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Coming into Consciousness Women's Empowerment Projects in Chinandega, Nicaragua

Brittany Wightman
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Coming into Consciousness

Women's Empowerment Projects in Chinandega, Nicaragua

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Abstract

Nicaraguan people are gridlocked into various oppressive hierarchies. Those who find themselves at the bottom of these hierarchies face what Paulo Freire calls “dehumanization”, because they are unable to engage in the inquiry and praxis of their realities. Through my independent study project, I address the hierarchical system of patriarchy in Nicaragua, and highlight the ways in which women empowering themselves are reclaiming their humanity through increasing consciousness. I was fortunate enough to work with two organizations in Chinandega: El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega, and El Grupo Crecer. In working with these organizations I became immersed in the the ways women are struggling together to assert their subjectivity. I hope to impart just a small part the fervor of women’s empowerment projects in Chinandega by discussing the topics relevant in the minds of women pursuing liberty through consciousness, and analyzing how women’s bold confrontations with these topics does indeed empower them.

Key words: Women, empowerment, sexism, consciousness, feminism, Chinandega Brittany Wightman

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Abstracto

La gente nicaragüense, como todos nosotros, están paralizado en las varias jerarquías opresivas. Aquellos que se encuentran en la parte inferior de estas jerarquías se enfrentan a lo que Paulo Freire llama " deshumanización " , porque no tienen la capacidad de participar en la investigación y la praxis de sus realidades . A través de mi proyecto de estudio independiente,

considero el sistema jerárquico de patriarcado en Nicaragua, y enfatizo las formas en que las mujeres están empoderándose a sí mismas y están reclamando su humanidad mediante el desarrollo de conciencia. Tuve la suerte de trabajar con dos organizaciones en Chinandega: El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega y El Grupo Crecer . En el trabajo con estas organizaciones yo estuve sumergida en las maneras que las mujeres están luchando juntas para afirmar su subjetividad. Espero poder transmitir sólo una pequeña parte del fervor de los proyectos de empoderamiento de las mujeres en Chinandega al discutir los temas relevantes en la mente de ellas, y el análisis de su forma de enfrentar estos temas sin tabúes para incidir en su autonomía.

Palabras claves: Mujeres, empoderamiento, sexismo, conciencia, feminismo, Chinandega

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Introduction

Nicaraguan people are gridlocked into various oppressive hierarchies. Those who find themselves at the bottom of these hierarchies face what Paolo Freire calls “dehumanization”, because they are unable to engage in the inquiry and praxis of their realities. Through my independent study project, I address the hierarchical system of patriarchy in Nicaragua, and highlight the ways in which women empower themselves and reclaim their humanity by expanding consciousness.

Throughout my process, I was fortunate enough to work primarily with El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega. This organization works alongside women for the reclamation of their strength and value as human beings through women’s rights education, emotional support, and legal aid. MMCH welcomed me to join hands with them in the struggle for liberation from sexism, and I was able to gain an intimate understanding of the most human aspects of women’s empowerment. I was also able to meet with several members from a young women’s empowerment organization *El Grupo Crecer*, and to learn about their passionate and creative efforts to raise consciousness and loosen the bonds of sexism from the minds of women in their community. Through this paper, I hope to impart the fervor of women’s empowerment projects in Chinandega by discussing topics relevant to women pursuing liberty through consciousness, and analyzing how women’s bold confrontations with these topics does indeed empower them.

Understanding Women’s Empowerment

Women’s social empowerment consists of two fundamental and equally important aspects: education, and feminism. It is important to distinguish both aspects, define them, and

explicate their roles in the empowerment of women to understand why empowerment is important, and how women achieve empowerment. In their ideal manifestations, both feminism and education lead to liberation by increasing individual and social consciousness.

Paolo Freire notes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹ that “for apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other”.² Along these lines, women, without the critical engagement of their place in their bodies, their families, and their society, are not “truly human”. To be truly human, according to Freire, is our “natural vocation”. “Dehumanization... [is] an historical reality... Within history in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness.”³

It is self-awareness, consciousness of one’s place in society whether or not she is oppressed, that defines humanity. Freire goes on to say that the “vocation [to be truly human] is constantly negated... It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity.”⁴ It is this “struggle” on the part of women “to recover their lost humanity”, that I name for this investigation the process of women’s social empowerment. **That is to say, when** I refer to empowerment, I am referring to this struggle. The process itself *is* empowerment, as the woman must be “an uncompleted being conscious of [her]

¹ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000. Print

² Freire 21

³ Freire 2

⁴ Freire 2

incompletion” before she can seek fuller human experience. In doing so she is humanized and dehumanized simultaneously. It is her consciousness that resurrects her humanity, and restores her to power.

Along this similar framework, Bell Hooks, in her book *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*⁵ illustrates the importance of raising consciousness for feminist empowerment. Hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.”⁶ To enact these outcomes, Hooks recalls the importance of consciousness-raising. “Revolutionary feminist consciousness-raising emphasized the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it is perpetrated and maintained,”⁷ so that women, in Freire’s terms, may come to a “truly human” state by way of consciousness. For the purposes of this investigation, the process of coming to this consciousness is empowerment. Women unconscious of patriarchy are disempowered, or “dehumanized” as they are “apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis.”⁸ They do not question nor do they act with awareness of their reality. Women have to understand the ways they may be oppressed in order to engage in meaningful inquiry of their realities and act with awareness.

My investigation explores the process of women’s empowerment through *El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega*, and *El Grupo Crecer*, both located in the department of Chinandega in the northwestern Nicaragua. While working with these groups I explored the way that women find strength by expanding consciousness and engaging critically with their realities. They enter a collective resistance to oppression by way of learning who they are, where they stand both

⁵ Hooks, Bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000. Print.

⁶ Hooks 1

⁷ Hooks 7

⁸ Friere 21

within their bodies and within society, and why. Despite the obstacles of ambivalence, religion, aggression, and law being rooted in the seemingly eternal grounds of patriarchy, women empower themselves through consciousness. Their struggle is one of profound beauty and resilience.

Researcher's Lens

In my university in Los Angeles, California, I am a part of a mentorship program called Women and Youth Supporting Each Other (W.Y.S.E.). The program began in 1992 at UCLA, and since has grown to include fifteen branches throughout the United States. The model involves a curriculum with topics ranging from identity to future options to the female body, a group of mentors at a university, and a group of mentees at a school in the area. At Occidental College, where I am currently in my junior year, we are a group of about twenty college women and thirty adolescents. Every weekend, two different members of our team meet to design a session based on one of the topics in the curriculum, Mondays we discuss the session as a group, and Friday afternoons we take the session to the school. The sessions typically consist of games, art projects, discussion groups, and mentee/mentor pair bonding time.

The goal is that we learn what we need to know to make decisions that are best for us. In other words, we claim the consciousness, the inquiry, and the praxis of our realities. We are also feminists, whether or not all of our members feel comfortable laying claim to that word because of misconceived connotations. We consider ourselves to be a mutual empowerment program, as both the university students and middle school students amplify consciousness by engaging with one another.

It is with this perspective that I came to Nicaragua about three and a half months ago. As a foreign woman in Nicaragua, I found the manifestations of gender based oppression to which the culture submitted me, understanding that my experience here is not identical to Nicaraguan women's, to be blatantly grotesque. I felt that they had the sole intention of displacing me from my sense of security within my own body and identity. The constant leering, cat-calling, street harassment, and occasional groping left me feeling vulnerable and powerless, totally objectified. I think I was more sensitive to sexism here because of my perspective as an outsider, sexist societal norms in Nicaragua were not normalized to me.

It is important at this point to recognize that my personal encounters with sexism in Nicaragua are subtle in comparison to the sexism that most Nicaraguan women suffer. Apart from street harassment, women suffer discrimination, violence, obstruction of reproductive rights, and the general message that they are the objects of patriarchy rather than subjects in their own right. The United States is certainly not free of sexism, but I cannot claim to understand or relate to Nicaraguan women's experience with machismo.

My acute awareness of these manifestations of sexism, and the way that I felt as a direct result of those manifestations, led me to wonder how Nicaraguan women internalize this sexism. How do they feel about themselves, growing up not only subject to "the gaze,"⁹ but having that gaze revoke their subjectivity to make them objects of a repressive system. Most importantly, I wanted to understand how women overcome the affects of sexism within their social experiences when considering their own identities.

⁹ Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". W.W. Norton. Ecrits, New York. 1977. Print.

Research Process and Methodology

Given my experience with W.Y.S.E. and my preliminary perception of sexism in Nicaragua, I was interested in connecting with women's mentorship groups during my ISP research. Understanding the transition from blind existence in sexist society to liberating consciousness of one's reality seemed best accomplished by engaging with organizations that foster that enlightenment. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work with two women's empowerment groups in Chinandega: *El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega* (MMCH)¹⁰, and *El Grupo Crecer*.¹¹ These two organizations were my gateway to understanding how women in Nicaragua see themselves, why they see themselves that way, and how they are coming to consciousness and reclaiming that identity.

My methods of field research included observation of the organizations' structures and projects, participation in workshops and meetings, and interviews with employees, volunteers, and participants of both groups. I was in Chinandega from April 10th until May 2nd, during which time I spent every workday in the field with MMCH. I typically spent mornings observing and participating in various workshops and courses, while spending the afternoons at the MMCH office. Working in the field gave me an opportunity not only to see MMCH's projects, but also to talk with the women who chose to participate in them. I noted what women talked about and how they interacted with each other and with the facilitators. At the bottom of each observations page in my work journal, I left space to record themes and write questions to ask facilitators after the workshops or bring up in later interviews. In doing so, I practiced Grounded Theory Method.

¹⁰ The Women's Movement of Chinandega

¹¹ The Group to Grow

During my time at the MMCH office, I reviewed or typed my notes from the day, observed the dynamic of the office, and held interviews. As often as was possible I entered the interviews with questions prepared ahead of time.¹² I based these questions on my preexisting knowledge, observations, or previous interviews. I tried to tailor them specifically to the person I would interview that day. I used interviews as an opportunity to expand my knowledge of different themes I observed in my investigations up to that point. Interviews also provided the

¹² Appendix A

rare but beautiful opportunity to open a space where women could reflect on their own experiences of empowerment; a space that I hope in and of itself served as an empowerment practice Whenever possible I recorded the interviews to listen to again. This allowed me to focus on the Spanish that I did not understand in the original interview, as well as to pull direct quotations from informants.

During the month of my ISP period, I also interviewed two founders of *El Grupo Crecer*, attend an internal meeting, hosted a group interview with the youth leaders, and conducted another interview with one of those leaders via Facebook messaging. I would have loved to attend or observe at least one *El Grupos Crecer's* projects, but unfortunately I did not have the opportunity.

The limitations I encountered throughout my research include the number of holidays taken over the course of the month, my Spanish comprehension, and the biases I am sure prevent me from pursuing relevant avenues of knowledge, but to which I am still blind. Unfortunately, *Semana Santa* took place the first full week of the ISP period. MMCH closed this entire week, and *El Gupos Crecer*, as a volunteer-based group that only meets weekends, did not hold any meetings or events. Additionally, International Workers Day took place on Thursday, May 5, so MMCH was also closed the May 5th through May 8th. Apart from limited time, my capacity as a researcher presented various limitations. While my Spanish comprehension improved greatly during the ISP period, I know that there is important information I have excluded from this research for lack of understanding. I also want to call attention to the vast diversity of Chinandegan women's experiences, the many successes and challenges of women's social empowerment efforts, and the complexity of gender dynamics in Nicaragua - all to which I cannot possibly do justice within the scope of this investigation.

El Grupo Crecer

El Grupo Crecer is a youth mentorship group for women in El Viejo, Chinandega. In 2010, *El Grupo Crecer* grew out of a missionary organization, but broke with its religious roots about a year later as the goals of its organizers expanded. The group consists of three tiers of participation: three women in their early thirties whose career connections and community influence allow them to facilitate the group, a group of four women ages fourteen to twenty who host projects and recruit girls from their barrios, and a group of about fifteen to twenty adolescents who participate in the projects.

El Grupo Crecer runs public campaigns against femicide, violence against women, and street harassment. They host workshops on maternity and our choice to become mothers, and often invite participants' moms to engage in the dialogue. The group also facilitates conversations about the female body, sexuality, and women's reproductive rights, as well as the rhetoric of "sin" that so often surrounds these issues. *El Grupo Crecer* performs theatrical works in the streets of their town, creates various murals, and has a weekly radio show which the girls themselves design and execute. The idea is to create an opportunity for women to explore and express their thoughts about body, gender, sexuality, defending their rights, their empowerment, and their ability to evoke change within their families and communities. They talk about their ideas and have the opportunity to look critically at why they see themselves and their world the way they do. The goal of *El Grupo Crecer* is "empowerment," says youth organizer Ixa Osorio,

“the ability to make your own decisions, and to defend yourself.” In an interview Rosario Balmaceda, one of the senior facilitators of *El Grupo Crecer*, she said that they want to impart the idea that “you can work for your dreams.”¹³

El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega

The pathways to empowerment within *El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega* (MMCH) are diverse and multifaceted. In the first place, the employees of the organization are interested in educating and empowering individual women so that they are able to make their own decisions in regards to their situations of abuse. Maria Candelaria said that the Movement wants to give women the tools “to recognize themselves, to empower themselves, and to make the decision to continue receiving [the abuse], or to change the situation... we do not enter the woman’s situation, we invite the woman to come to us.”¹⁴

The next level of empowerment is the anticipated ripple effect within the families and communities of the individuals who seek and receive support from the Movement. Lorena Melendes feels that the Movement promotes growth within the family and within the community, “with just a little bit of education [about the law], we can teach people... and they talk to other people.”¹⁵

The Women’s Movement of Chinandega fosters the sharing of information and experiences both through the self help groups and the workshops that are held in each of the

¹³ Balmaceda, Rosario. Senior Facilitator *El Grupo Crecer*. Personal Interview. KFe at Hotel Balcones, Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 21 April 2014.

¹⁴ Candelaria, Maria. Psychologist- MMCH. Personal Interview. MMCH headquarters, Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 10 April 2014.

¹⁵ Melendes, Lorena. Lawyer- MMCH. Personal Interview. MMCH headquarters, Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 10 April 2014.

department's municipalities. Self help groups provide women with a space not only to share their experiences of abuse and violence, but also to hear about the experiences of other women. In this space they are able to identify that they have a network of support, a valid story, and voice with which to tell that story. Through the groups, women learn that they do not need to be ashamed for having suffered abuse, and that they do not need to be afraid in talking about their experiences.

The network of women's empowerment generated from MMCH extends even further by way of the bi-weekly workshops that they host in each of the district's thirteen municipalities. The themes of these workshops are all related to the legal rights of women within their local and national contexts, with the goal of empowering Chinandega women to defend those rights and recognize that they have a voice within their communities. The information circulates from MMHC through the municipalities as follows: employees from MMHC go into each of Chinandega's thirteen municipalities every two weeks to host a workshop in which they facilitate learning about a different theme related to women's rights in Nicaragua. Within that municipality, the employees work with two volunteers, those two volunteers personally speak with and invite women in their communities to the workshops. In the workshops, women engage in open discussions about their rights and roles as such. While observing one of the workshops, I spoke with two women who had been attending for nearly a year. I asked if they previously had knowledge of the topics we had covered that day. "Of course," she told me, "[we know about these things] so that we can defend ourselves."¹⁶ Often times, some of the women who

¹⁶ "Claro... para defendernos." Anonymous. Participant at MMCH workshop. Villanueva, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 11 April 2014.

participate in the workshops take over as the community volunteers, and eventually may become employees of MMHC.

Conscious Conversations: What Women are Learning to Talk About

When I met with the youth leaders of *El Grupo Crecer*, one of the things they emphasized was the opportunity that they give each other to talk about subjects “taboo” to their culture. These topics include a variety of issues from the church and domestic abuse to sexual pleasure and street harassment. They are topics that determine how women exist within their bodies and within society, but which they are too often shamed out of speaking about. By breaking the silence surrounding these topics, women are coming into greater consciousness, a more “truly human” state of being. Talking about the elements that shape their identities and their places within society allows women to lay claim to those identities, and if they desire, to change how they interact with society. From my point of view, this is an empowerment of which every woman is capable given the opportunity. She may not be able to change sexist attitudes or abuse within her community, but she can take control of the way that she sees herself, and the way that she reacts to that sexism. Prompted by the discussions fostered by women I worked with, I will now take a closer look at Nicaraguan society’s social manifestations of machismo, apparent resistance to change, and government’s role in women’s rights, and explore how women in *El Grupo Crecer* and *El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega* are coming to a more critical awareness of these subjects, and thus of themselves.

A Closer Look at Sexist Oppression: Machismo and the Context of Poverty

The source of women’s disempowerment is sexism. In Nicaragua, poverty contextualizes

sexism and comprises another layer of oppression. Surprisingly, poverty is a topic I did not hear mentioned once in my time working with MMCH or with *El Grupo Crecer*. Women's economic dependence on men? Admittedly a huge problem. A husband leaving the home up six months at a time for work? It has been mentioned a few times. Women discuss the consequences of poverty, but never poverty itself. In order for myself to fully understand the oppression of sexism in Nicaragua, I find it important to look at the force of economic oppression that supersedes it.

It is frequently noted by those concerned with this nation that Nicaragua is currently the second poorest country in our hemisphere. As Nicaragua is at the bottom of an international economic hierarchy, the reality of oppressed poor is unavoidable. This context of economic oppression makes other forms of oppression far more likely. Nicaraguan men who are economically oppressed, disempowered and seemingly without control over their own fates claim power wherever it is possible. For disenfranchised men, sexism lends itself as an easy structure to embrace in order to lay claim to whatever power may be available. It comes naturally for the oppressed to also oppress. Freire explains why:

... the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or "sub-oppressors."... Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of "adhesion" to the oppressor... their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression. At this level, their perception of themselves as opposites of the oppressor does not yet signify engagement in a struggle... the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole.¹⁷

With this in mind, women too have the capacity to promote cycles of sexist oppression, and often do. While economically oppressed men in Nicaragua oppress the women in their society, oppressed women, identifying with their oppressors, oppress those weaker than they,

¹⁷ Freire 3

namely children or other women. It is with the knowledge of what sexism is, and how sexism manifests, that women can be conscious and desist ignorantly promoting sexism.

I have not seen anyone in the organizations I worked with address this particular aspect of the struggle. Poverty is certainly not something that El Grupo Crecer or MMCH can contend with on a large scale. As long as the world exists under the guise of Capitalism, there exists an economic and social hierarchy in which Nicaragua is at the bottom. Within that hierarchy oppression operates as the tool of the powerful to maintain their power. The wealthy oppress the less privileged, the strong oppress the less able, and many people “believe that a person in authority has the right to use force to maintain authority.”¹⁸

This is why I do not talk about empowerment as the take down of violence against women and discrimination or the rupturing of machismo and sexist systems. While “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”¹⁹ that would require the hierarchies and social tendencies that developed with capitalism over the preceding centuries be dismantled. What we can do to reclaim our humanity now, to empower ourselves in the face of economic and sexist oppression, is amplify consciousness. One of the most beautiful workshops I attended was part of a weekly, three month long women’s empowerment course collaboratively organized by MMCH and the Association for Eco-sustainable Development (ADEES).²⁰ The title of the particular workshop I attended was “Gender/Access and Control of Resources-

¹⁸ Hooks 64

¹⁹ Hooks 1

²⁰ *Asociacion para el Desarrollo Ecosostenible*

Empowerment of Women, Covering Strategic Needs and Improving Quality of Life.”²¹ During the course of the three hours we spent in this workshop, we did not speak about specific “resources” or “strategic needs”; rather, we examined the power structures in which we exist.

The first activity we did [served as](#) a metaphor for the power of women working together. We broke into teams, and with our bodies formed different modes of transportation (i.e. a train, an airplane, and a boat). The teams with the best organization and synchronicity made the machines that would move forward most effectively. This demonstrated the power of women’s solidarity to move society forward. For the second activity, we explored dynamics of power. The facilitator arbitrarily selected a “queen” for each group, and everyone else had to do what she said. While this was a light hearted introduction to power, the small group discussion held after the game brought us to a deeper understanding of how the power dynamics actualize in our own lives.

In the small group I was a part of [during this activity](#), the facilitator asked questions to prompt critical reflection about power and power structures that we encounter regularly. We compared how we felt with or without power, and explored arbitrary power and the abuse of power. The group facilitator ensured that every woman had the opportunity to speak, and that her voice was respected. Many women shared that they see men demanding that women work within and without of the home, and that whatever money the woman earns be given to her partner. Women noted that these men often use that money to buy alcohol, and are unable to work or care for their home because of their addictions. This is an example of women coming to a place of inquiry, to a more fully human state. They identified the arbitrary power of men and men’s abuse

²¹ “Genero/Acceso y control de recursos- Empoderamiento de las mujeres, cubriendo necesidades estrategicas y mejorando la calidad de la vida.” ADEES/MMCH Workshop. Somotillo, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 23 April 2014.

of that power, the sexism that composes their reality, and then questioned its legitimacy. This moment inherently reflects empowerment.

The discussion moved from inquiry to praxis, bringing women even more fully into their humanity. In response to a woman who stated that women need to start by demanding respect in the home, our facilitator asked why women don't defend their rights. The answer that came from the group was fear: fear of abuse and fear of dependence. After establishing that Sexism revokes women's power, we pushed to uncover ways to recover our own power. During this time, women in the group openly laid claim to "the power of the word", "the power to express ourselves", "the power to do", the power "to resist... to resist pain", the power "to rebel", and "the power to know," to know our own rights and our own strength.²²

Patriarchal Aggression and the Female Body

Nicaraguan culture, like others, upholds oppressive structures of sexism by ensuring women's continued sense of insecurity. The means by which oppressors maintain that insecurity is aggression, or the threat of aggression. If a woman questions or challenges the sexist hierarchy by attempting to assert her subjectivity, she risks retaliation by those wanting to maintain their advantage over her. Aggression reminds the woman that she is not active subject but passive object. If she remains unconscious to this tendency she has no chance of reclaiming her human vocation. Oppressive aggression manifests in the home in the form of violence or the threat of violence, and manifests in the street in the form of harassment. Both displace women from their

²² "Genero/ Acceso y control de recursos- Empoderamiento de las mujeres, cubriendo necesidades estrategicas y mejorando la calidad de la vida." Group Discussion. ADEES/MMCH Workshop. Somotillo, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 23 April 2014. ²³ Hooks 62

subjectivity. Fortunately women can fight these forms of oppression by coming to consciousness and **challenging** those practices.

Violence, or the threat of violence, is the tool by which the powerful maintain their advantage, especially in situations where that power is shallowly achieved or potentially jeopardized. Hooks explains that patriarchal violence is “based in the belief that it is acceptable for the more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force... violence... is connected to sexism, and sexism to male domination.”²³ In 2011 Nicaragua recorded 37,000 cases of domestic or sexual violence, “about 80 women a year were being killed by their spouses. In a country with 6 million inhabitants, this is an appalling number.”²³

Through individual therapy sessions, self-help groups, and legal advising, MMCH empowers women in the face of patriarchal violence by providing a safe space to consciously engage and reflect upon the violence. They may then heal from its resulting trauma, and if they choose, do something to change their situation.

Therapy and self help groups provide women with the space to verbally recognize that as the objects of violence they have lost their subjectivity. Jaqueline Castro and Maria Candelaria, two psychologists of MMCH who give therapy and facilitate the self help groups, told me that the goal of the self help groups is to recover self esteem.^{24,25} Through these two activities women **can** come to consciousness of themselves and their realities and heal, both of which are essential to the process of empowerment in the face of violence.

²³ Jagger, Bianca. "Let's End Violence against Women." The International Poetry Festival of Granada. Granada, Nicaragua. 18 Feb. 2013. *The Nicaragua Dispatch*. Web. 5 May 2014. <<http://nicaraguadispatch.com/2013/02/letsend-violence-against-women/>>.

²⁴ Candelaria, Maria. Psychologist- MMCH. Personal Interview. MMCH headquarters, Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 10 April 2014.

²⁵ Castro, Jaqueline. Psychologist- MMCH. Personal Interview. MMCH headquarters, Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 21 April 2014.

Patriarchal violence is also of primary concern for the young women of *El Grupo Crecer*. During our meeting, the youth leaders emphasized that the majority of women and girls in their communities in El Viejo experience abuse in the home. In addition to raising consciousness about the injustice of violence through discussion forums, *El Grupo Crecer* also performs theater productions. Despite the oppression of violence woven deeply into the economic and social fabric of their society, the women of *El Grupo Crecer* reclaim their humanity by raising awareness of sexism, questioning it, and reshaping their realities because of that consciousness. This is women's empowerment.

In addition to domestic violence, *El Grupo Crecer* recognizes street harassment as a mechanism for the maintenance of sexism. Katelin Salazar says that "this topic, [street harassment] is super universal; it happens to all of us... we feel a lot of fear."²⁶ *El Grupo Crecer* raises awareness and works to change the restrictive and intimidating reality of street harassment in their community. "*El Grupo Crecer* causes a lot of revolution in the town and with the institutions because we are in a campaign against street harassment"²⁷ says senior facilitator Rosario Balmaceda. Their slogan: "Unity is Strength." "The unity of women will never be defeated," claims Katelin, "[the campaign] is working so that the girls don't see the cat calls as something normal, they can see the reality, that this is a type of violence... and to make the men understand that we are the keepers of our own bodies."²⁸

²⁶ "este tema es super universal a todas las mujeres nos pasa ya q a los hombres n c les eskpa ni una sola mujer a parte q muxas mujeres n somos kpaces d sakr o sentimos muxo temor..." (Salazar, Katelin. *El Grupo Crecer* Youth Leader. Facebook Messenger Interview. 5 May, 2014. Facebook.) My translation.

²⁷ "*El Grupo Crecer* causa mucha revolución en el pueblo y con las instituciones porque estamos en una campaña en contra del acoso callejero." (Balmacedas) My translation.

²⁸ " 'LA UNIDAD HACE LA FUERZA' " _unidad las mjeres jamas seremos vencidas...Si en eso c esta trabajando para q las muxaxas no vean los piropos como algo normal y lo puedan ver desd la realidad q es un tipo d vilencia y hy q evitarla y hacer entendr a los hombres q n son los dueños d nuestros cuerpos " (Salazar) My translation.

Violence against women is probably the single most relevant topic to women involved with MMCH and *El Grupo Crecer*. More than anything else, I heard women talking about psychological, emotional, and physical aggression, and women's resulting feelings of powerlessness within these situations. Women in MMCH and *El Grupo Crecer* empower themselves in the midst of a society saturated with sexist aggression by coming to consciousness, making the effort to heal from the pains caused by that aggression, and by working to change their realities.

Sin, the Female Body, and Judging Your Neighbor

In a society as immersed in Christianity as Nicaragua, the women of *El Grupo Crecer* have found it essential to inquire about "imagery of God"²⁹ and how this affects their realities. Interestingly, as I mentioned earlier, the group broke with their religious roots within a year after its founding because of differences in goals. *El Grupo Crecer* finds that religious ideologies dictate women's rights and relationships with their bodies legally, socially, and individually.

Nicaragua has an openly Christian government. In terms of [how this Christian government influences](#) the way that women experience their bodies, one of the most heavily and frequently debated issues is abortion. In November of this year, *El Grupo Crecer* will host a discussion forum on the perception of abortion as sin, and how perceptions of God and the Bible influence women's autonomy within their bodies. Currently, abortion is illegal under any circumstances. *El Grupo Crecer* opens the space for young women to debate the right of the

²⁹ "Imágenes de Dios" *Balmaceda

government not only to control what women do with their own bodies, but also the motivations behind that control.

Religious fundamentalism and tradition also play a part in determining what is and is not appropriate for a woman to talk about and to do with her body. Ixa Osorio, youth leader and five year member of *El Grupo Crecer* expressed frustrations about how she sees religious fundamentalism to limit the consciousness of people in her community. Ixa credits her open world view to her participation in *El Grupo Crecer*.³⁰ Where many in her community are stifled by their versions of religion, unable to enter into expanded consciousness, Ixa found the opportunity to pursue deeper understanding of herself and her reality.

All of the youth leaders I met with agreed that their experience with the organization has given them the ability to talk about womanhood, themselves, and their bodies in ways that their society simply does not allow.³¹ Seventeen year old youth leader Judy Hernandez spoke about the liberty of being able to claim her sexuality. Normally, “talking about sexuality is prohibited”, but to Judy, “sexuality is respect.”³² Identity, the body, gender, sexual orientation, sexual decision making, and self pleasuring are all a part of being conscious within one’s body. They are part of being human. When religious influences on society forbid us from talking about these things, it limits our consciousness. When we open up the space to become aware of our bodies, when we question the motivations that dictate our praxes, we become more truly human, and we are empowered.

³⁰ Osorio, Ixa. *El Grupo Crecer* Youth Leader. Personal Interview. *La Casa de las Mujeres*, El Viejo, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 27 April 2014.

³¹ Anonymous, Judy Hernandez, Ixa Osorio, Katelin Salazar. *El Grupo Crecer* Youth Leaders. Group Interview. *La Casa de las Mujeres*, El Viejo, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 27 April 2014.

³² Hernandez

This reclamation of the body in the face of the limitations of religious fundamentalism is not without its social consequences. “What we do... is rebellion” says Ixa, “... some people say we’re crazy.”³³ Because Judy identifies as a feminist, is so active with *El Grupo Crecer*, and chooses to have many male friends “people say ‘she is a lesbian.’ But when I’m with girls, still people say that I’m a lesbian... but it doesn’t matter.”³⁵ Despite the negative prejudice some of the women receive from others in the community, they continue to participate in *El Grupo Crecer*, to have socially unacceptable conversations, and to make decisions that they believe are right for themselves.

“Lack of Volition”: Why it is so hard to Change

The obstacle of ambivalence was substantiated several times in my initial interviews at MMCH, by a participant of a workshop on citizen participation, and *El Grupo Crecer’s* dwindling attendance rates. The “lack of volition,”^{34 35} as several call it, acts as an external adversary to women as well as an internal one. From the outside, ambivalence inhibits women’s faith in the security of their human and legal rights. From within, ambivalence functions as an enemy of perpetuating oppression as when women commit patriarchal violence, or when women simply refuse to engage in conscientious conversation. People passively perpetuate oppressive structures of sexism because layers of trauma inhibit the motivation for progress and because systems of oppression perpetuate fatalism among the oppressed. Both causes of ambivalence

³³ Osorio. Group Interview.

³⁵ Hernandez

³⁴ “*Falta de voluntad*” (Candelaria)

³⁵ “*Falta de voluntad*” (Melendes)

potentially inhibit women's ability to see themselves as empowered beings, and both are addressed by MMCH and *El Grupo Crecer*.

For Lorena Melendes, MMCH legal representative, the problem of passivity in the face of violence against women rests in the community. Laws are ineffective because neither the home, nor the school, nor the church hold its members accountable to the law, thereby neglecting to protect the rights, bodies, and psyches of its victimized members. Often even the victims themselves are ambivalent in their own processes of seeking justice or healing. To Lorena, it seems that no one wants to take up the responsibility of protecting the woman, even the woman herself. Neglect to protect a woman in one's community, or neglect on behalf of a woman to protect herself, demonstrates a lack of respect in Lorena's eyes.³⁶

On April 11th I had the opportunity to attend a workshop on the Law of Citizen Participation hosted by MMCH at one *La Casa de las Mujeres* in Villanueva, Chinandega. The workshop began with a series of ice breakers that introduced a slideshow on Law No. 475, the Law of Citizen Participation. The slide show defined Law No. 475, discussed the law in its different contexts, and explained its importance. While the women at the workshop seemed eager to learn about the law, as evidenced by their presence and active participation, several expressed skepticism in regards to people citizens actually participating in anything.

The Women's Movement of Chinandega describes citizen participation as the involvement of social actors in individual or collective forms with the objective and intention of influencing and participating in the making of management decisions and design of public politics in different levels and modalities in the administration of national territory and public institutions with the purpose of achieving a sustainable human development in co-responsibility with the state.³⁷

³⁶ Melendes

³⁷ "IV. Taller Sobre Derechos Políticos con énfasis en Género, Ley No. 475, Ley de Participación Ciudadano." Powerpoint. MMCH. 11 April 2014.

They go on to define a citizen as an officially recognized part of a society who receives, and also respects and upholds, a particular set of rights within that society.

It seems that Nicaraguan women examining their personal and political powers today find themselves floundering in a sea of ambivalence. It was at the moment during the presentation when Coni was defining “citizen” that a woman called out, “Lies!” I was rather taken aback by this interjection, as it seemed to me that “a person recognized by the authorities as forming part of a society” seemed like a perfectly legitimate definition of the word. The problem the woman had was not with the definition, but with “the people, they don’t want it.”³⁸ By “it”, I infer that she means the responsibility of maintaining and participating in local government. Later on in the workshop we discussed the importance of citizen participation to be the influence the citizens, the reduction of corruption, and the ability to understand the systemic functioning within the municipality or nation. At this point the same woman spoke up again, skeptical, because “in Nicaragua... there aren’t workers.” This woman does not trust her fellow countrypeople to uphold their responsibility of being conscious, liberated members of the society in which they exist.

One possible cause of this ambivalence is sustained suffering. In Martha Cabrera’s article “Living and Surviving in a Multiply Wounded Country,”³⁹ Cabrera notes that “it is often said that people don’t want to change, aren’t interested in the project, don’t want to develop. But it is seldom asked why people feel that way. One of the chief answers is trauma, accumulated pain.”⁴⁰ Her position is that war, multiple natural disasters, and the generations of oppression and

³⁸ IV. Taller Sobre Derechos Políticos con énfasis en Género, Ley No. 475, Ley de Participación Ciudadano. MMCH. Villanuevo, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 11 April 2011.

³⁹ Cabrera, Martha. "Living and Surviving In a Multiply Wounded Country." *Revista Envío* -. Envío Digital, Dec. 2002. Web. 08 May 2014.

⁴⁰ Cabrera

violence at various levels of society has left Nicaraguans with multiple layers of trauma. She believes that these layers of trauma inhibit people's motivation to progress. According to Cabrera efforts to evoke positive changes for women have failed because,

Ignoring the personal history of people one is trying to teach in such a battered country is evidence of an educational model that the Left has not yet shaken off. It is based on denying the person, the individual, the subjective, on conceiving of individuals as links in a transmission chain towards a more impersonal collective project that is always supposedly for the greater good.⁴¹

El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega and *El Grupo Crecer* overcome the obstacle of ambivalence in women's empowerment in part by addressing the potential trauma's women experience, and open up spaces where women can heal. MMCH provides a variety of opportunities for women to address their traumas, and this undoubtedly allows for the empowerment of many women. During one-on-one therapy sessions, victims of violence meet with an MMCH psychologist to work through the various traumas that they have endured. It is through this healing process that women become more conscious of themselves, and more aware of the capacity that they may have to change their reality, or experience that reality differently. Some women choose to leave their abusive situations after receiving therapy, and even more choose to attend MMCH's self-help groups and workshops. The self-help groups are another space where women have the opportunity, guided by a psychologist, to confront their trauma directly and heal alongside their fellow women. The opportunity to heal, Cabrera argues, frees people from entrapment of passivity.

El Grupo Crecer promotes healing by bringing young women together, and providing them with a space where they can talk about the various traumas they sustain. Facilitated workshops and conversations on violence against women, healthy relationships, and family give

⁴¹ Cabrera

the women an opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences. By way of this reflection, they may both heal, and come to a greater sense of self and cultural awareness. It is this liberty to talk, [along with](#) the validation and healing they experience when their voices are respected, that [seems to](#) keep them [returning](#) to the group.

Another possible cause for the lack of volition that many Nicaraguan women struggle against is cultural and individual fatalism. “As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition,” says Freire, “they fatalistically ‘accept’ their exploitation. Further, they are apt to react in a passive and alienated manner when confronted with the necessity to struggle for their freedom and self-affirmation. Little by little, however, they tend to try out forms of rebellious action.”⁴² MMCH and *El Grupo Crecer* combat this fatalistic attitude by transmitting awareness of the condition of women in Nicaragua. When women come to consciousness of their condition they are no longer alienated. They recognize the valor of their fight for liberty. Whether the lack of volition stems from layers of trauma or fatalism that results from lack of consciousness, *El Grupo Crecer* and *El Movimiento de Mujeres de Chinandega* confront the source of the problem by opening a space for healing and by raising awareness.

Government’s Role in Women’s Rights

The topic of government [in Nicaragua is especially](#) important to women seeking empowerment because it claims to defend the rights of women by punishing violence through Law 779, the Law against Violence against Women, and by protecting women’s right to participate in government [through](#) laws protecting citizen participation and municipal rights.

⁴² Friere 15

Both aspects are relevant to women's struggle to reclaim subjectivity.

Maria Candelaria has worked as a psychologist for the Women's Movement since 2011, and formerly she worked for the women's police commissary in Chinandega. I asked her to share about her experiences working with law enforcement, as I have heard several times of peoples' dissatisfaction with the police forces in Nicaragua. She explained that many members of the police lack the training to be sensitive to victims of gender based violence, and unintentionally re-victimize people reporting crimes. She estimates that fifty percent of women who begin the process of seeking legal protection and psychological healing do not see their journeys through to completion. Rather than authority figures seeking training or support in regards to violence against women, "people," it seems, "they don't want to change."⁴³

Beyond the lack of education in regards to how to sensitively work with cases of patriarchal violence, government agents do not enforce laws established to protect women. "Data from the Commissary for Women and Children in 2011, [claims] that 3,660 allegations of sexual violence, only 3,047 were referred to the Attorney General and the rest of cases, 613, were dismissed by the institution. 1,050 of the victims were children and adolescents under 14 years of age."⁴⁴ I had the opportunity to accompany MMCH lawyer Sujey Romero and her client on a visit to the Commissary for Women and Children in Chinandega, and observed the inadequacies of the legal system. The client came to MMCH because three weeks prior, she had denounced her abuser, and over the course of nearly a month, nothing happened. "We have the best law in

⁴³ Candelaria

⁴⁴ "Nicaragua." *UNICEF*. UNICEF, 13 July 2013. Web. 08 May 2014.
<http://en.unicef.org/ni/prensa/75/>

Central America... on paper,” says MMCH lawyer Sujey Romero, “supposedly there aren’t the resources to uphold the laws.”⁴⁵ Because MMCH has a relationship with the Commissary, their accompanying the women usually helps the cases of their clients move through the system more efficiently. When we arrived at the Commissary office, there were probably thirty people in the small waiting room and crowded around the door. We walked directly into the office of the chief, and about a half hour later she joined us to take down the victim’s information.

Aside from the lack of resources that potentially hinder the implementation of laws, there is the problem of sexism within some local governments and individual officials. At a meeting in Potosi in which MMCH presented and discussed their seasonal agenda with local authorities, several men expressed contempt for Law 779: Integral Law against Violence against Women. One man in particular argued that Law 779 sets off the balance of power in favor of women. His logic was that women provoke their partners to abuse them in order to use Law 779 against them. In a government where the people in authority hold opinions like these, it is easy to see why many Nicaraguan women cannot trust the government to protect their rights.⁴⁸

Others place their dissatisfaction with the legal system elsewhere. Unlike her co-workers Maria Candelaria and Sujey Romero, Lorena Melendes feels that people’s dissatisfaction with law enforcement is a result of the lengthy legal process. In her experience, victims often denounce their perpetrators with the expectation that they will see results immediately. The reality of the situation is that the process of legally evoking change in instances of physical, psychological, or financial abuse requires many interviews, psychological evaluations, and

⁴⁵ Romero, Sujey. Lawyer- MMCH. Personal Interview. Sujey’s home, Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 2 May 2014. ⁴⁸ Reunión con las autoridades con el tema del proyecto “Promoción del cumplimiento de los Derechos de las Mujeres para la prevención y atención de la Violencia de Género en Chinandega.” Restaurant, Potosi, Chinandega, Nicaragua.

simply waiting. Some women stop pursuing legal justice not because it is unavailable but because the process to achieving justice is too exhausting.

But beyond individual cases and the attitudes of local government leaders, women see their empowerment hindered by corruption and betrayal on the national level. During the workshop on the Law of Citizen Participation, we discussed the state of the law, public politics, and democracy with regards to Law No. 475. At this point another woman spoke up, stating that the authorities do not do anything to help women in terms of protecting their rights to citizen participation. With a tone of voice that reflected rage, but an expression that betrayed ever so subtly her exhaustion, the woman cited the prohibition of the International Women’s Day demonstration in Managua as evidence of women’s political isolation and powerlessness.⁴⁶ How does knowledge of the law serve as a way to defend and empower oneself when every time women look up they see that these laws are violated by the very institutions that put those laws in place? Laws exist on paper to protect citizens and their rights, and to maintain democracy and the power of the people, but **these goals are rendered obsolete when there is neither infrastructure nor a legitimate system of checks and balances to uphold these laws.** I struggle to understand how anyone can feel, let alone actually be empowered, when her fellow citizens, authority figures, law enforcement officers, and national government neglect or violate the legally and explicitly defined “rights” of Nicaraguan citizens.

Empowered Women Empowering Each Other: How it Feels to do this Work

While it seems that the perpetual violation of one’s rights would result in an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, “it’s just the opposite,” insists Isaura Cornejo of MMCH.

⁴⁶ “Taller sobre Derechos Políticos”

“The more women learn, the more women are empowered...they realize that it’s a fight, but that they are in that fight together.”⁴⁷ Where Cabrera notes that the stagnancy that results from accumulated pain and Freire presents the obstacle of fatalism, MMCH overcomes. Women are interested, they do feel empowered, and they believe in the work happening. “The magic is that in the face of all of the challenges- the church, the society, the authorities- the woman are organized,”⁴⁸ they learn, they engage, they fight together and they support each other. The young women of *El Grupo Crecer* recognize the violence, sexism, and injustice that work against Nicaraguan women, “the girls are way too vulnerable... we are going to inform them”⁴⁹ says twenty-year-old youth leader Katelin Salazar. It is the notion that informed women are powerful women, and that conscious women in solidarity are powerful women, that drives groups like MMCH and *EL Grupo Crecer*.

Many women who work on the facilitating side of MMCH and El Grupo Crecer shared with me the personal fulfillment they experience working with women for women’s empowerment. “I really like my job,” says MMCH attorney Lorena Melendes, “we put ourselves in the shoes of the victims. It’s very interesting work... and at the end of the day there’s a sense of satisfaction.”⁵³ In an interview with MMCH psychologist Jaqueline Castro she beamed as she told me she absolutely believes that her work has the potential to change communities and break cycles of violence. When one woman comes to MMCH and is empowered “to speak out against her abuse, to change her situation, to be happy, other women will ask her story... they will be

⁴⁷ Conejo, Isaura. Employees of MMCH. Group interview. MMCH headquarters. Chinandega, Chinandega, Nicaragua. 28 April 2014.

⁴⁸ Conejo

⁴⁹ Salazan. Group Interview. ⁵³ Melendes

emboldened and empowered as well.”⁵⁰ This is the way that empowerment by consciousness works, it amplifies. Maria Candelaria, another psychologist at MMCH, strives to break women’s notion of “no I can’t” by demonstrating that she is a woman who can.⁵¹ One woman’s consciousness sparks that of another, and we become more truly human.

Conclusion

The reality is, in a society where poverty and sexism prevail because the capitalist structure of the global economy thrives on the back of that society’s subordination, the sexism may never be eradicated from Nicaragua. As long as people find themselves in a position of powerlessness, they will use whatever force necessary on any other being that they perceive as weaker than they are to garner some small semblance of control. As long as there are insufficient funds and resources within that society to uphold the law, no piece of legislation, no matter how brilliantly crafted, will end violence against women. Empowerment for women lies neither in the hands of the law nor in the end of poverty, but in each individual woman’s consciousness. A woman is empowered when she recognizes who she is and what her natural rights are, looks critically at the context of her life within her society, and asserts herself as *subject* rather than object. Throughout this project, I too have come to a heightened consciousness of myself as a woman, and of my place within this gorgeous struggle.

⁵⁰ “denunciar su abuse, cambair la situacion, ser feliz, otras va a preguntarla... sentirán envalentonadas y empoderadas también” (Castro) My translation.

⁵¹ Candelaria

Appendix A

Preliminary Interview Questions

Describa cómo empezó a trabajar con esta organización.

¿Cuáles son sus diferentes responsabilidades dentro de la organización?

En su tiempo de trabajo con la organización, ¿ha sido testigo de cambios personales específicos para las personas que han participado en los programas?

¿Puedes hablar sobre el crecimiento que ha sido testigo de sus pares o compañeras de trabajo?

¿Ha notado que a medida que trabajan para ayudar a otras mujeres empoderarse, ellas también experimentan empoderamiento?

¿Podría hablar un poco sobre el crecimiento personal que ha experimentado en su trabajo con este proyecto?

¿Le importaría hablar sobre algunos de los retos a los que **es posible que haya enfrentado?** En mi experiencia, trabajando regularmente con personas que han experimentado la pérdida o el trauma tiene el potencial de ser muy estresante. A veces puede ser muy difícil de asumir la responsabilidad de apoyar a otra persona a través de su viaje de sanación. ¿La organización ha desarrollado, o usted ha desarrollado, métodos de auto cuidado para ayudar a **manejar esta presión o estrés?**

En mi experiencia de trabajo con las mujeres para apoyar a otras mujeres y muchachas en sus procesos de crecimiento y empoderamiento, he encontrado que es importante para nosotros recordar que tenemos que cuidar también para nosotros mismos. ¿El Grupo Crecer ha desarrollado, o usted ha desarrollado, métodos o prácticas **de auto cuidado?**

¿Crees que es importante, o incluso posible, para mantener tensiones personales, y tensiones de trabajo separadas? **Si es así ¿cómo se hace eso?**

En el taller en Villanueva que yo asistí el 11 de Abril, yo noté que las mujeres respondieron correctamente a las preguntas durante la actividad escrita, pero que muchas de las palabras fueron mal escritas. ¿Qué piensa sobre eso? ¿Ha notado ese tipo de cosas también?

¿Cómo cree que el acceso a la educación influye en los procesos de empoderamiento de las mujeres?

¿Cuáles son sus metas personales en cuanto al trabajo que usted hace?

¿Cree usted que el trabajo que haces tiene el potencial para provocar cambios que van más allá del nivel personal, como en la comunidad o ciudad?

¿Puede hablar un poco acerca de los espacios que han visto aquí en Nicaragua para las mujeres a expresar y aprender sobre sí mismos?

¿Piensa que transformaciones sociales son necesarias con el fin de abrir más espacios para las mujeres y las jóvenes? Y si es así ¿Qué tipo de cambios son necesarios?

¿Ve a (El Grupo Crecer o El Movimiento) que contribuye igualmente a los cambios sociales como a los cambios personales?

¿Qué parte es lo que ves organizaciones de empoderamiento de las mujeres, como éste tener en el futuro de Nicaragua?

¿De qué manera se imagina que (El Grupo Crecer o El Movimiento) va a crecer o cambiar en el futuro?

¿Hay algo más que usted piensa es importante mencionar sobre el trabajo que usted hace? ¿Algo más que le gustaría compartir?

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