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Opening Space: The Relationship of Contestation Between Women and the State in Nicaragua

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Opening Space: The Relationship of Contestation Between Women and the
State in Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between organized women—particularly feminists—and the State in Nicaragua has been one of open contestation. As Daniel Ortega and the FSLN administration continue passing laws that the feminist movements perceive as attacks on women’s rights, the fight between them continues. For the women struggling against the actions of the State, the language of this contestation is often the language of open and closed spaces. They speak of a double closure: the closure of institutional spaces and of opportunities to express their autonomy, especially autonomy over their bodies. However, the perceived lack of space for women to make real change at the personal and institutional levels has not resulted in their defeat. Rather, because of their commitment to opening new spaces for the achievement of women’s rights, many within the feminist movements see themselves as the only true opposition to the increasingly authoritarian Ortega government. Thus, the State’s grasps at controlling and shutting down space for opposition have pushed women’s movements in Nicaragua to create alternative spaces to contest action and construct new realities.

ABSTRACTO

La relación entre mujeres organizadas—específicamente las feministas—y el Estado en Nicaragua ha sido una de cuestionamiento abierto. Mientras Daniel Ortega y la administración del FSLN siguen aprobando leyes que los movimientos feministas perciben como ataques a los derechos de las mujeres, la lucha entre ellos continúa. Para las mujeres enfocándose en contra de las acciones del Estado, el lenguaje de este cuestionamiento es, muchas veces, el lenguaje de espacios abiertos y cerrados. Ellas hablan de un cierre doble: el de espacios institucionales y el de oportunidades de ejercer su autonomía, principalmente su autonomía sobre sus cuerpos. Sin embargo, la percibida falta de espacio para hacer cambio a nivel personal e institucional no ha resultado en la derrota de los movimientos feministas. Más bien, por su compromiso de abrir nuevos espacios para la realización de derechos de mujeres, muchas dentro de los movimientos se ven a si mismas como la única oposición verdadera frente a un gobierno cada vez más autoritario. Así, los esfuerzos del Estado de controlar y cerrar espacio de oposición han empujado a los movimientos de mujeres nicaragüenses crear espacios para refutar las acciones del gobierno y construir nuevas realidades.

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INTRODUCTION

The language of the relationship between women—feminists, in particular—and the State in Nicaragua is irrevocably the language of “space.” Within the feminist movements of Nicaragua there exists an incredible diversity of approach towards the construction of women’s rights and a feminist agenda, yet most of the women I conversed with referred to a conceptual opening of new spaces where the current government has closed them. The return of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) to power in 2006 coincided with a fracture in the feminist movement: the decision of the Women’s Autonomous Movement (MAM) to ally with the dissident Sandinista party, the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS), resulted in the split that generated the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua. Despite their ideological differences, however, women from each of these three actors—the MAM, the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua, and the MRS—share some important characteristics: their criticism of president Daniel Ortega’s actions and the terms they use to describe it.

Henri Lefebvre maintains that “space serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.”¹ As Ortega’s government grows increasingly powerful, and, arguably, less democratic, certain spaces in the Nicaraguan imaginary have become loci for struggle between such control and its opposition. Women of disparate backgrounds and organizations seek to reclaim the rights the State denies them, action many of them refer to as “opening space.” By contesting the government in distinct, if largely conceptual, spaces, these women seek to fight what they view as a major retrocession in the status of women’s

¹ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space* (Malden: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

rights. Two spaces that came up consistently as I interviewed various women from feminist organizations and the MRS party were the body and weak political institutions that characterizes the state of democracy in Nicaragua. Given the political context of Nicaragua, it makes sense that women would be preoccupied with both encroaching government control over female bodies and decaying political institutions.

From an outside perspective, the FSLN government has vacillated confusingly from policies that limit women to policies that, at least on the surface, advocate gender equality. The 2006 ban on therapeutic abortion—abortion performed only if complications from pregnancy present a risk to the mother’s life—for example, presents a distinct threat to the well being of Nicaraguan women. As Juanita Jiménez, the executive director of the MAM, points out, if a pregnancy could kill a woman, she is going to die. Not only will she die, but the State will *let* her die.² The penalization of such a life saving procedure highlights an alarming lack of control women have over their own bodies. Thus, the body has become one of the main spaces that feminists in Nicaragua use to assert their rights: by reclaiming autonomy over their bodies and choices, women contest the government’s actions, opening space as the State closes it.

While the body is an intimate space at which to contest the government and reclaim rights, many women of the feminist movements also talk in terms of broader, institutional spaces. This is, perhaps, the area where Ortega’s actions have been most contradictory. The passage of laws such as the new 50-50 law, which guarantees women 50% of political

² Juanita Jiménez (Executive Director of the Women’s Autonomous Movement, Managua), interview by author, April 27, 2012. Translation mine.

positions in mayor's offices,³ suggests that he is making strides towards achieving women's equality. Many of the women I spoke to, however, feel that the institutions of Nicaragua have become so unreliable—whether because of what they perceive as the fraudulent re-election of the Daniel Ortega in 2011 or the impunity granted to individuals with power—that they have closed entirely as a mechanism to achieve gender equality.

The perceived lack of space for women to make real change at the personal and institutional levels has not resulted in their defeat. Rather, many see the feminist movement as the only true opposition to the increasingly authoritarian Ortega government, particularly because of their commitment to opening new spaces for the achievement of a feminist agenda. Lefebvre suggests that, though space can be a means of domination, those with power can never fully control it.⁴ This has certainly been the case in Nicaragua, where the State's grasps at controlling and shutting down space for opposition has pushed the women's movement to create spaces to contest action and construct new realities. Feminists often talk about cultural and societal changes, to which Lefebvre responds, "Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space."⁵ According to Nicaraguan feminists' discourse on their relationship with the State, it appears that producing appropriate spaces for the achievement of equality is exactly what they seek to do.

³ Ramón H. Potosme, "Aprueban Ley Integral Contra la Violencia Hacia las Mujeres," *La Prensa*, January 26, 2012. <<http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2012/03/08/poderes/93376-diputados-aprueban-ley-50>>

⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26.

⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 59.

RESEARCHER'S LENS & METHODOLOGY

Before delving into the intricacies and tensions of the relationship between Nicaraguan women and the government, I must position myself. As a privileged young woman from the United States, studying in Nicaragua for a mere three and a half months, I cannot presume to have captured the complexities of a tense and infinitely multifaceted relationship: that of president Daniel Ortega's administration and Nicaraguan women. Inevitably, some of the intricacies of the feminist and women's movements in Nicaragua have escaped me. Given that my first language is English, I have also likely lost various cultural and idiomatic subtleties. Perhaps the biggest factor impacting my interpretation and presentation of this research, however, is my position as a feminist.

In calling myself a feminist, I refer, basically, to my belief in the equality of all people, regardless of gender. This, in turn, speaks to my assertion that such equality has not been achieved, as well as my belief that patriarchal systems—those systems in which men hold power and women are largely excluded from it— throughout the world have yet to be abolished. Thus, in the process of my research, I identified ideologically with many of the women I interviewed, simply for their involvement in feminist movements. I cannot say I identify similarly with President Ortega or his actions, a fact that may be evident at times in my work. Furthermore, while I spoke with a diverse group of women in opposition to the government, I did not have the opportunity to speak to women in favor. It is my sincere hope, however, that rather than detracting from my work, the affinity I felt with the women I interviewed will deepen my interpretation of their words. I cannot help but come to this work with my identity in tow, but I can also acknowledge its implications. Ultimately, I believe such acknowledgment enhances the quality of this project.

My approach to this investigation was straightforward: over a period of one month, I sought to identify and interview small sections of the diverse population I defined as “women in opposition to the government.” During the first phase of the process, I made contacts through my advisor, Cristina Arévalo, a leader at the feminist organization *La Corriente*, and Violeta Delgado, one of the leaders of the MAM. From many of the women I interviewed, I received contact information for other women who could perhaps aid me in my investigation. By way of this informal networking, I eventually interviewed twelve women: four women affiliated with the MAM, three women from the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua, three women from the feminist organization *Grupo Venancia*, and two women from the MRS political party (see Appendix I).⁶

Each interview began with an explanation of who I am: an undergraduate student from the United States, studying in Nicaragua with a program that culminates in a month long independent research investigation. Subsequently, I asked each woman for her consent to participate in my research about women in opposition to the government and her consent to record our conversation. Upon receiving consent, I then asked a series of questions divided into three sets (see Appendix II). The first set of questions related to personal information about the interviewee and her relationship with and perceptions of feminism. The second set of questions addressed the relationship between the government and organized women in Nicaragua, as well as specific laws that the FSLN government has

⁶ While two of my interviewees are members of the MRS party, my primary focus is on women of the feminist social movements in Nicaragua, thus I refer to the women I interviewed collectively as “feminists.” While this is not necessarily true for the two women of the MRS, it is interesting to note that their perceptions of the main issues I address here did not stray widely from the perceptions of the women directly involved in feminist organizations. Furthermore, it is beyond the scope of this piece to address the MRS in its entirety—I simply could not do it justice.

passed in relation to women's rights. The final question set dealt with the mechanisms women use to confront the State and contest its actions. While I worked principally from a list of open-ended questions, the conversation often strayed from this list depending on the interests and answers of the interviewee. Each interview, however, centered loosely upon the three aforementioned topic areas. Through these interviews, I sought to gain an understanding of the women's definitions of feminism, perceptions of the government, motivations for opposition, and actions taken to manifest their views.

Once I completed an interview, I then listened to its recording and took notes. From these notes, I identified common subjects and consequently coded each interview for those topics. Thus, I extrapolated the major themes that shape this paper: the body as a site of political contestation, the impact of weak institutionalality on women in Nicaragua, and the importance of opening new conceptual spaces in the fight for women's rights. Within these themes, language was a focal point in my analysis of the interviews. I looked for common speech patterns and word choices, because the structure of a statement—not only its content—informs its significance. While I do not speak for the women I interviewed, I hope to present my interpretation of both their shared and disparate perceptions of the relationship between the State and women in Nicaragua. I cannot extrapolate intention or make condemnations from the information I received from these women. What I can do is draw connections and interpret meaning, in the hope of synthesizing the insight I have had the privilege of gaining from the women I spoke with throughout this process.

WOMEN'S BODIES IN OPPOSITION

A slogan of the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement clearly and unapologetically states the relationship between the body and the exercise of political freedom: “Feminists revolutionize when we live our bodies with pleasure.”⁷ This phrase simultaneously brings up the body as a site for political contestation and plays upon the concept of revolution. The use of the term “revolutionize” is appropriate: it implies that the women are taking their liberation into their own hands by claiming control over their bodies. This is an apt discourse to invoke, as many women feel that the formerly revolutionary FSLN has failed to adequately promote women’s rights as an integral form of establishing equality in society.⁸

While the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua is widely known for championing the causes of reproductive health and other themes related to the exertion of rights over the body—as opposed to the MAM which has taken a stricter approach toward condemning the status of democracy in Nicaragua⁹—nearly all of the women I interviewed referred to the manifestation of feminism at a micro-level. The majority expressed the belief that both a feminist ideology and the assertion of rights begin with the personal. The personal, in this case, takes on a political dimension, because most of the women see asserting their right to control over their lives as directly linked with the exercise of citizenship. Thus, while the women spoke to me extensively of personal autonomy, the fight for individual rights does not mean fighting individually. Rather, claiming space for control over the body is a collective battle, often against the State. As Martha Meneses of the 8th of March collective

⁷ “Las Feministas Hacemos Revolución Cuando Vivimos el Cuerpo con Placer,” *Feminist Movement of Nicaragua*, March 9, 2012. <www.movimientofeministanicaragua.org>

⁸ Margaret Randall. *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Foundation, 1992), 90.

⁹ Aynn Setright and Florence E. Babb, “Gender Justice and Political Inclusion: Sandinistas, Feminists, and the Current Divide,” *Latin American Studies Association* (2010): 4.

states, “I’m not a feminist so that they restore only my rights. We are a collective movement.”¹⁰

When asked how they manifests feminism in their lives, nearly every woman I spoke to began with a description of feminism as a quotidian practice. Elvira Cuadra, a sociologist who has worked closely with the MAM, describes her feminism as a choice to *make* choices, “It is a personal decision to make my decisions...to have the last word in the decisions I have to make.”¹¹ Norma Chavarría, a young feminist from the organization Grupo Venancia, talks about entering into relationships of equality as a form of manifesting feminism, while Violeta Delgado points toward taking care of her own health and well-being. Meneses echoes some of these sentiments, referencing motherhood as a specific area where she has exercised her right to choice by *not* becoming a mother. These, perhaps, are the actions the Feminist Movement refers to when it speaks of being “protagonists of quotidian revolutionary processes.”¹²

These daily processes are revolutionary, not only for their transformative properties, but also for the often-implicit assertion that women are taking back rights the government refuses provide, and, often, restricts. As Chavarría states, “The government is trying to control women: control their bodies, control their lives, and keep us oppressed.”¹³ Similarly, Juanita Jiménez asks, “If a vote at a poll to elect the president is worth so much, why are you not going to be able to make choices about your own life, your own body?”

¹⁰ Martha Meneses (Educator at 8th of March Collective, Managua), interview by author, April 26, 2012. Translation mine.

¹¹ Elvira Cuadra (Sociologist at CINCO, Managua), interview by author, April 24, 2012. Translation mine.

¹² “Espacios Vitales Entre Mujeres,” Movimiento Feminista de Nicaragua (2009): 5.

¹³ Norma Chavarría (Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa), interview by author, May 1, 2012. Translation mine.

Both Jiménez and Chavarría's points highlight the body as a focal point of political struggle at the individual level. Not only must women claim rights over and appreciate their bodies, in order to do so they must also actively fight the State's grasp for control over them. The most salient example—and an example to which the women are often referring when they talk of the FSLN's attempts to restrict women's rights—is that of the 2006 ban on therapeutic abortion.

There is perhaps no choice more intimate, personal, and linked to the body than the decision to have an abortion. In the case of therapeutic abortions, the procedure is not so much a choice for the woman as a life saving operation, thus the ban is a main point of contention between the government and feminists in Nicaragua. Like many women, Edipcia Dubon, a leader in the dissident MRS political party, interprets the ban as an indication of the government's broader lack of respect for women's rights, "Women's rights are at risk...it has to do with liberty."¹⁴ Dubon's comment, along with Meneses' assertion that "the government is not responding to the strategic needs of women" by creating such a ban suggest that, by not respecting women's control over their bodies, the government does more than just deny individual women access to a medical procedure. The government—and Ortega in particular—makes a statement with such legislation: that women's autonomy is not a priority to his administration and that the State has the right to control what women do or do not do with their bodies. Such control thus translates into a limitation on women's freedom to exercise their citizenship, whether through sovereignty over their bodies or any other means.

¹⁴ Edipcia Dubón (Movimiento Renovador Sandinista, Managua), interview by author, April 26, 2012. Translation mine.

The women I spoke to continually placed emphasis on autonomy, the right to exercise citizenship, and the right to be a subject *with* rights. The importance of control over the body is a factor in all of these goals and thus an important part of attempts to achieve them. In discussing an approach to realizing such rights, María Teresa Blandón, one of the leaders of the feminist program known as La Corriente, argues for an approach that puts emphasis on “themes that the government is not dealing with correctly, like abortion, sexual freedom, sexual education, and gender violence.”¹⁵ Violeta Delgado, a MAM leader, broadens this perspective, suggesting that women must fight with “a complete demand for the rights of women as citizens, equally as much in the sexual, personal, public, political, economic, and social spheres.”¹⁶ Adelaida Sanchez, who works with both the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights and the MAM, makes the point even more succinctly: “We want to be recognized as subjects with rights.”¹⁷ By fighting from the space of the body, these women want more than to be recognized as women with women’s rights: they want to be recognized as citizens, who may exercise their autonomy as citizens without governmental attempts to control their bodies. States Carola Brantome, a member of the feminist Grupo Venancia, “Private practice is political.”¹⁸ Though the body itself is private, personal, and subject to the autonomy of the individual, it is also the site of a political struggle and the subject of a collective movement.

¹⁵ María Teresa Blandón (Programa Feminista La Corriente, Managua), interview by author, May 4, 2012. Translation mine.

¹⁶ Violeta Delgado Sarmiento (MAM, Managua), interview by author, April 23, 2012. Translation mine.

¹⁷ Adelaida Sanchez (CENIDH/MAM, Managua), interview by author, April 20, 2012. Translation mine.

¹⁸ Carola Brantome (Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa), interview by author, May 2, 2012. Translation mine.

The concept of autonomy bridges two of the main issues that feminists and women of the MRS party take with Ortega's government. On one hand, women's expression of autonomy requires the aforementioned control over their own bodies. As Luz Marina Torres, director of the Women's Network Against Violence, puts it "we want women to take their power and say no when they need to and yes when they need to."¹⁹ By exercising control over their bodies, women express their autonomy *from* government control of their space. The other dimension of autonomy, however, is access *to* the protection of political institutions. Dubón suggests that "political participation requires a level of autonomy." If women do not have such autonomy over their bodies, institutional spaces such as government positions are closed to them. This is not to say that women do not exist within political institutions in Nicaragua. However, the perception of many of the women I spoke to is that, in order to become a part of such institutions, women must renounce some of their ideals—thus, some of their autonomy—in favor of submission to the FSLN. The closure of institutions to non-FSLN women subsequently renders an agenda focused on women's rights an impossibility through formal political channels. This, to complete the cycle, means that it is unlikely the State will seek mechanisms to give women autonomy at the personal level.

The problem of institutions closed to women is compiled in Nicaragua by what many see as a crumbling institutionalism in general, in which Ortega's interests—not the interests of the Nicaraguan people—dictate the direction of the government. In such a

¹⁹ Luz Marina Torres (Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia, Managua), interview by author, April 30, 2012. Translation mine.

climate, “no one, neither men nor women, have any kind of independence.”²⁰ Thus, the greater atmosphere of untrustworthy political institutions compounds the struggle of the women’s movement for their rights as citizens, as they search for space *outside* of the State to exercise control over their own bodies while searching for space *within* the State to make the changes necessary to grant such autonomy.

²⁰ Violeta Delgado Sarmiento (MAM, Managua), interview by author, April 23, 2012. Translation mine.

“THEY SEE IT AS A GIFT, NOT A RIGHT”: POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS

While the government seems to have closed off women’s opportunities to exercise autonomy over their bodies, this is not to say that Ortega and the FSLN have ignored a women’s agenda entirely. It is possible to look to recently approved laws like the reinforced law against violence and the 50-50 equality law for examples of the FSLN’s strides towards gender equality. New social programs directed at women, like the Zero Hunger program²¹, bolster the assertion that Ortega is, in fact, deeply committed to addressing inequality and women’s rights. Feminists’ perceptions of such actions, however, suggest that these laws are nothing more than a reflection of the weak institutions that bore them.

A major preoccupation of most of the women I spoke with is the state of democracy in Nicaragua. Just as dealing in themes of personal rights is generally considered the domain of the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement, contesting the current government’s legitimacy is normally attributed to the MAM and the women of the MRS party. In my research, however, I found that—as with the issue of autonomy and rights over bodily space—concern over the impact of weak institutions belongs to all women who contest government action, not one sector. The issue of lack of democracy, after all, cannot be divorced from lack of autonomy over the body: Without institutions to assure women’s right to protest, they cannot argue for their right to choice and control. Without the application of laws that strive for gender equality, no actual progress toward those goals is made. Without robust civil society, there are no mechanisms through which to organize and make demands for individual rights. This relationship of undemocratic institutions to a

²¹ “Programa Hambre Cero Ha Beneficiado a Cien Mil Mujeres.” *La Nueva Radio Ya*. March 25, 2012. Accessed May 8, 2012. <<http://nuevaya.com.ni/2012/03/programa-hambre-cero-ha-beneficiado-a-cien-mil-mujeres/>>

lack of women's rights does not go unnoticed by the feminist movements of Nicaragua. In fact, it is a major point of contention between them and the State.

At the most basic level, many women see the re-election of Ortega in 2011 as an infringement on the rights of all, which, naturally impacts the rights of women. Ana Vijil, a member of the MRS party, states categorically that "respecting women's rights starts with respecting the vote."²² A diverse group of the women I spoke with referenced the "violation of institutionality"²³ that they perceive the most recent elections to be, due to fraud and what they call Ortega's illegitimate candidacy. According to Juanita Jiménez, "They destroyed institutionality to remain in power." In such a context, then, women's rights are placed in a precarious balance: "When they violate and manipulate the institutionality of the country, women's rights are more...vulnerable."²⁴ The logic seems to be that—although a fraudulent election has no direct link to a feminist agenda—if the government cannot be trusted to respect the vote of its people, it certainly cannot be trusted to follow through on commitments to social goals. Rather, in disrespecting institutional checks, the government announces its power to dictate the terms of political activity in Nicaragua. The erosion of democratic institutions also tends to signify greater oppression of civil society and social movements, a reality that women in opposition have already lived under the FSLN and Ortega.

While fraudulent elections certainly play a role in the tension between the feminist movements and the State, the area in which institutional weakness most obviously impacts the fight for women's rights is in law and decision-making. Here enters the complexity of

²² Ana Vijil (MRS, Managua), interview by author, April 24, 2012. Translation mine.

²³ Luz Marina Torres (Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia), Violeta Delgado (MAM), Ana Vijil (MRS).

²⁴ Violeta Delgado (MAM). Translation mine.

the relationship between the Ortega government and women's rights. While the penalization of therapeutic abortion and the official definition of family as comprised of a man, woman, and children run against the current of feminism in Nicaragua, some of the Ortega administration's other legal choices have been less clearly in contrast to feminist goals. Given the recent passage of both a reinforced law against violence towards women and a law guaranteeing women 50% of political positions in mayors offices, the Ortega government does not appear unequivocally anti-woman. Current FSLN leadership, thus, is distinctly indistinct when it comes to their stance on a feminist agenda. The leaders of the MAM and the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement are far less indistinct in their argument: despite policies that, at face value, present advances in women's rights, the laws are worthless due to the inability and unwillingness of the State to actually apply them. In other words, "The law is there, but it is dead letter."²⁵

What the women I interviewed had to say about the new law against violence towards women further clarifies their continued opposition to the State despite its apparent advances in women's rights. The main issue that feminists take with the law is that it goes unapplied, whether due to a lack of adequate resources or the granting of impunity to violators who have ties to the FSLN. As Adelaida Sanchez explains it, "the laws are very good instruments, however they don't apply them." In a nearly identical statement, Martha Meneses argues that, "Nicaragua has very good legal instruments, but it does not apply them." While these women come from different sectors of feminism in Nicaragua, they make nearly exactly the same point: well-constructed legal institutions mean nothing if they go unused and ignored. The government can proclaim its support for women by

²⁵ Elvira Cuadra (CINCO). Translation mine.

creating a law against gender violence, but without institutions upon which to build and apply such a policy, it means nothing.

Not only do feminists question the use of a law without application, they also point to the FSLN's intentional ignorance of its own legal standards. In regards to the law against violence against women, Sanchez highlights a "traffic of influence" that allows powerful violators of the law—particularly those with links to the FSLN—to place obstacles in their victims' path to justice. Drawing on her experience denouncing rights violations with the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, she suggests that throughout the *entire* justice system individuals with power may completely circumvent laws like the law against violence towards women. Granting abusers impunity from the law based on their power and connections highlights a closure where the government tries to argue there exists an opening. Without strong rule of law, women not only remain as vulnerable to violence as they would without this new policy, they are also subject to the violence of the State as it intentionally ignores their struggle.

The 50-50 law receives criticism from the feminist perspective in Nicaragua, as well. Many of the leaders I spoke to see this law as an intentional manipulation by the government to make it seem as if they commit themselves to an agenda of women's rights. Rather than viewing the policy as an advance, however, the women of the feminist movements see much "emptiness"²⁶ within the law, on the basis of two main points: first, that exact equality of percentages does not mean equality of power and second, that women themselves are not always committed to women's rights, especially when their loyalty lies first with the FSLN.

²⁶ Luz Marina Torres (Network of Women Against Violence). Translation mine.

Norma Chavarría uses the metaphor of marionettes to describe her perception of FSLN women in political positions. Several other women echo her suggestion that the forces controlling women do not prioritize the achievement of a feminist agenda. Elvira Cuadra maintains that giving women political positions “does not necessarily mean opening space to women so that they can make decisions,” while Marta Meneses suggests that “they are never going to include our demands because including the demands of women means questioning the structure.” In a most concise statement of the sentiment that women in power do not actually *have* power, Violeta Delgado tells me that “many of the women who assume [political] roles of responsibility do not have any level of autonomy or authority.” The overwhelming opinion here is that being a woman does not mean being a feminist, nor does it mean fighting for women’s rights. The idea that women in political positions are merely puppets for the FSLN compounds this apprehension towards the 50-50 law: “The women will vote for what Ortega wants.”²⁷ Thus, political institutions are not closed to women in the sense that it is impossible to get into them. Rather, the price of entrance is autonomy, which consequently robs women of the space to articulate issues different from those articulated by the FSLN. While women may have a symbolic presence in political spaces, their lack of autonomy due to corrupt institutions prevents that presence from being substantive.

Juanita Jimenez makes a different argument about the 50-50 law, an argument that relates to another major impediment to women’s access to institutional space in Nicaragua. She claims that the 50-50 law is not “free” because it was passed with the particular interest of gaining the women’s vote and, as she says, “the law should not be a gift.” The

²⁷ Martha Meneses (8th of March Collective). Translation mine.

culture of gifts for political loyalty—in other words clientelism—extends beyond the 50-50 law, and presents a further example of the degradation of political institutions in Nicaragua. Several of the women I spoke to mentioned the Zero Hunger program as an example of such clientelism. The Zero Hunger program, a program that gives impoverished women a “Productive Food Bonus”—comprised primarily of livestock and grains—is one of the social programs that some point to as evidence of Ortega’s true commitment to the achievement of social justice, particularly for women.²⁸ Others, however, see further reflection of corrupt institutions reflected in the mirror of Zero Hunger.

Chavarría, who works with women who have received the benefits of Zero Hunger, claims:

They do not see [the bonus] as a right, they see it as a gift, a favor...you go to communities and lots of women say ‘Thanks to Daniel Ortega!’ They don’t say ‘[the government] gives it to me because it is my right as a citizen.’

By giving women the “gift” of alleviating their poverty, Ortega also wins their political loyalty, without dealing in the ideological realm of women’s equality in terms of power or their access to political institutions.²⁹ By appeasing women with material goods, the government also discourages them from taking on their rights as citizens to make demands. The presentation of social program as favors, rather than rights, reinforces the idea that “the government does not want its citizens to demand, it wants them to ask.”³⁰ The treatment of social programs like Zero Hunger in this way discourages civil society, a main component of robust democracy. But the gift-giving of clientelism is not the only way the State has deterred women from fighting for their rights in political spaces.

²⁸ “Hambre Cero: Desarrollo o Gotas de Lluvia?” *Revista Envío* 334 (2010). Accessed May 8, 2012. <<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4121>>

²⁹ Marta Meneses (8th of March Collective).

³⁰ Luz Marina Torres (Network of Women Against Violence). Translation mine.

The criticism between feminist movements and the State goes both ways. The Ortega administration has taken an active role in portraying feminist activists in a negative light and shutting them out of negotiation around issues that concern them. Returning to the law against violence towards women, María Teresa Blandón points out that the State refuses to acknowledge feminists' mechanisms of violence prevention, preferring to relegate responsibility for implementation of the law to an already overburdened police force that lacks proper training in the issue of gender violence. The state "denies feminists credit for the approval of the law,"³¹ even though its approval was a result of years of pressure from them.³² Nancy Mora, of Grupo Venancia, also discusses the intentional closure of the State to working with feminist organizations: "This government wants to take away the social, organizational spaces that exist in Nicaragua."³³ Chavarría, in the same vein, says that "the State has a very direct message: the women need to be quiet."

Not only are women in Nicaragua indirectly shut out from institutional spaces through the illegitimacy or unreliability of political institutions and the clientelism of Ortega, they are also intentionally closed out if they exercise their citizenship to demand women's rights. Though institutional spaces are quite clearly and intentionally used to shut out women with a feminist agenda, however, space is not only a tool of oppression. When asked about the future of women's rights and their relationship with the State in Nicaragua, every woman expressed doubt as to the potential for advancement but they also referenced the creation of new spaces as a mechanism for change. These women's comments imply that space does not *only* have to be closed; it can also be opened.

³¹ María Teresa Blandón (La Corriente). Translation mine.

³² Potosme, "Aprueban Ley Integral."

³³ Nancy Mora (Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa), interview by author, May 2, 2012. Translation mine.

SPACE AND CONCLUSIONS

Lefebvre talks of an inherent contradiction within political power. While power is able to manage flows of energy within it, in order to effectively control such flows, it requires permanent establishments, permanent centers of decision and action.³⁴ Political power can have flows or permanent centers, but not at the same time. Thus, that which is needed to have complete control over flows of energy is made unattainable by virtue of their existence. To extend this theoretical approach to the example of Nicaragua, in order for the FSLN to effectively and completely close out the feminist movement, it would require an unshakeable center of power from which to fight. Unquestionably, Ortega and the FSLN harbor far more power within the Nicaraguan political context than the women's movements. However, the MAM and the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement, as well as some of the members of the MRS political party, consistently contest the State's center of power. Consequently, its power is not permanent, by virtue of the very existence of feminist movements. Thus, the relationship between the State and the feminist movements in Nicaragua is dialectic: by closing off both institutional and personal spaces, the government fosters its own opposition. This opposition, in turn, opens space where the government has closed it, rendering the State's absolute control over these women an impossibility.

The women I spoke to are acutely aware of the importance of space as a conceptual tool for the dismantling of the FSLN's concentration of power and the achievement of women's rights. Both Norma Chavarría and María Teresa Blandón stated explicitly that women must "go about opening space for themselves" in order to contest the government's actions that close space. When asked about the responsibility of a feminist, Violeta Delgado

³⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 388.

argued for “assuming a space of action in favor of other women.” Edipcia Dubón claims “we open the spaces that are lost,” while Nancy Mora compellingly talks about “standing to strengthen the other organizational spaces there are...to keep this cause alive.” These women are of disparate political and social backgrounds, working with different organizations, often with varying ideas about the proper mechanisms for achieving feminist goals. Nonetheless, they all talk about and take space as the ultimate locus for political struggle and the construction of different realities.

The distinction between the two major feminist groups—the MAM and the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement—thus relates to what kind of space they choose to focus on creating, rather than their ultimate goals. Juanita Jiménez, executive director of the MAM, acknowledges that, between the two groups, “at the philosophical level there is almost no difference...the difference is how we act upon it.” While both acknowledge the importance of reclaiming and opening space at both the personal *and* institutional levels, each group takes a more specific approach to one type of space or the other. The MAM takes the route of direct confrontation at the institutional level, decrying the corruption of Ortega, in particular, and government institutions more generally. In contrast, the Nicaraguan Feminist Movement strives for the realization of spaces in which women are autonomous over their own bodies first, recognizing “the body as the first space where citizenship is exercised.”³⁵ This division is significant: after all, it led to the fracture in the feminist movement in 2006. In talking to the women, though, it did not seem as if these two concepts of social space were mutually exclusive. Rather, my observations align with Aynn

³⁵ Nancy Mora (Grupo Venancia). Translation mine.

Setright and Florence E. Babb's observation that "the 'divide' among feminists is not so much a permanent rupture as a fracture that will take time to mend."³⁶

One reason the fracture between the MAM and the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua does not appear fatal to the whole feminist movement is that the different spaces the organizations occupy are integral to one another. Without autonomy over the body, individuals cannot seek to contest institutions, whereas without openings in institutional spaces there is little hope for the achievement of bodily or individual autonomy. This, perhaps, is the reason so many women emphasize the importance of feminists as the only true opposition in Nicaragua. Though not all feminists have renounced party politics—the MAM's 2006 alliance with the MRS party is one reason for the current fracture—many of them speak of the movement as the key opposition to the current government.

Despite the internal debate over involvement in partisan politics, all of the feminists are unquestionably political in terms of what they seek to do: contest power by creating space.

What the feminists of Nicaragua seem to recognize is that, as Lefebvre puts it, "groups...cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another as subjects, unless they generate (or produce) a space."³⁷ The women of the feminist movements have fought hard to produce such a space within Nicaraguan society, no easy feat in the face of the FSLN's growing power and after years of neoliberal governments that ignored women's rights. Their recognition of the need to create and construct spaces in order for the achievement of feminist goals has led the women to perceive themselves as an important—perhaps the only—true challenge to the power of the State in Nicaragua. As Martha Meneses twice reaffirms, "In this country, there is no partisan opposition. The only opposition here is the

³⁶ Setright and Babb, "Gender Justice and Political Inclusion," 8.

³⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 416.

feminist movement of women. We are the only opposition.” The words of Elvira Cuadra reflect the same conception of the role of women in relation to the government and civil society: “The women’s movement has played a key role. Without the women’s movement, society would be demobilized.”

By recognizing the importance and possibilities of reclaiming space, the feminists in Nicaragua have created a key movement for the contestation of a State that many, not just organized women, have begun to decry as problematic and institutionally corrupt. By reclaiming their own personal spaces and rights—consequently exercising their citizenship and seeking to question, if not also open, space at the institutional level—women have become a major force in the political scheme of Nicaragua. In daring to so openly contest Ortega, they have suffered government repression,³⁸ yet they continue denouncing the increasing closure of spaces, both institutional and personal, that the government enacts. In the relationship of space, these women open where the government closes, consequently destabilizing the State’s power and eviscerating its attempts at their elimination.

The feminist movements’ positioning as an opposing, civil society force creating space outside of the official Nicaraguan political institutions gives them the power to continue existing. However, none of the women I spoke with express so much as cautious optimism for the future of the relationship between Ortega and the feminists, or for the future of women’s rights in Nicaragua. Many women suggest that the oppressive political climate will only worsen as Ortega concentrates and centralizes power by manipulating institutions to his benefit. What is astounding, then, is not the capabilities of the Nicaraguan feminist movements to make instantaneous transformation. After all, they combat not only

³⁸ Violeta Delgado (MAM), Ana Vijil (MRS).

the State, but also greater oppressive systems of patriarchy and machismo within Nicaraguan society.³⁹ Such systems will not be deconstructed easily. Thus, their willingness to continue to fight, in full knowledge that they face an inevitably prolonged struggle with power, is the most salient characteristic of the women's movements. In a simple yet powerful proclamation of the goal of feminists, Nancy Mora invokes the theory of space, stating that "an opening is what we want." By constructing new spaces, the Nicaraguan feminist movements continue contesting State power and fighting for an opening.

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³⁹ Luz Marina Torres (Network of Women Against Violence).

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEWS

Associated with the Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres (MAM):

Cuadra, Elvira. Sociologist, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 24, 2012, Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO), Managua. Telephone: 8887.2538.

Delgado Sarmiento, Violeta. Manager of Programs, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 23, 2012, Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO), Managua. E-mail: zapoyol@hotmail.com.

Jiménez, Juanita. Executive Director, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 27, 2012, Office of the Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres, Managua. Telephone: 8854.1082.

Sanchez, Adelaida. Journalist, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 20, 2012, Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos, Managua. Telephone: 8606.2468.

Associated with the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua:

Meneses, Martha. Educator, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 26, 2012, 8th of March Collective (Colectivo 8 de Marzo), Managua. Telephone: 8787.5505.

Torres, Luz Marina. Coordinator/Liaison, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 30, 2012, Network of Women Against Violence (Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia), Managua.

Blandón, María Teresa. Director, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. May 4, 2012, Feminist Program "La Corriente," Managua. Telephone: 8855.3680

Associated with Grupo Venancia:

Brantome, Carola. Journalist, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. May 2012, Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa. Telephone: 8647.7767.

Chavarría, Norma. Educator, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. May 1, 2012, Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa. Telephone: 8943.6250.

Mora, Nancy. Social Worker, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. May 2, 2012, Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa.

Associated with the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS):

Dubon, Edipcia. MRS Representative, Interview re: women in opposition to the

government. April 26, 2012, Casa de Café—Altamira, Managua. Telephone: 8672.0796.

Vijil, Ana Margarita. Lawyer/Director of the Central American Institute of Legal and Political Studies, Interview re: women in opposition to the government. April 24, 2012, Universidad Politécnica de Nicaragua, Managua. Telephone: 8884.7901.

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Personal Details/Feminism:

1. Como se llama? *What is your name?*
2. Con que organización trabaja? *With what organization do you work?*
3. Dígame un poquito sobre ud./su historia./su trabajo *Tell me a bit about yourself/you history/work.*
4. Ud. se considera feminista? *Do you consider yourself a feminista?*
5. Si sí, como manifiesta su feminismo en su vida? En que aspectos de su vida? Como lo usa? *If so, how do you manifest your feminismo in your life? In what aspects of your life? How do you use it?*
6. Que es la responsabilidad de una feminista? Solo denunciar y contestar o más? *What is the responsibility of a feminista? Only to denounce and contest or more?*
7. Cuales son sus metas? *What are your goals?*

Relationship with FSLN/Ortega:

1. Cree ud. que el gobierno respeta los intereses y derechos de mujeres? Como? *Do you believe that the government respects the interests and Rights of women? How so?*
2. Como es la relación entre feministas y el gobierno? *How is the relationship between feminists and the government?*
3. Que hace, específicamente? Que ha hecho para promover derechos de mujeres o para quitar los derechos? *What does [the government] do, specifically? What has it done to promote women's rights or to take them away?*
4. Ha hecho algo para promover los derechos de mujeres? *Has the government done anything to promote women's rights?*
5. Que cree sobre la ley 50/50? Es un logro para mujeres? *What do you think about the new 50-50 law? Is it an achievement for women?*

6. El asunto de aborto terapeutico—que es su opinión. *Your opinion on the issue of therapeutic abortion.*
7. Que piensa ud. de esta nueva ley reforzada contra la violencia hacia mujeres? *What do you think of the new reinforced law against violence towards women?*
8. Cual es el asunto mas importante que ve? *What is the most important issue you see?*

Actions Acciones...

1. Que hace ud. para manifestar sus opiniones feministas y/o contra el gobierno? *What do you do to manifest your feminista opinions and/or your contestation of the government?*
2. Como visibiliza sus acciones? *How do you visibilize your actions?*
3. Que es la responsabilidad de un partido político? Puede ser un mecanismo de contestar las acciones del gobierno a los derechos de las mujeres? *What is the responsibility of political parties? Can they be mechanisms to contest the actions of the government against women's rights?*
4. Explíqueme un poco de las divisiones internas de los movimientos de feministas. Como afecta sus acciones? *Explain to me the internal divisions within the feminista movements. How does this affect your actions?*
5. Hay algo mas que quiere agregar? *Is there anything else you would like to add?*

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