patriarchal culture, naming it as the major reason behind violence against women and feminicides.

As in the case of the RMCV, the AMNLAE workers also mentioned 'the killing of women' when discussing the issue of violence, but never used the concepts of 'femicide' or 'feminicide'. Carla informed me that "*Lately in Nicaragua, I don't know if you have noticed, the media is 'hot' with stories about women who have been killed*". She pointed at different reasons for these killings, ranging from the women victims themselves to the police institutions and the national laws. Carla explained that the new Penal Code gives shorter sentences to the murder of women than to acts of sexual assault<sup>20</sup>. As such, these laws project the conflicting message that "*it is worse to commit a crime of rape than to kill a person*". Carla argued that the policewomen at the *Comisariías* are partly responsible for these murders due to their lack of *capacitación* and poor sensibility towards the problem of violence. She believes that in some cases, the police could have prevented the murder if they had taken the woman seriously. Furthermore, in Carla's opinion, the women themselves are also to blame, because after reporting their husband to the police, they forgive him and withdraw the accusations. "*And most of the times, it is not worth it, because the man slips back to old behaviour and sometimes it even ends with murder*", Carla argued. The men who commit these murders, she claimed, are men who are blinded by jealousy and who believe women are their possession. According to her "*all of this depends primarily on our culture*", because "*the 'machismo' of the man here is simply stronger than in other places*". Carla summed this up stating that violence against women is caused by men's "*falta de cultura*", meaning literally "*lack of culture*".

Dina shared Carla's opinion that the women victims are themselves sometimes accessory to their own death by giving their husband one chance too many. Dina also talked about the "*lack of culture*", but of the women. She argued that women's education since childhood teaches them to be submissive, to endure abuse for the sake of her children, that it is not fitting for a good woman to separate from her husband or partner, and so on. Also, Dina

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<sup>20</sup> According to the Nicaraguan Penal Code (Asamblea Nacional 2008b), the highest sentence for sexual assault is 12-15 years for aggravated rape and the sentence for homicide is 10-15 years. Comparing these two penalties, we can observe that it is possible to receive a higher sentence for rape than for killing another human being. However, murder/assassination has a penalty of 15-20 years and if aggravated circumstances, 20-30 years.

believes that reprimands from their family adds to the victims' own view of what it means to be a good wife and a good mother, which in the worst scenario might have a fatal consequence. Furthermore, by believing that they are doing the right thing by staying with their violent partner, women often do not realize the rather negative consequences this decision has for their children. Furthermore, and as we will see next, both AMNLAE and the RMCV workers' understanding of violence against women, what causes it and what should be done to prevent it, is closely connected with their perspective on what it means to be a man and a woman.

### **7.2.3 What does Gender have to do with Violence?**

In chapter 3 I discuss how gender is both expressed through and influenced by discourses. I also argue that dominant discourses coexist with alternative discourses which may challenge prevailing understandings about gender and consequent practices. When approaching the field and analysing my data, I departed from the view that "various discourses/public narratives on femininity and masculinity [...] are created and recreated in an ongoing interplay with one another and with other discourses" (Johansson 1999:50). Through my fieldwork I have found that the individuals within the organizations reproduce some public discourses on gender and reject and challenge others. As previously mentioned, the AMNLAE workers argued that 'our culture' and the deeply embedded *machista* values determine men's negative values and actions against women. Therefore, a discussion of how they use the concept of culture and their understanding of its interlinked relation to women and men's actions will follow next.

AMNLAE's lawyer Carla believes that the reason why men resort to violence is grounded in the Nicaraguan *machista culture*. As mentioned earlier, she finds that violence against women can only be stopped by changing men's values. Both lawyers, Carla and Dina, used the expression 'lack of culture' when talking about issues which they see as negative, such as *machismo* and women's own self-perceptions as inferior to men, while at other times, they referred to the same 'negative' issues as *part* of their culture. This may seem like a contradiction, but I find that the concept of 'culture' is used in two different ways. One is to describe the supposedly good norms and values appropriated through the 'right' upbringing and a good education. In this respect, it appears that they employ the concept of 'culture' as synonymous to being 'civilized', or more appropriately, 'educated', implying that if you are not educated, you lack culture – and by lacking culture, you are uncivilized. According to Carla men who do not have an 'academic level' are the ones with the most *machista* values and as such, they represent the majority of the men exerting violence against women.

Consequently she argued that higher education should be made more available also for the poor part of the population, making reference to the limited capacity at public and free universities. As such, Carla believes that the culture you have is “*fundamental, because culture is what makes you see life differently, if you want to study, have a better future*”. As Carla and her husband are highly educated people, by differentiating between possessing and lacking ‘culture’, this can be interpreted as a way of distancing herself and her husband from negative practices and values present in the Nicaraguan society.

The second way the concept of ‘culture’ is used by members of AMNLAE is to describe general values and consequent actions. For instance, Dina talked about “*the culture of our ancestors*” transmitted to us by our parents, teaching women to stay with their husband, to *aguantar*, because that is a woman’s duty and “*he is the father of your children*”. According to Dina, the only way to change men’s mentality and way of acting is through ‘a change of culture’, and that this should be done through programmes of prevention directed towards boys and men at schools and in the homes.

The observations and arguments of the AMNLAE workers regarding the victims and perpetrators of violence support my initial argument based on Moore (1994) and Connell (2009) of how an individual’s identity and practice is influenced by a society’s dominant discourses of gender. Women’s embodiment of dominant discourses and subsequent practices serve to further reinforce and reproduce gendered stereotypes and related ‘role’ expectations (Stølen 1996). Dina’s reflections illustrate the intimate relationship between the represented and the lived, that is, between the discourse of being a ‘good woman’, and women’s lived experiences. Her understanding of violence and the practical work at AMNLAE is interrelated, given the emphasis on women as agents of change through the informational work that the Women’s House promotes in the barrios and at the Women’s House.

As mentioned in the literature and theory chapters, it is important to regard women as social agents and not “merely passive victims of oppressive forces” (Melhuus & Stølen 1996:12; Stevens 1973). Evelyn Stevens argued that even though there are “enormous pressures on individual women to conform to the prescriptions”, these restrictions are not so ‘ironclad’ as to preclude any possibility of acting otherwise (1973:98). As mentioned, AMNLAE workers believe that women ‘choose’ to endure abuse as a practical response to their situation, a result of pressure from family and friends, a consequence of their upbringing, education and culture, or as a combination of all these. Similarly, they see education and culture, or the ‘lack’ of

such, as the main causes behind men's actions. This is consistent with Moore's (1994) argument about how discourses work to construct women and men as different sorts of engendered individuals who consequently embody different principles of agency. As such, even though AMNLAE has an individualistic approach to the problem of violence, they are aware of the influence and constraints that social structures and discourses pose.

Furthermore, by giving women the role as agents, believing that women can change, they are already challenging the dominant discourse on women as "essentially passive, powerless, submissive and receptive" (Moore 1994:50). Also, by believing that men's behaviour can be changed through education, AMNLAE workers distance themselves from the popular argument of men being inherently bad. "*Los hombres así son*" (that's just how men are), I often heard from women victims of violence and other Nicaraguan friends when discussing the topic. Additionally, through AMNLAE's practical work at the Women's House, trying to improve women's self-image through *capacitaciones* and counselling and by encouraging women to report their husbands, the AMNLAE workers are challenging what Henrietta Moore terms the "dominant cultural models of gender" (1994:15). Furthermore, those women victims of violence taking on the challenge of stepping out of their 'accepted' gender role are examples of "how a negotiation or interchange between subject positions may serve to contest or alter dominant gender discourses, and perhaps also serve to change the gendered principles of agency" (Moore 1994; Ødegaard 2006:49). Yet, it can be argued that AMNLAE's practical approach of helping 'the local woman' lacks a deeper critique of the structures of society responsible for institutionalizing the repressive gender models throughout the different levels of society.

In contrast to AMNLAE, the RMCV put most of their energy in precisely the criticism of the patriarchal structures of society. Furthermore, even though both AMNLAE and the RMCV workers blame violence against women on men's perceived or actual control and domination over women – often referring to it as *machismo* – they do so in quite different ways. RMCV's Fátima Millón finds that the responsibility for the problem of violence against women mainly "*lies in the hands of the government, obviously, because they are the ones who have the obligation to guarantee safety, the exercise of laws, [and] that the case doesn't end in impunity*". The RMCV sees *machismo* as something deeply ingrained in the cultural and political structures of a patriarchal system, that is, at the structural level (Heise 1998). As such, the RMCV argue that not only attitudes, but the entire structure of the state system, and

especially the legal system, needs to be radically transformed in order to stop reproducing discourses that limit women's possibility of living a dignified life.

From my conversations with the AMLAE and RMCV workers, public employees, women who have experienced violence and others, my impression is that the popular discourse about women centres on the role of the mother and the understanding that being a good mother includes staying with your man for the sake of your children. The economic context further reproduces this discourse as women find themselves 'forced' to stay in a violent relationship where the man is the breadwinner, seeing no alternative way of maintaining her children. This is consistent with what previous studies from Nicaragua have found (mentioned among others by Ellsberg, et al. 2000; Hagene 2008; Kampwirth 1993; Molyneux 2003). Serving to reinforce the discourse of the 'good mother' or 'good wife' is that "Nicaraguan women are honoured for their chastity" when linked to 'wifeness' (Johansson 1999:387). For instance, my informants told me that employees at state institutions including the *Comisarías*, and the family and friends of the victim, often exert pressure on the woman to 'attend her duty' and stay with her husband or partner. Lately, however, the discourse of the 'good mother' appears to be undergoing certain transformation, perhaps as a result of women's organizations' initiatives, starting to include the responsibility of breaking out of a violent relationship precisely to protect the children.

Added to this discourse of 'the good woman' and serving to reproduce it, is the government's official discourse on 'traditional family values' which has been implemented through state programmes and is practiced at most governmental institutions. The RMCV argued that this 'official' discourse promoting family unity, evidence of Michel Foucault's argument of how 'power' operates through the institutionalization of dominant discourses in society, as argued by the RMCV, causes state officials at different levels to push for the reconciliation of the couple, often at the expense of women's safety, in order to comply with state policies. Even though the RMCV claims that the focus on traditional values has increased with the Sandinista government, this discourse was also present during the years with the liberal parties in power (Hagene 2008; Johansson 1999; Kampwirth 1993; Welsh 2001).

### **7.3 The Legal System and State Involvement – Threat or Guarantee?**

Mediations have been a legal method to resolve conflicts regarding ownership to land since 1997, and an alternative for resolving disputes and minor offences for the judges since 1998 (Poder Judicial 2005-2006b). With the Law 540 concerning mediations which entered into

force in 2005, both private and public offices are now allowed to implement mediations as an extrajudicial method of solving conflicts (Asamblea Nacional 2005). The goal with the extension of this alternative resolution method is, according to the Nicaraguan Supreme Court of Law, to facilitate ‘justice’ for people with scarce resources and contribute to relieve the national courts from an escalating load of cases (Poder Judicial 2005-2006a). The new Penal Procedure Code from 2008 supports this in its Articles 56 to 58, stating that mediations can be applied for “1. Misdemeanours. 2. Offenses resulting from criminal negligence or recklessness. 3. Crime against property committed by individuals without violence and intimidation. 4. Crimes sanctioned with low penalties” (Asamblea Nacional 2008a:34). Art. 57 further specifies that mediations that are done previous to a possible criminal charge or prosecution can be held by a lawyer or notary, the Public Defender’s Office or a Judicial Facilitator in rural areas. Art. 58 declare that mediations can also be done by the Public Prosecutor at any time during the prosecution process. In both circumstances, once the agreement is accepted by the Judge, the case against the accused is dismissed (Asamblea Nacional 2008a). Finally, if the case reaches the Judge, he can also mediate if requested by the parties involved.

Deborah Poole (2004) discusses in her article *Between Threat and Guarantee: Justice and Community in the Margins of the Peruvian State*, how the ambiguous relation of the state as part of but yet separated from the localized systems of justice in Peruvian communities create an ambiguous sense of threat and guarantee for its citizens. Poole recounts how Peru during the 1980s and 90s underwent a transformation of its judicial system by opening up centres for dispute resolution in urban areas and giving new life to community-based justice in rural areas. Similarly, in Nicaragua in 1999, “to guarantee the Nicaraguan civil society an improved access to justice” and to relieve the courts from some of their tasks, Nicaragua opened mediations centres - *Centros de Mediación y Arbitraje* - in several of its major cities (Poder Judicial 2005-2006a). However, until 2005, with the Law 540 which extended the application of mediation, these centres dealt mainly with problems related to property. As in Peru, Nicaragua decided to implement the programme of ‘judicial facilitators’ after seeing the necessity of improving access to justice also in rural areas. With the expansion of this programme in 2007 and the law 540 from 2005, mediations are today a widespread means of solving disputes, misdemeanours and minor offences as much by private as by public instances.

As mentioned in chapter 6, AMNLAE’s local Women’s House in San Marcos uses mediations as means of solving different kinds of problems. By applying mediations to cases

such as family disputes, domestic violence, child support and other minor neighbourhood conflicts the Women's House directs their assistance to the relationship- and community dimensions in Heise's (1998) model. The workers at AMNLAE sincerely hope that they, through these mediations, will contribute to resolve some minor, though important problems for the individuals involved. However, all the AMNLAE workers are quite critical, even though not publicly, to current state policies on the practice of mediations within the judicial system and in public, as well as in private institutions. Doña Yolanda defended mediation when it is used appropriately, but she is preoccupied for the consequences of the extensive use of these, being applied far too often and in situations that should not have been mediated. She was also of the opinion that it does not have the same effect on criminals as receiving a sentence would have. *"Doing mediations myself, I can see that they are not very educational. The perpetrator, who will follow up on him so that he does not assault another person or commit another crime? He does not receive a punishment or a sanction"*. However, Doña Yolanda argued that the legal system in general did not provide a good solution to criminality:

*"It is a human right to get a second chance. However, people do not seem to appreciate this opportunity... There are criminals who have been incarcerated 20 times and when they come back instead of looking for a job, they go back to the same and end up imprisoned again... It's like a cancer, like the alcoholic..."*

Carla is not negative to mediation in itself, but to the way they are done and promoted by the police, lawyers and judges. She claimed that the police imposed mediations without taking into account the woman's will or informing her about her alternatives, even though the law is very clear on this point. The law on Mediation emphasizes the "pre-eminence of the autonomy of will of the parties" and the duty of the mediator to "inform the parties about the procedure of mediation, their rights and the legal effects" (Asamblea Nacional 2005). A consequence of applying mediations in serious cases of domestic violence is that without a formal complaint, the judge will not dictate the application of the *Medidas de Seguridad de Urgencia*, that is, urgent security measures in order to protect women who have been victims of domestic violence.

The lawyer Dina is critical to the general use of mediations, arguing that it has come to disorganize and destabilize the legal system. She especially criticizes the police's use of mediations, claiming that they apply mediations to serious crimes in order to save time and resources: *"They ignore our Law that states that the [mediation] has to be something promoted by – and the will of – the parties, and not an imposition"*. According to Dina, mediations are not taken very seriously by the perpetrators, and even though it frees the

judges from time, it creates more insecurity, violence and criminality in the community. Dina was also very negative to the role of the judicial facilitators. She believes that they do not carry the same respect compared with a judge, being that *“the judicial facilitator is only a person from the neighbourhood”*. At the same time, this person has legal authority and acts in the name of the judge and the National Laws. Similarly as Poole (2004) evidenced in Peru, Dina argued that this system ‘allows’ the facilitators to act representing both the judicial system and their personal interests. Since the judicial facilitator is partially detached from the judicial system and undergoes less control, it is easier for him or her to rule out of self-interest. The result is that corruption increases while the ones in pursuit of justice often end up losing. Furthermore, Dina claimed that if someone tried to report this injustice the police would just tell them that *“the facilitator is the judge”*. The victim then feels trapped between the supposed guarantee of justice that comes with the easy access to the judicial system, and the threat that the judicial facilitators pose given their partial liberty within this system (Poole 2004). It could be asked, at what cost should access to ‘justice’ be implemented?

My fieldwork at the women’s organizations and the *Comisarías* left me with the impression that these projects which in theory sound good, did not function in practice. As in Peru, I found that the negative consequences seem to affect the people that these measures were supposed to help, namely the poor and excluded (Poder Judicial 2011; Poole 2004). Poole mentions that the intention of increasing “access to justice by allowing poor people to bypass the national judicial system” has resulted in “the creation of a shadow legal system that is both of and not of the state” (2004:53). This uncertainty makes itself evident in the ambiguous validity of the document signed during mediation. Dina explained that *“when the mediation is done before a judicial facilitator it has penal value before the court”*. However, if the accused break the agreement, the victim would have to go through a whole new process in order to take the ‘breach of contract’ to court. Consequently, the document they sign does not seem to have much importance, causing an insecurity of the legal value of these mediations for the parties involved.

When it comes to Doña Yolanda’s role as Judicial Facilitator, that is, as a person connected to the formal judicial system, and her role as director of AMNLAE’s Women’s House, this may cause confusion as to the legal status of the organization. The consequence is a further blurring of the separation between private/traditional problem resolution and the involvement of the judiciary and the state. As stated by Deborah Poole, “the effort to create sequestered forms of informal mediation separate from the state actually results in a greater contamination

by the state” (2004:56). Furthermore, the judicial facilitators are supposed to be persons that are natural “leaders in their community” and who according to programme regulations cannot “exercise any post of political partisan nature” (Poder Judicial 2011). However, this does not seem to include posts within the government’s Councils of Citizen Power. Even though these councils are supposed to represent the ‘Nicaraguan society’, in practice they are restricted to Sandinista sympathizers, acting as “both of and not of the state” (Poole 2004:57). My impression from conversations with members of the RMCV, AMNLAE and others was that being Judicial Facilitator often overlapped with being a member of these Councils, as evidenced in the case of Doña Yolanda. According to Poole (2004), acting as a representative of different sectors of the state may serve to obscure the division between ‘impartial’ judicial punishment and personalized or political interests.

When it comes to the RMCV, they repel the use of mediations in all circumstances when concerning any type of violence against women. Virginia Meneses, from the Area of Political Action of the RMCV said that with the *Programa Amor (MIFAMILIA 2008)*, or ‘Programme Love’, implemented by the Sandinistas in 2008, the use of mediations has exacerbated. Meneses explained that with the insertion of this programme as an institutional mandate in all government institutions, the unity and reconciliation of the family is superimposed at the expense of women suffering under violence. In practice, for the police and other public representatives it means that when women come seeking help “*you talk with them and then send them home to reconcile. That’s it. This is how this policy is being practiced*”. Fátima Millón from the RMCV also pointed out that once the cases reach the court, the judges are also practicing an extensive use of mediations, “*and that does not guarantee that the criminal [action] stops, only that the perpetrator will evade justice*”.

Even though we can argue that the project with Judicial Facilitators and the widespread use of mediations creates an ambiguity between the sense of threat and guarantee, it is not something unique or completely new within the system of justice. As argued by members of the RMCV, and constituting their main critique and cause of mobilization, partiality and corruption have been and still is extensively widespread at all levels within the formal justice system. As stated by Poole, “‘justice’ has always occupied the slippery space between threat and guarantee” (2004:56). Since the RMCV focuses their activism towards the structural levels of society, and then especially the judiciary institutions and systems of law, they are forced to act through this ‘slippery’ space of justice. Additionally, by refusing to accept ‘traditional’ means of mediations in order to achieve their goals, the RMCV has to deal with these formal

institutions. Their daily struggle for a just system therefore produces the impression that “things like justice and disinterested public service are inherently fictional yet nevertheless very real parts of what “the state” is all about” (2004:61). Poole argues that this ambiguity between private/traditional forms of justice and the state, comes to create a situation where justice is at the same time “excluded from and dependent on the state” (2004:59). Furthermore, according to the RMCV, they find themselves in a situation where the current government excludes them by denying state institutions to cooperate with them. However, in order to achieve women’s access to justice, they have to go through these institutions which they find themselves excluded from.

The lack of authority of the mediation agreement, and the Judicial Facilitators’ relative detachment from the formal judicial system, make these new initiatives appear as very insecure and inefficient. Furthermore, my overall impression was that the trust towards the Nicaraguan Judicial System as a route to achieve justice was generally low. As Poole finds in Peru, people often expect that “legal cases are settled according to personal connections and money” (2004:61). She concludes that “‘law’ itself [...] is assigned little, if any agency in determining the outcomes of the judicial proceedings that take place within the margins of the state” (2004:62). In my case, I would extend this statement to include not only the margins of the state, consisting of these traditional and alternative forms of justice, but with some restraints, also the formal judicial system. Finalizing, I find one of Poole’s statements especially fitting for describing what my informants presented as the consequences of these alternative policies and practices in Nicaragua: “The nation courts were thus freed from the escalating load of domestic violence hearings, while women, the most frequent victims of this form of criminal violence, were shuttled into a system where no legal sanctions could be brought against their attackers” (Poole 2004:55).

Through the comparison of AMNLAE and the RMCV I discovered several similarities, but also fundamental differences regarding their strategies, the way they talk about gender and violence, and their relationship to the government and state institutions. In the next chapter I will come back to these different factors, emphasizing the different ways in which the women’s organization’s relation to the state appears to be defining.

## 8 CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUDING REMARKS

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My motivation behind this thesis was the apparently contradictory situation in Nicaragua which I discovered through different newspapers and talking to my local friends. On the one hand was the positive atmosphere marked by the comeback of the great heroes of the revolution, Daniel Ortega with the *Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional*. On the other hand, there were increasing complaints and demands being made from frustrated civil society actors, and especially from a loud and radical women's movement; for democracy, human rights and justice. With this initial impression, I decided to focus my master's thesis on the mobilization of women in their struggle for the improvement of their own rights, especially regarding their right of living a life free of violence.

Even though both the RMCV and AMNLAE work towards the eradication of violence against women, they pursue very **different strategies** in order to reach their goals. As presented in chapter 5 and 6 and discussed in chapter 7, the nature of these strategies can be seen in relation to the area of focus of each of the organizations. The RMCV aims for transformations at the structural level, expecting a 'trickle-down' effect from this dimension to the private sphere. AMNLAE, on the other hand and especially its local Women's Houses, aim at changing the more immediate situation of individual women. Furthermore, the history of the organizations and their positioning in relation to the FSLN has also led me to argue that the RMCV and AMNLAE enact in **cultural politics** in very different ways. The RMCV pursues a strategy of redefining existing "social relations of power" mainly by challenging the prevailing political practices (Alvarez, et al. 1998:7). In contrast, AMNLAE refrains from that type of activism and instead directs their discourse of change directly towards women, but also men and children, in local neighbourhoods. Consequently, and seeing power as a social relation diffused through all social dimensions (Foucault 1984), I find that AMNLAE's strategies challenge gendered power relations at a more individual level.

When exploring the nature of the organizations' way of mobilizing, I used Maxine Molyneux's (1985) categories of '**strategic gender interests**' and '**practical gender interests**' as a point of departure. I found that the RMCV's approach mainly responds to women's strategic interests; whereas AMNLAE work towards women's practical interests. Molyneux (1985) states that there are limitations to each of these approaches, and that one of these cannot work successfully without being complemented by the other. She argues that pursuing practical interests can only cause long-term transformation if they become

politicised and reformulated into general demands that most women can identify with and support (Molyneux 1985:234). In the context of Nicaragua, several researchers (Craske 1999; Linkogle 1996; Molyneux 1985) have argued that the main mistake of the FSLN regarding women was their primary focus on women's practical interests. These authors claim that the FSLN failed to provide a truly transformative solution to women's subordination, and that this could only have been done by addressing both women's practical and strategic gender interests. Furthermore, the FSLN's strong influence on AMNLAE meant that also they failed to "adequately address strategic gender interests" (Linkogle 1996:81). For instance, during the revolution and the following period of struggles against the *Contras*, AMNLAE subordinated women's specific interests to the broader goals of FSLN.

Regarding the question of promoting political policies and practices, I found that in the case of AMNLAE and the RMCV, their level of autonomy was decisive. Even though both claim **political autonomy**, they differ profoundly in how they maintain this independent profile in practice. Similar to what Rousseau (2009) found happened in Peru under President Alberto Fujimori's rule can be said to have happened also with AMNLAE under FSLN's rule, although with some divergences. Firstly, in Peru, women's grassroots organizations were co-opted through measures of threat and reward, serving to legitimize the rule of the regime. Compared to Nicaragua, and as previously argued, the FSLN has always maintained some influence over AMNLAE. However, during the years with liberal governments, the FSLN loosened its grip and the Women's Houses were left to operate more or less independently. With the return of Daniel Ortega, once again AMNLAE National is under FSLN's control. Consequently, it is clear that even though my informants claimed the local house's autonomy from both the main office and the Sandinista party, they were not entirely 'free'.

Secondly, in Peru, by portraying his initiatives as a response to the needs of poor mothers, "Fujimori had an easy terrain on which to build emotional and material linkages with them to sustain his rule" (Rousseau 2009:127). Most of the AMNLAE members praised the FSLN's social programmes and reforms, portraying them as a better response to women's needs than those of the liberal governments. Perhaps the reason is that AMNLAE's members on an everyday basis relate to poor women and especially poor mothers, and therefore are more sensible to their needs. In contrast, the RMCV criticized these programmes for being simplistic and not providing a long-term solution to women's problems. Thirdly, in Peru, some women's organizations actively participated in political institutions, assuming overall benefits despite the undemocratic and corrupt nature of the party and the system. Similarly,

women from AMNLAE have mainly remained FSLN supporters and participated in local politics, with the belief that it is better to support a *machista* revolutionary (Ortega) than ‘a woman of the right’ (Violeta Chamorro), as a former FSLN woman soldier put it (Linkogle 1996:100). This applies also to Doña Yolanda, who is personally FSLN supporter and very active in local politics. She explained that she will always stay with the FSLN, because they are the ones that liberated Nicaragua from the hands of its oppressor. However, AMNLAE’s connection to the FSLN goes against Molyneux (1985) argument that in order for women’s interests not to become subordinated to the government’s more general goals, women’s organizations should maintain their autonomy, yet always struggling to influence party policy.

In relation to their different history and contrasting strategies, I have argued that the workers in the two organizations become involved in the construction of ‘**collective identities**’ and utilize ‘**strategic essentialism**’ differently in their work. The RMCV portrays itself as an organization which includes all women, emphasizing that because their members have all sorts of backgrounds, a negotiation of difference is necessary in order to act in a united way. However, even though their strategy of ‘supporting all women’ is accompanied by a discourse of wide inclusion and diversity, it also presumes that women have some shared interest that surpass interests based on other ‘axes of difference’ (Moore 1994). The RMCV’s assumption that they are representing the interests of all women by posing strategic demands might not be embraced by women who on a day-to-day basis struggle to put food on the table. As Dina from AMNLAE emphasized, poor women are less concerned with long-term transformations.

AMNLAE workers did not appear to engage in any sort of negotiation in order to construct a common identity. However, AMNLAE’s history and current link to the FSLN reproduces the idea that AMNLAE is still a ‘Sandinist’ organization. This idea also influenced the general perception about the AMNLAE workers, as I got the impression that most people regarded all of them as Sandinistas. Furthermore, I found that through its community-focus, the Women’s House does project an image of the organization that especially appeals to poor women and mothers. The AMNLAE workers argued that they are more ‘down to earth’ than the RMCV, because “*we work with real-life problems*”. Consequently, I argue that AMNLAE workers’ projection of being an organization for the ‘underprivileged’, that is, the majority of the Nicaraguan population, is stronger than the political identity that follows them. However, their focus on class-based interests has caused other feminist organizations, among them the RMCV, to criticize AMNLAE for tending to emphasize class over gender identity and consequently undermine women’s specific gender interests.

AMNLAE and the RMCV had similar perspectives on the reasons for **violence**, with some differences regarding the **responsibility of providing a solution** to this practice. Both the RMCV and AMNLAE were generally sceptical to the legal system and emphasized the negative impact of the widespread *machismo*. Unlike AMNLAE, the RMCV placed the main responsibility at the highest level of the political hierarchy, criticizing what they consider to be a government influenced by *machista* values that reproduce attitudes and practices which are harmful to women. AMNLAE workers found the main problem to be grounded in the attitudes and lack of *sensibilización* of the police and professionals in the community, arguing that the solution sometimes is as simple as ‘more *capacitación*’. When it comes to the **judicial alternatives** implemented by the state through the projects of Judicial Facilitators and mediations, AMNLAE and the RMCV have very different opinions. While the AMNLAE workers partly defend the appointment of Judicial Facilitators, especially in the case of Doña Yolanda, the RMCV did not seem to believe that these local ‘judges’ would facilitate women’s access to justice. AMNLAE workers also defended the use of mediations in some circumstances, whereas the RMCV was very critical to the use of mediations in general, arguing that it leaves the perpetrators free from charges, and as such reproduces impunity.

When it comes to the **financial situation** of the organizations, they both claimed to have enjoyed more economic support during the years of the liberal governments than under the current government of Daniel Ortega and the FSLN. In this thesis I therefore argue that the nature of the responses of the RMCV and AMNLAE to the problem of violence against women, in addition to being closely related to whether they see violence as a consequence of mainly personal or structural factors and of their relationship to the government, it is also influenced by their level and source of economic financing.

In the end, it seems that for AMNLAE it all comes down to giving an immediate answer to a pressing situation for the individual woman, that is, a practical response and a bottom-up perspective. Unlike AMNLAE, the RMCV is more concerned with formulating a strategic and long-term solution by emphasizing the transformation of state policies and institutional structures, thus representing a top-down perspective. However, due to my focus on the RMCV’s main office, I wish to emphasize that in addition to its structural approach, the RMCV does also target women’s practical interests in a direct and personal way through its associated women’s centres, clinics and shelters. In contrast, AMNLAE’s coordinating office does not target the structural factors that seem to reproduce violence against women and limit women’s access to justice. Furthermore, AMNLAE’s local Women’s House’s lack of critique

of negative structural factors has to be considered not just as a ‘flaw’ from their side, but as a consequence of AMNLAE’s general history, their relationship to the Sandinista party and the current political context. I will also argue that by remaining submissive to the FSLN, a situation that does not appear to change in the immediate future, AMNLAE’s lack of neutral political criticism and the influence of the FSLN in different aspects of their work, will persist. This illustrates why some of AMNLAE’s local Women’s Houses along the way have broken out of AMNLAE National, choosing to become an independent organization.

**Summarizing**, it can be argued that the RMCV and AMNLAE’s Women’s House, with their different strategies towards the eradication of violence against women, both have their limitations and strengths. They both do an important job, targeting different levels of society and promoting change respectively. Furthermore, it is striking how all the different aspects involved in women’s mobilization in Nicaragua are interconnected. These aspects involve the organizations’ strategies, the type of interests they promote, the levels of society towards which they direct their work, their opinions about and use of state institutions, and also their discourses on violence and gender. But more importantly, by analysing all these factors I found that they all appear to be defined by the organizations’ level of political autonomy.

Especially striking is the major paradox the organizations encounter when dealing with women’s access to justice: the dilemma of depending on a system which they do not believe in. This is particularly clear in the case of the RMCV which do not accept the localized judicial methods currently promoted by the state. In order to achieve their goal of improving women’s access to justice, the RMCV therefore finds themselves depending on the judicial apparatus which they heavily criticize as deficient, inefficient and corrupt. Contrary to the RMCV, AMNLAE accepts the alternative legal methods as a way of making the legal processes more accessible for the general population. Since the state’s responsibility to provide protection through its institutions is not being fulfilled, its citizens are left with an ambiguous sense of ‘threat and guarantee’.

Through my research, the women’s movement’s particularly complicated relationship to the government and the state institutions becomes evident. Furthermore, my research also illustrates the great initiatives that are being taken by women’s organizations in order to improve the situation of violence and promoting women’s access to justice. Consequently, it can be argued that they are taking on the responsibility that originally belongs to the Nicaraguan state: The responsibility of preventing and responding to violence against women.

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