Graduate School of Development Studies

Lived Sexualities:
Understanding Sexuality and Power Relations from the Life Experiences of Young Women in Nicaragua

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Disclaimer:

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This investigation is dedicated to my friend Theresa Banoba Baveng, for her inspiring strength in the battle against cancer.

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List of Acronyms

GV	Grupo Venancia
HIV/AIDS	Humane Immune Deficiency Virus & Acquired Immune Defficiency Syndrome
INEC	Instituto Nicaraguense de Estadísticas y Censos. Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
LC	La Corriente
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RBA	Rights Based Approach
RSP	Radical Sexual Politics
SRR	Sexual and Reproductive Rights
SSR	Sexual Social Relations
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

Abstract

Women's sexuality has been included in the development agenda mainly in relation to health and risks. More recently the approach towards sexuality has incorporated women's rights to pleasure and to control their reproductive capacities. In Nicaragua, feminist organizations have been working with young women in these topics, intersecting their agendas with the development agenda in some aspects, and differing in others.

This paper looks at the way in which young Nicaraguan women experience and give meaning to their sexuality in their daily lives and in their interactions with two feminist organizations that work on the topics of sexuality and gender power relations.

These organizations have critically incorporated the approaches of "empowerment" and "rights", in vogue in the development discourse, in their work with young women. These approaches have been challenged by feminist and sexuality scholars. From the perspective of young women that have been engaged with feminist organizations, this paper reflects on the theoretical and practical challenges that the frameworks of "empowerment" and "rights" poses to the understanding of women's sexuality and power.

Relevance to Development Studies

A paradigm of Development that is people-centred and aims to enhance people's quality of life cannot exclude the sphere of sexuality.

Sexuality has served as an instrument of power to distribute material and symbolic resources based in the alleged "normalcy" and "superiority" of certain bodies and practices. Hence sexuality can also be an instrument of reversion of inequalities, which involves the politicization of the approaches towards sexuality in the development field.

It is necessary to analyse how these processes of social change occur at the local levels, and from the experiences of young women, in order to gain better understandings of the complexities it entails.

Keywords

Sexuality – Gender - Power Relations - Young Women – Nicaragua - Empowerment – Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Chapter 1
Introduction

The first wife of Adam was Lilith who, according to the legend, decided to leave Adam and the Gardens of Eden because she didn't agree with the way in which Adam wanted to have sex with her. She refused to lie on her back and being passive while Adam was dominant, because she strongly believed that they should have sex as equals (Plaskow 2005). Eve, Adam's second wife, was also disobedient, tempting him to eat the forbidden fruit; but was less rebellious than Lilith. And in opposition to them is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was pure and virgin.

Women's sexuality has been critical to the construction of women's identity not only in the Judeo-Christian religion, but almost in every tradition and culture in the world. It has also been the subject of deep inquiry in Western feminist theorising primarily because of its links with gender inequality. Some theorists as Marcela Lagarde, view in the construction of female sexuality as passive and inherently in service of others, a direct link to women's mandate to please and work for others at the expense of their own well-being, which she considers essential to maintaining patriarchy. According Lagarde (1990), on this social construction of female sexuality as passive and in service of others, rests a series of inequalities and oppressive power relations that influence not only the ways women feel about themselves, but their access to symbolic and material resources.

This investigation explores the ways in which young Nicaraguan women experience the links between gender, sexuality and power. As a young feminist woman myself, I became interested in this topic inspired by the ideas of Lagarde and other feminists. Another event that sparked my curiosity was the strong conflict between the current Nicaraguan government and feminist organizations in relation to women's sexual and reproductive rights. Since 2006 it is illegal for Nicaraguan women to have an abortion, even if they were raped or their lives were at risk. The outlawing of therapeutic abortion[1] was the result of a negotiation between the current government and the catholic hierarchies for political purposes.

This experience triggered a process of reflection through which my political position in relation to issues of gender and sexuality increased. I became interested in the work of feminist organizations that address these topics, especially in the way they look at sexuality. However, at the same time that my "activism" was increasing, I begun to recognize certain disconnections and challenges in internalizing or practicing what I was rationalizing. This made me curious about how these processes are experienced by other women.

In this research paper therefore, I focus in the ways in which young Nicaraguan women that are linked to two feminist organizations: La Corriente (LC) and Grupo Venancia (GV), experience and give meaning to their sexuality in

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[1] Therapeutic abortion refers to an abortion that is allowed due to medical reasons or because the woman was raped.

their daily lives. I decided to look at the experiences of young women linked to feminist organizations because, as previously stated, I would like to show how other young women live the process of reflection and interiorization of topics related to gender and sexuality. I selected the cases of LC and GV because they integrate "pleasure" in their approach towards sexuality, which complements the more dominant ways of looking at sexuality in Nicaragua, mostly centred on health and violence.

The purpose of doing this research is to look at the processes of these young feminist women, in order to raise questions regarding the ways the links between women's sexuality and power have been theorised, as well as to the ways these theories have been put in practice by international development agencies and local organizations, under the rubric of "empowerment" and the narrative of "Sexual and Reproductive Rights" (SRR). This chapter will discuss in detail the methodology and epistemological lenses employed for conducting this challenging task.

1.1   Feminist perspectives on sexuality, gender equity and empowerment as issues of the development agenda

The issues of gender equity and sexuality have been gradually incorporated into the development agenda, interacting in terms of theorization and implementation with feminist scholars and organizations.

Sexuality started to be incorporated in the development agenda mostly in relation to population control, HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health problems (Jolly, 2010). During the 90s in Latin America, many feminist collectives started to play an important role as implementers at the local level of the development agenda on issues regarding gender and sexuality. This process of "NGO-ization" of feminist collectives (Alvarez, 1998) encapsulates the trend that some feminist organizations followed, of becoming non-governmental organizations and working as state partners with development funds.

With the operationalization of this process, some streams of the feminist thinking started to mingle with the development discourse, and topics related to gender more often, but also to sexuality, started to be discussed in developmental ways. Along with this phenomenon, other important paradigmatic process was taking place. Two spheres that up until then had been working separately, the human rights and the development field, started to converge on a series of aspects that were expressed in the conferences of Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994), Copenhagen (1995) and Beijing (1995), where gender equality and issues of sexuality and reproduction began to be framed as rights and linked to notions of "empowerment" (Cornwall et al. 2008).

The Beijing Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 illustrates this new trend. In it, the participant Governments committed themselves to "[w]omen's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society", as well as to the "explicit recognition and reaffirmation of the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility" (UN, 1995: art. 13&17). It continues by stating that "[t]he human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters relating to their sexuality,

including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence" (UN, 1995: paragraph 96).

In this confluence of feminists and development agendas, two narratives have become dominant in development theorization and practice, in one hand, the narrative of SRR and, on the other, the narrative of empowerment. In most interventions of feminist organizations at the national levels, the enforcement of SRR has been seen as a mean to empowering women, as well as an end in itself, to which I will be referring to as the "empowerment/rights approach."

Women's empowerment has been vastly theorized and put in practice. As Corrêa (2010) argues, empowerment is not a simple concept but on the contrary, there are many meanings attached to it that depend on the contexts and position from which the concept is being used. Amongst the most influential theorizations of "empowerment" is the work of Naila Kabeer. Kabeer understands women's empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 2001:435). Kabeer qualifies choice in two ways, first in terms of the *conditions* from which to choose (whether women chose from a variety of alternatives or not); and second, in relation to the *consequences* of those choices, which she classifies in terms of its *transformatory* potential (whether the choices challenge social inequalities or reproduce them) (Kabeer, 2001).

The "empowerment/rights approach" has been criticized by feminist and sexuality scholars[2] for the following reasons:

(1) Some scholars as Corrêa (2010) have challenged the way in which "power" has been conceptualized in the "empowerment" approach, as a top-down, oppressive and possessed phenomenon.

(2) Cornwall and Anyidoho (2010), and Bradshaw (2006), focuses their critics in what they consider a process of de-politicization and de-radicalization of the feminist agenda, through its inclusion in the development discourse under the rubric of empowerment and rights.

(3) The third group of critics questions the universalizing tendency of Eurocentric visions about sexuality that is in the basis of these frameworks, as well as its individualistic and liberal biases (see MCFadden 2010, Connell 1995[3], Mahmood 2001).

Each of these three groups of critics will be engaged throughout this document, in some cases in a more conceptual and theoretical fashion, and in others by contrasting them with the empirical findings and reflections presented in this research.

1.2   Research objective, questions and argument

This investigation focuses on current debates regarding the dominant ways in which women's sexuality and its links with power has been theorized and prac-

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[2] These criticisms will be further analysed in chapter 2.

[3] Connell refers more specifically to the ideas of sexual liberation and rights. This will be explained in chapter 2.

ticed by feminist development organizations[4], and the criticism it has generated.

The main objective of this research is "*to explore the ways in which young women linked to two Nicaraguan feminist organizations (La Corriente and Grupo Venancia) experience and give meaning to their sexuality, and the implications this has for feminist and development approaches towards women's sexuality*".

In order to understand these women's experiences I will first look into the structural conditions in which they live in Nicaragua. As part of the social context I will make reference to dominant discourse about sexuality and gender in Nicaragua, as well as to the alternative discourses to which they are exposed in their interactions with *LC* and *GV*.

This research will address the following questions: "*What is the context under which young Nicaraguan women are positioned?*" and "*How do these young women interact with the organizations?*" Given my main interest of looking at their life experiences, an important part of this investigation will pay attention to the ways in which they understand and experience their sexuality, and the reflections they have in their work with these organizations. This leads to the following question: *How do these young women experience and give meaning to their sexuality in their daily lives?*

Considering the critics that these frameworks have generated, as well as my own experience in relation to these processes, I will work the following preliminary argument in this research: *acknowledging the important contributions of the "empowerment/rights approach" for women's lives, its universalistic, individualistic, and liberal basis, as well as its framing of power; fails to address the nuanced ways in which young women experience, give meaning, and negotiate their sexuality.*

1.3 Limitations and scope

This research does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the work of LC and GV, neither does it attempt to offer an evaluation of the ways in which these two organizations are dealing with these topics. Instead, it aims to provide an insight into the points of convergence with regards to their work, as a way of contextualizing these young women's experiences and reflections about sexuality.

When this study refers to the "empowerment/rights approach" it should not be assumed that I it refers to the work of these organizations. This idea will be elaborated in chapter 3.

Finally, I want to stress that despite in the sample I considered some social differentiators such as age, sexual preference, gender identity, class, and urban/rural location, I am not aiming to compare women's experiences in relation to these elements. Rather, my objective is to include a diversity of experiences in the analysis, in order to avoid the homogenization of the category "young women". This will be explained further in the methodological section.

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[4] Feminist organizations that work with development funds.

1.4   Ethical considerations

While conducting the fieldwork in Nicaragua and during the phase of analysis, I developed the concern of how to diminish the biases that my social position and personal experience brings to the analysis of these women's voices and silences. I became aware of the power I had in "producing" knowledge about women, and of the reproduction of power relations that this exercise entails.

I tried to diminish these effects first, by acknowledging and being aware of the power I am exercising as a researcher in selecting the information and the lenses to look at it; second, by deeply questioning my assumptions regarding the topic and recognising the differences in my social position in relation to the interviewees; and third, by including the views of the interviewees as much as it was possible in chapter 4.

I also shared the preliminary findings with some of the interviewees, incorporating their views in the analysis. However it has to be acknowledged that as every academic work, this one also involves an exercise of power that inevitably privileges some experiences at the expense of others.

1.5   Methodological and epistemological journey

This section explains the theories that inform the selected approach for the identification of methods and sources for this investigation.

To depart from an idea of sexuality as socially constructed (see Foucault (1978), Rubin (1984), and Vance (1984)), means in methodological terms, that information about sexuality cannot be found in the individual's biological body exclusively, but in the contextual elements that give meaning to this body. Influenced by these views, De Lauretis look at the identity of a woman as "the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the discursive context to which she has access" (De Lauretis in Wieringa 1994:834). This research looks at young women's sexuality in the same way. The first set of sub-questions address the discursive context in which young women interact. This context includes the structural elements that determine their social positions in the Nicaragua society, the dominant discourses about sexuality that they are exposed to, and the alternative discourses in which they partake through their link with feminist organizations.

The second set of sub-questions focus in the way women interpret and reconstruct their sexuality. This assumes a degree of *agency* in the process of women's reflexivity, which is in line with the thinking of feminist theorist McNay. In her reflections about gender, McNay criticises the over emphasis that materialist and culturalist feminists put on the level of the *structure* (including discourses), neglecting the level of women's *agency* when studying the construction of gender. She states that to explain *agency* (the way in which actors negotiate power relations), it is necessary to look at the level of experience, viewing discourses as concrete rather than abstract mediums where *structures* are expressed (McNay, 2004).

Following these ideas, in order to understand how power and sexuality interact in the lives of young Nicaraguan women, this research looks at their experiences in the material and discursive contexts in which they interact.

1.5.1 Selection of the sample

This investigation focuses in the experiences of young women that engage with feminist organizations, because they interact with dominant and alternative discourses about gender and sexuality. Exploring their cases allows us to see how these young women give meaning and negotiate these discourses in their daily lives, which will give us hints to engage with broader debates about the "empowerment/rights approach". Therefore the first criterion used in the selection of the sample was that they were interacting with feminist organizations.

The sample includes 15 young women (seven from GV and eight from LC) between 18 and 30 years old[5]. Most work as activists on issues of SRR, violence and HIV/AIDS in their communities. A smaller group only study, do domestic work, or work in topics not related to gender and sexuality. This is important to mention because in the current political situation in Nicaragua, feminist organization have been targeted by the current government, being portrayed as pro-abortion, lesbians, or bourgeois (see Murillo, 2008). This means that being identified as a feminist represents a social cost for some young women, especially considering that 80% of the population is Christian (INEC, 2005).

The investigation includes only young women first, because they have become important targets of development projects in relation to sexuality, portraying their sexuality as especially problematic and risky. Second, because their different social position in relation to adult women and children makes them a different unit of analysis. It is relevant to mention that although it is acknowledged the important existing debates around the concept of youth, especially the theories that advocate for understanding youth as a social construction (see Wyn and White 1997), for the purpose of this investigation youth will be defined in terms of age.

Problematizing "women's experience"

Despite the fact that "young women" as a category might share similarities as compared to adult women or men, there are also important differences between them that have to be considered. The literature developed by third wave feminists such as Mohanty (1986), Anzaldua (1990), and hooks (1981) among others, flagged the often essentialist and universalistic biases of previous Western feminist theorizations about Third World women. Among other things, they pointed out the importance of questioning the category of women, and of including other social differentiators in the analysis of women's experiences, such as ethnicity and class, for example.

On the same line, McNay drawing on the work of Scott, Lazreg, Butler and Spivak, states that *experience* should not be confused with "an unexamined

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[5] 18-30 is the legal rank of age in which a person is considered young in Nicaragua (Nicaraguan National Assembly, Law 392).

empiricism which does not scrutinize the conditions that determine how experience relates to knowledge" (McNay, 2004:178). She argues that *experience* should be review in order not to "create a sense of consensus by attributing to it an assumed, stable and shared meaning" (Scott as cited in McNay, 2004:179). McNay's call is for an acknowledgement of the diversity of experiences between women, and of the power relations that make some categories more visible than others.

These reflections are relevant for this research because despite the elements that young women share, the experience of being a young woman in Nicaragua is different in relation to the social class to which a person belongs, the level of education, sexual orientation, gender identity, and geographical location. This investigation will not analyse the links between the abovementioned axis of differentiation and the way in which women experience and give meaning to their sexuality. However, in order to avoid homogenizing young women's experiences, the sample includes diverse women in relation to these axes of differentiation.

Seven interviewees live and work in rural communities, and eight live, study or work in urban or semi-urban areas. Four interviewees live in the capital city, and have a better financial situation in comparison with others. This is related with their level of education, having on average more than 15 years of education in comparison with 10 years or less in other interviewees. More educated women from Managua work in NGOs or as consultants. Women with less years of formal education combine their work as promoters of SRR with domestic and agriculture tasks. Some women work in the formal sector but earning low incomes.

The sample is also varied in terms of sexual preference and gender identity, including three women who identify themselves as lesbian, transgender, and bisexual respectively. It is relevant to mention that the analysis includes the *aid memoires* of some activities of LC, where the voices of other young women are expressed.

1.5.2 Selection of the organizations

LC and GV were selected as cases of study because both organizations produce alternative discourses to the hegemonic discourse about young women's sexuality in Nicaragua. These organizations also work with a socially constructed notion of sexuality, and include elements that have been less emphasised in the work of some feminist organizations such as pleasure, desire, sexual preference and gender identity. Additionally, both organizations have programs to work with young women.

1.5.3 Data generation methods

The fieldwork was conducted in Managua and Matagalpa, Nicaragua, and included 13 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions (FGD) with young women, and five interviews with members of the coordinating staff of the organizations. The FGD were used to elicit "participants' feelings, attitudes and perceptions about [the] selected topic" (Puchta and Potter, 2004:6), and to

generate exploratory hypothesis in the initial phase of the research process, which were *triangulated* with other techniques, mainly semi-structured qualitative interviews, document review, and direct observation.

Part of the fieldwork included direct participation in regular workshops and activities of LC and GV with young women. In terms of secondary data analysis, the profiles of the organizations, web pages, visual and written materials of their campaigns, and *aide memoires* were reviewed.

Two workshops were conducted to share the preliminary findings of the research with the informants. The process of reflection generated in those activities played a key role in the analysis of the information. The process of analysis has also included enlightening discussions with colleagues and supervisors at the ISS.

1.6   Structure of the research

The structure of this report follows the methodological logic presented in the previous section. Chapter 2 will look in more depth the theoretical discussion presented in section 1.2, in order to present a more comprehensive view of the ways in which women's sexuality and its links with power have been theorised. This chapter also explains the conceptual lenses through which the research strategy and analysis of findings has been developed.

Chapter 3 addresses the first sub-questions, related to the structural and discursive context that surrounds young Nicaraguan women, as well as the discourses of both feminist organizations. This will provide a better picture of the elements that inform these young women's ideas about sexuality.

Chapter 4 presents the main findings of this research, focussing on the ways in which young women are experiencing and making sense of their sexuality and its links with power, in the context of their interactions with the organizations and their structural social position.

Finally chapter 5 goes back to the set of critics raised in section 1.2 and deepened in chapter 2, and engages critically with them. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to contribute to these debates, looking at them from the perspective of young women's experiences in Nicaragua.

Chapter 2
Adjusting Lenses: Theorising about Women's Sexuality, Gender and Power

This chapter examines some theoretical approaches to the topic of gender, sexuality and power, and focuses on how these approaches have informed current narratives of empowerment and sexual rights, dominant in current feminist/development projects regarding gender and sexuality. The chapter addresses some of the criticisms these views have generated, as well as the questions they have opened.

2.1   Sexuality as a social construction

Sexuality will be visited in this investigation from a socio-constructionist perspective. This means that it will not be seen as "natural" and understandable in purely biological terms, but as a construction of society and a product of human activity constituted in history. As Vance explains it:

> Sex is not simply a "natural" fact, as earlier, essentialist theories would suggest. Although sexuality, like all human cultural activity, is grounded in the body, the body's structure, physiology, and functioning do not directly or simply determine the configuration or meaning of sexuality (Vance, 1984:8).

The work of Foucault has been very influential in the development of this approach. In The History of Sexuality (1978), he presents an analysis of the historical emergence of the modern notion of sexuality as a distinctive domain of human experience, as the bearer of a deeper truth about our subjective selves. In the historical interweaving of social, economic and political processes of the advent of modernity, sexuality appeared in the intersection between two fundamental preoccupations: the preoccupation with the control of populations and the preoccupation with the constitution of the subjectivity. It came to be a privileged site of knowledge about the self, and of control over it.

Foucault challenged the idea that sexuality was a pre-existing biological element in people's bodies that was repressed and in need of liberation. He argued that it is through the deployment and knowledge created about sexuality that power has been exercised, and bodies and identities have been constructed in hierarchical ways. Therefore, an idea of sexual liberation from a Foucaldian perspective would require the liberation *from* sexuality, and not *of* sexuality.

> We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim – through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality- to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance (Foucault, 1978:157).

In the same line, Rubin challenges the ideas of *sexual essentialism*, or the belief that sex is a natural, fixed, asocial and transhistorical force that exists prior to social life and resides in people hormones or psyches (Rubin, 1984:275). She sees sexuality as a realm with "its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression" (Rubin, 1984:267), and offers a detailed description of the ways in which these politics, inequities and forms of oppression are expressed in Western cultures. Among the most important characteristic is *sex negativity*, or the dominant idea of sex as a "dangerous, destructive, negative force" (Rubin, 1984:278) that has to be redeemed by its practice for accepted purposes, such as procreation under marriage.

Figure 2.1.1
The Sex Hierarchy
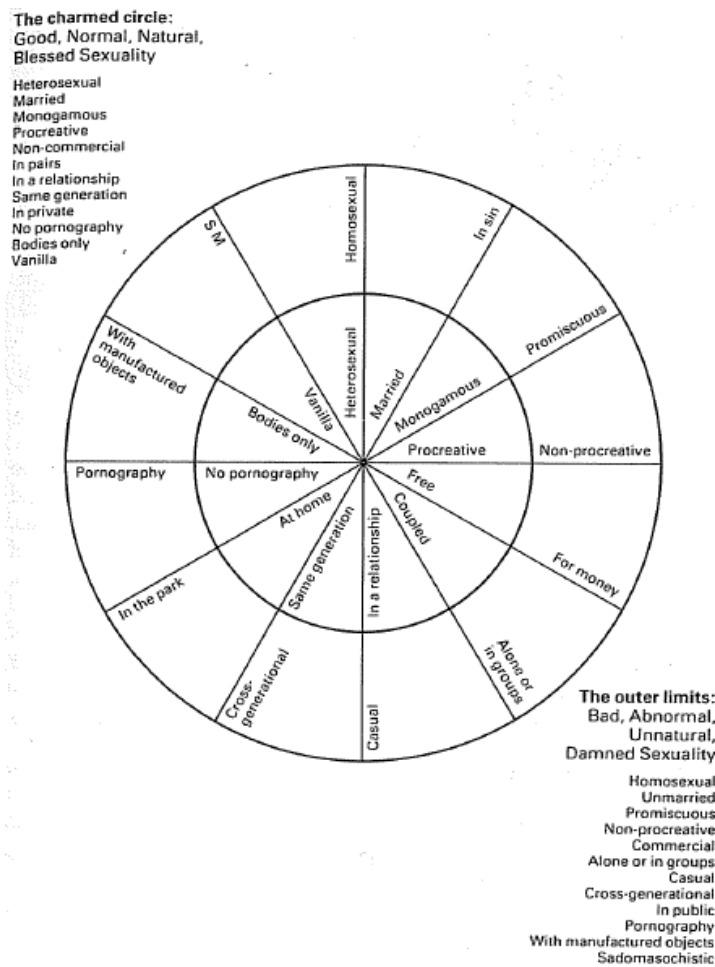
Source: Rubin, 1984:281

Rubin developed the idea of "sex hierarchy". She argues that in the organization of modern Western societies, sexuality plays a key role, placing people and its sexual practices in a hierarchical system of values. Married-

reproductive heterosexuals are at the top of the system, followed by heterosexuals in monogamous couples, and lesbians and gays in long-term monogamous relationships. At the bottom of it are transsexuals, transvestites, sadomasochists, sex workers and other transgressors (Rubin, 1984:278-279). This system serves to differentiate "good", "normal" and "natural" expressions of sexuality, from those considered as "bad", "deviant" or "unnatural".

Rubin's sex hierarchy model shows how sexuality is structured in society, and also how sexuality structures society, what Connell (1995) coined as "Sexual Social Relations" (SSR). In this system of SSR people are positioned differently in relation to power and resources due to their practices and identities.

> In this structure personal practice encounters organised limits and organised enablements. [...] As the hegemonic position of heterosexuality illustrates, the structuring of sexuality may make the enablement of some group's practice the condition of limitation on others'. In this case, the structure requires inequality and gives rise to oppression (Connell, 1995:387).

This hierarchical system produces inequalities but is also produced by already existing inequalities. Let us use the practice of masturbation as an example. Even though it is the same action, it makes a difference if it is performed by a woman or a man. This means that when gender and other elements of differentiation such as class, ethnicity, or age, interact with this system of sex hierarchies, inequalities are produced and reproduced at many levels. This will be illustrated in next section with some of the intersections between gender, sexuality and power from a feminist perspective.

2.2   Women's sexuality, gender and power

This research adopts a socio-constructivist approach to sexuality because in comparison with essentialist approaches, it allows to identify how power intersects with sexuality, and the social dynamics that these intersections generate. This approach is especially useful for analysing the case of young women in Nicaragua, because in their interactions with the organizations and their daily life experiences, they are living processes of de-construction and reconstruction of their sexuality. These processes are mediated by power relations, which are necessary to understand in order to avoid its reproduction. Additionally, in relation to the links between sexuality and gender inequality, the socio-constructivist approach offers tools to question the sources of such inequalities, which goes beyond the solution of its effects.

Marcela Lagarde has worked on the links between sexuality and gender inequality. In line with Rubin, Lagarde (1990) argues that sexuality is at the base of power, organising differently the lives of the social subjects and societies. In case of women, their reproductive function plays a central role in the way they are positioned in relation to men.

According to Lagarde, in the construction of femininity as naturally and inherently *in service of others*, which has been linked with their reproductive and nurturer bodies, women learn to please and work for others at the expense of their own well-being. On this social construction of female desires and pleas-

ures, Lagarde identifies the origins of a series of beliefs that sustain a system of inequalities and oppressions.

> Sexuality in our society focuses masculinity and femininity in access to real and symbolic assets, access to work and other creative activities [including] access to power and pleasure (Lagarde, 2003:10).

The central point of Lagarde is that women are constantly negotiating between their reproductive and their erotic experience of sexuality, and despite the fact that their bodies are objectified as erotic bodies, this eroticism is made available for men and not for themselves (Lagarde, 1990). In a similar vein, Gonzalez (2005) argues that women's lives are marked by the fate of becoming the objects of men's desire, or a "body-to-have-sex-with", even before they acknowledge it.

> We are encouraged to feel complete if we succeed in satisfying male desire. We exercise our sexuality, but at the same time we are penalized for it. Dishonour befalls a woman who decides to have sexual relations, even when she assumes the role of the object (Gonzales, 2005: 183).

These authors share views regarding women's sexuality and its links with gender inequality. They use a socio-constructivist perspective to argue that women's experience of their bodies and sexuality is socially constructed, hence flexible. Perhaps not many feminists would disagree with these views, but there are important disagreements regarding the way to overcome these structures of power.

The debate between Radical and Libertarian feminists in the 80s illustrates this point. The debate focussed in how to reverse the perverse effects of the links between women's sexuality and gender power relations. Radicals view sexuality in a male-dominated society as an instrument through which men have oppressed women, hence they advocated for an elimination of the practices and institutions that sustain that oppression, such as pornography, prostitution, and compulsory heterosexuality. On the other extreme were Libertarian feminists, who disagreed with the position of the former and saw the exchange of sexual pleasure between consenting partners as a liberating practice, and advocating for the transgression of socially acceptable sexual norms as a strategy of liberation (Ferguson, 1984).

From a socio-constructivist Foucauldian perspective of sexuality, both extremes present conceptual flaws. According to Sawicki (1990) both groups tend to present an essentialized view of women's sexuality. For example, Radicals view sexual pleasure as a "male" preoccupation, and intimacy and affection as its opposite "female" interest, while Libertarians view women's sexual pleasure as something repressed and in need of liberation.

The notion of power behind these ideas can be challenged from a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault questioned the "juridico-discursive" model of power present in traditionally revolutionary theory, which conceptualised power as possessed, centralised and repressive. He viewed power as exercised rather than possessed, focussing on the power relations rather than on the subjects of those relations. He also viewed power as something productive rather than repressive, for example in the creation of the identity of the "homosex-

ual" based in the alleged normalcy of heterosexuality. And he viewed power as exercised from bottom-up instead of top-down. This means that power is not centralized but dispersed at the microlevel of society, in the form of norms and beliefs rather than oppressive laws (Sawiki, 1990).

Along these lines, Foucault shifted the emphasis put in the ideas of power as something oppressive and possessed by a group of people or an institution (men or the state), to a more dispersed and productive exercise of power, in which "power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions" (Mills, 2003:33).

The way in which Foucault theorised sexuality and power presents interesting questions to more recent debates about how to resist or challenge unequal gender power relations in the realm of sexuality. The next section addresses, from a theoretical perspective, some of the main analytical dilemmas that this investigation engages with.

2.3 Exploring the "empowerment/rights approach"

With the inclusion of gender and sexuality in the development agenda, two narratives have become dominant in theories and practices of development programs with women: empowerment and sexual and reproductive rights. Feminist organizations at the local levels have been relevant translators of these narratives into actions, in their interactions with young women.

The ways in which these dominant approaches have been theorised and put in practice have been questioned by feminist and sexuality scholars as it is presented below.

The first criticism deals with the conception of *power* that has informed the conceptualization of *empowerment* in development theories and practices. Corrêa (2010) drawing on a Foucauldian approach to power, argues that the dominant conception of empowerment in development theories and practices conceptualises power in simplified and mechanical terms, as if men were holding unilateral power over women.

> [I]nstead of a nuanced, complex and intricate understanding of power, the dominant use of the idea is confined within a binary way of thinking in which men have all the power and women have none. To put it simply, empowerment became the strategy used to reverse that binary logic: empowering women, mainly seen as 'victims' of their lack of power, through development programmes aimed to enhance their agency (Corrêa, 2010:184).

Corrêa argues that this approach obscures the ways in which women exercise their power over other women, as well as the ways in which women exercise their agency in the realm of sexuality.

The second criticism has been centred in the alleged de-politicization and de-radicalization that this framing of women's sexuality brings. Bradshaw (2006) considers that the Rights Based Approach (RBA) may de-politicise the feminist agenda by focussing on the effects and not the causes of sexual and gender inequalities.

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The assumption that claiming rights implies rebalancing power, or that a focus on rights does challenge relations of power, may detract from the important task of challenging unequal power relations, and the discourse of power might be silenced as it is subsumed within the rights discourse (Bradshaw 2006:1337).

Linking her views with Rubin's model of sex hierarchy, questioning the causes of inequality would imply to challenge the conceptions of sexuality that marginalize people, i.e. questioning the divisions between "normal-good" and "deviant-bad" sexual practices and identities.

Cornwall and Anyidoho conduct the same criticism to the developmentalist approach towards women's empowerment. They push their criticism even further, by arguing that this dominant notion of empowerment is "individualistic, instrumental, [and] neo-liberal, [pledging] an image of the 'good woman' as the deserving object of development assistance" (Cornwall and Anyidoho, 2010:145).

This leads to the third criticism, which focuses in the political implications of the alleged universality in which sexuality has been framed in the "empowerment/rights approach", as well as its ontological individualism linked to a liberal bias of the development discourse.

According to Connell (1995), considering the diversity existing in the realm of sexuality, a new conception of radical sexual politics (RSP) is needed, in order to avoid universalistic normative biases. RSP should go beyond the "liberation of sexuality" to a call for more egalitarian relationships independently of the form that those relationships take. In his view, it is not the liberation of sexuality what is important (which would imply an essentialist view of it), "but the democratization of the social relations involved" (Connell, 1995:390). According to him the use of the discourse of individual rights to "sexual expression and pleasure", makes it difficult to seek for more democratic social relations.

> [T]o treat one's body as a private possession (the basis of the discourse of sexual rights within a capitalist society) is to refuse the issue of inequality between owners. The arguments work as if the body were everyone's only possession, so far as sexual practices are concerned. [However] claims of rights are vulnerable to counterclaims of rights based on other people's possession of their bodies (Connell, 1995: 392).

The ontological individualism that underlies the liberal notions of rights, i.e. its over emphasis in sexuality as placed in the individual and not as a relational exercise, fails to address the collective meaning and experience that sexuality has, especially in some contexts.

Returning to Foucault, an individualistic bias towards sexuality tends to see power and pleasure as possessions rather than as exercises which meanings are given in the particular relations with others. In this sense, Connell advocates for framing sexuality in ways that leads to more egalitarian relationships between people, rather than in the achievement of certain specific goals in terms of practices or conducts.

In relation to sexuality and gender, these views help to question the normative way in which women's agency and change in gender relations have been approached in feminist theory. Mahmood criticizes the tendency of feminist scholars to couple women's agency with resistance or subversion, suggesting that "we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001:203). Mahmood goes further in questioning the way in which the liberal individualistic notion of agency as resistance to social norms has been universalized.

> If we accept the notion that all forms of desire are socially constructed (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including those for submission to a variety of goals, and not naturalize those that ensure the emergence of feminist politic (Mahmmod, 2001:208).

The ideas of Mahmood open important and difficult questions. If desires are socially constructed and no form of desire should be considered hierarchically better than others, implies that women's needs and desires should not be assumed homogeneous, neither the ways in which power operates and is resisted. Furthermore, this questions the very notion of resistance, and look at it as a result of certain socially constructed desires, hence not universals, and not inherently better than those of women who choose not to resist.

Considering these views, how could agency be differentiated from oppression? Is it necessary or even desirable, to think in social change? If yes, how do we incorporate difference without generating *epistemic violence*[6]?

Sawicki attempts to partially answer some of these questions with her call for a feminist "politics of difference", in which "theory and moral judgments are geared to specific contexts" (Sawicki 1991:32), which is in line with Vance's ideas regarding sexuality.

> [S]exuality may be thought about, experienced, and acted on differently according to age, class, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation and preference, religion and region. Confrontation with the complex intersection of social identities leads us away from simple dichotomies […] toward recognizing the multiple intersections of categories and the resulting complexity of women's lived experience (Vance, 1984:17).

Contextualizing women's experiences do not entirely solve the puzzle presented by Mahmood, but it is a necessary first step when looking at women's sexuality and power.

2.4 Adjusted lenses

The theoretical discussion above serves as the framework from which this research looks at women's sexuality and power. A socio-constructivist Foucauldian approach is adopted, because it allows identifying the political dimensions of sexuality rather than its merely biological aspects. This is relevant in

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[6] See Santos (2007).

order to be able to unveil the links between women's sexuality and gender inequality as well as other inequalities that the system of SSR as described by Connell, produces.

Adopting a Foucauldian perspective in this research means that in the analysis of young women's sexuality in Nicaragua, the emphasis will be put in the meanings that they assign to their practices and desires, rather than on the practices or desires themselves. These meanings will be understood as socially and discursively[7] constructed, i.e as related to the material and discursive structures in which young women are positioned. Viewing these meanings as flexible and in constant negotiation, the most immediate power relations in which women negotiate these meanings in their daily lives will be analyzed. Power will be understood in a Faucauldian perspective as described above.

A socio-constructivist understanding of how young women give meaning to their sexuality and the processes of negotiation behind these meanings, will allow us to engage critically with the complex set of debates addressed in previous sections. Hopefully, through the analysis of these elements embracing the ideas of "politics of difference" as explained by Sawiki (1990), this investigation will contribute to the complex dilemmas set by Mahmood in relation to women's agency, resistance and change.

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[7] This refers to a Foucauldian perspective of discourse, understood as "the unwritten rules and structures which produce particular utterances and statements" (Mills, 2003:53).

Chapter 3
Dominant and Alternative Discourses about Sexuality in Nicaragua

Previous chapters presented a series of questions and challenges regarding the topic of women's sexuality and its incorporation in the development agenda. Chapters 3 and 4 address the ways in which young women experience their sexuality and give meaning to it in their daily life as well as in their interactions with LC and GV.

The first set of sub-questions is addressed in this chapter. First, it is explained *the context under which these women are positioned,* by the description of some socio-economic and cultural factors of the Nicaraguan society, including dominant norms related to young women's sexuality and gender. Section 3.2 explores *how these young women interact with the organizations.* The work of LC and GV, and the alternative discourses about sexuality that they produce, are briefly explained there.

3.1 Nicaraguan context and dominant discourse about sexuality

Nicaragua is a Central-American country inhabited by 5.66 million people (World Bank, 2010). Approximately 60% of the population are younger than 25 years, half are women, and around 56% live in urban areas (INEC, 2006).

The level of poverty is high and unequally distributed, with 46% of the population living under the poverty line (UNDP, 2010). The level of poverty is higher in rural areas where the majority of indigenous and African-descent people resides. Age, gender, and sexual preference are also variables that determine the greater or lesser access to resources by the population. In 2006 the median income of men was in average 18.5% higher than women's, for example (Agurto et al. 2006).

Although 90% of children in scholar age were inscribed to primary school in 2006, only 43% of young people were inscribed to secondary school in the same year. This shows that many children and youth have no access, or drop out of the education system (Instituto Casa Alianza, 2009). Only 12% of Nicaraguans have more than 10 years of education, which determines the type of employment they can access (INIDE, 2007). As most of the population, 75% of employed young people are part of the informal sector of the economy, without social security coverage and in employments of low qualification (FIDEG, 2003:16).

3.1.1 Sexual and gender norms and practices

According to INIDE (2008) around 25% of adolescent women between 15 and 19 years old in Nicaragua, are pregnant or have children already. The per-

centages are higher in rural areas of the Atlantic zone of the country, and amongst women with less years of education.

Although most women know at least one birth control method, its use among women aged 15 to 29 years varies between 60 and 80%. The most common methods are sterilization and injection (INIDE, 2008), and much less used are condoms, although it is one of the few methods that prevent STIs.

The sexual conducts of young women and some of its effects such as adolescent pregnancies are closely related to the hegemonic system of gender and sexual values in Nicaragua, which according to Montenegro is "procreative, monogamous, heterosexual and phallocentric" (Montenegro, 2000:24).

These norms are used to normalize instances of violence against women by their own partners. According to INIDE, One in two Nicaraguan women between 15 and 49 years old that had been married or in a long term relationship at least once in their lives, reported being victims of either sexual, psychological, or physical violence by their partners or ex-partners. Among the triggers of violence are their husband's jealously, women's complains or disobedience, and women refusal to sex (INIDE, 2008:389).

Montenegro argues that the phenomenon of violence against women is related to the dominant sexual and gender norms that determine the roles of men and women in society. She adds that this dominant model was inherited from the Colonial period, and that it continues influencing important institutions such as the educational system. The female roles that this model reinforces include the following mandates according to Montenegro (2000:40)

- Women should be subordinated to men.
- The purpose of sex is for reproduction. Women cannot decide how many children they want to have, since this is God's will.
- Women's fate is being a wife and taking care of the family and the house. The violation of this rule is a threat to the family.

In concordance with this model, abortion, homosexuality and masturbation are seen as sins or sicknesses and couple relationships are seen as immovable joints (Montenegro, 2000:72). The combination of the abovementioned ideas with the lack of a more accurate sexual education for youth, have an impact on the way young women experience their sexuality. For example, in a study conducted by Lynch et al. about Nicaraguan youth, it is revealed that in the current system of sexual and gender norms "women continue to be judged for having multiple sexual partners, carrying condoms, or being victims of sexual abuse" (Lynch et al. 2008:19). It is common that women that propose to use condoms are seen as "easy women" or less virtuous than those who do not. Hence, the scope for girls to negotiate the use of condoms or other ways of safe sexual interactions, are determined by the dominant social norms regarding gender and sexuality.

Dominant sexual and gender norms however, are not fixed but are negotiated and subjected to change. For example, in a recent study of young people's sexuality in Nicaragua, Blandón and Jiménez (2009) argue that some youth have advanced in the internalization of the "decency of pleasure", which changes the ways in which they give meaning and practice their sexuality. This idea of the possibility of change is what drives the work of organizations like

LC and GV, which challenge the dominant discourses of sexuality and gender in Nicaragua. Next section discusses their work.

3.2 Exploring the work of La Corriente and Grupo Venancia

This section presents the alternative discourses about gender and sexuality that LC and GV discuss in their interactions with young women. GV and LC are feminist organizations founded in the late 80s and early 90s respectively. Some of their projects are funded with development aid. However, they do not define themselves as development organizations but as feminist organizations with their independent political agenda. Therefore LC and GV cannot be seen as representatives of the development discourse, but as feminist organizations whose agendas intersect with the agenda of development agencies in some aspects and differ in others.

The profile of the organizations, their goals and views on how to achieve those goals, as well as the ways in which the organizations adopt and adapt the "empowerment/rights approach" in their interactions with young women, will be described and analysed in this section. This analysis is based on the interviews with leaders of the organizations, their campaigns and web pages, as well as my direct participation in some of their activities.

3.2.1 The organization's aims

La Corriente

LC is a Central American feminist organization founded in 1994. In Nicaragua the organization is based in Managua, and works in the promotion of spaces of dialogue for the defence of women's human and civil rights. They do this through the organization of trainings, workshops, campaigns and research through which they open spaces for critical reflection about these topics (Movimiento Feminista de Nicaragua, 2009).

According to María Teresa Blandón, coordinator of LC, their agenda has changed with the pass of the years. Currently LC engages with debates about citizenship and the role that sexuality plays in women's well-being.

> *In LC we are strongly questioning the patriarchal power through the inclusion of these issues of the body, pleasure and sexual freedom. [...] We began to notice that despite all the programs of sexual and reproductive health, the problems presented by young women remain largely unchanged [...] This led us to begin addressing issues of sexuality differently. We cannot be feminists who claim legal, labour, economic, and political rights, forgetting that first of all we are a body endowed with desires, needs and aspirations that cannot be out of the debate about citizenship* (Blandón, 2010).

In their work with young women LC organizes educational programs in which topics such as pleasure, sexual diversity, motherhood, love, femininity and masculinity, and violence are discussed. Their goal is to critically assess the dominant sexual culture in Nicaragua, generating reflections that women can link with their own experiences and incorporate to their personal life. According to Blandón (2010), when organising these groups LC always tries to assure

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representativeness. Therefore they invite women from urban and rural areas, African descendants, indigenous, heterosexuals, lesbians and transgender.

Grupo Venancia

GV is an organization of feminist popular education and communication based in the north-central region of Nicaragua (Matagalpa), since 1989. They work on the construction of an autonomous women's movement, with urban and rural, young and adult women, through the strengthening of their autonomy (Grupo Venancia, n.d). Among other programs they offer spaces of reflection and training for young women that work as community promoters on issues of SRR and violence. The goal of GV is to offer analytical and informative tools that these women can incorporate in their own work with other women in their communities, but also to their personal life as Geni Gómez, one of the members of GV, explains.

> *We want young women to have the opportunity of questioning the messages and the mandates they receive from all sides, so they have a chance to grow personally, to seek for their independence, and to feel motivated to excel. [...]On the other hand we want these young women to be organized, to connect with the spaces of the women's movement to fight for our rights together. We want them to promote activities and open spaces in their neighbourhoods and communities* (Gómez, 2010).

These organizations emphasize the importance of promoting a horizontal environment of reflection. Instead of organising top-down academic sessions in which "experts" teach young women about a topic, LC and GV create spaces where women share their experiences, reflect and learn from each other. At the same time, the organizations attempt to generate a pleasurable environment for these reflections, which will be elaborated in next section.

3.2.2 Learning from experience while working with pleasure

The dynamics that LC and GV use in their work are relevant to understand the experiences of young women with these organizations. Two elements must be highlighted: the ways in which the organizations combine theoretical with experiential analysis, and their use of playful dynamics that incorporate the body in the exercises of reflection. Although both organizations prepare materials to lead the discussions and determine facilitators for each activity (which is a more traditional and vertical approach), they start their activities by posing questions through which young women reflect on their experiences and share them, finding coincidences and differences with other women.

The organizations combine theoretical reflections with games, readings, films, colouring, music, and other activities. Antonia, a member of GV explains this point. *"One learns by playing here. We do not stand in front of the women as teachers when we talk about sexuality, but we address the issues with different dynamics"* (Antonia, 2010).

The methodology that GV used to produce a booklet about sexuality illustrates this approach (see figure 3.2.1). This methodology consisted in asking women to write their questions about sex, anonymously. The questions were distributed in smaller groups and they were asked to answer the questions as if

they were radio presenters. Afterwards GV collected the answers, comple-
mented them, and produced the booklet.

Figure 3.2.1
Booklet about Sexuality GV
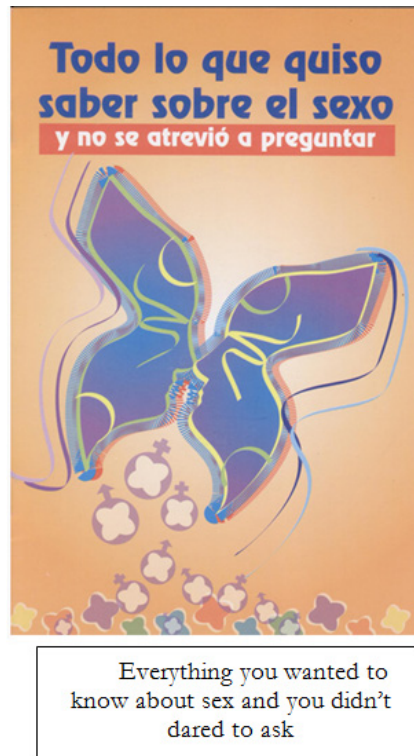
Source: Fieldwork 2010

The horizontal way in which different topics are addressed also allows the
organization to define their agenda based in the needs of young women.
"Working with this approach helps us to have a more accurate view of reality" (Blandón
2010). Through these discussions the organizations have identified gaps in pre-
vious approaches towards gender and sexuality, which has allowed them to re-
think their strategies. For example, both organizations have included the topic
of *relationships with the mother* in their agenda, after observing that this was a re-
current worry in young women. GV also offers psychological therapy to girls
that have experienced sexual and other types of violence, which was a necessity
the group identified along the way.

Another relevant element of this approach is that by designing dynamics
that are pleasurable and fun rather than boring or exploitative, the organiza-
tions are offering young women a space to experience and to reflect about the
importance of pleasure in their life.

This links to the next section, which addresses the topics that these or-
ganizations work with young women, as well as the ways in which they view
the role of the "empowerment/rights approach" in their work.

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3.2.3 Empowering women with the RBA

In their work with young women LC and GV use the Empowerment and Rights discourse. They advocate for young women's rights to make decisions about their bodies, especially in relation to their reproductive capacity; to experience a pleasurable and healthy sexual life; to live free of violence; to access economic resources; and to be respected in cultural and ethnic terms.

Both organizations consider women's rights as interrelated and indivisible. Although their emphasis is on SSR, they attempt to articulate sexual rights with economic, political and cultural rights, as it is shown in the most recent campaign of LC in figure 3.3.1.

Figure 3.3.1
Campaign "All the Rights for All Women" LC

Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBBQDNcNCdU

This campaign advocates for the rights of women that are afro-descendent, indigenous, lesbians, transgender, and women who live with disabilities. They include rights such as be educated in their own language, transit without architectonic barriers (in the case of women with disabilities), be legally recognised as a lesbian partner, be recognised and respected as indigenous or afro-descendent, and be recognised as a woman (for trans-genders).

The organizations focus in two elements of the RBA: first, the recognition of women's rights by the state, and the creation of the necessary legal frameworks to ensure the implementation of these rights; and second, the structural constraints that women face which limit them from exercising their rights. These constraints have to do with unequal power relations and the existence of dominant social norms that prevent them from doing so.

We work with a broader notion of citizenship and rights, which have a point of intersection with the state public policy, but that does not end there. The recognition of the rights has to do with profound changes in beliefs and social norms (Blandón, 2010).

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Accordingly, both organizations question dominant norms related to sexuality that sustain different types of social inequalities. For example, in their view of sexual diversity the organizations challenge not only the discrimination towards "sexual minorities" but also the alleged normalcy and naturalness of the dominant model of heterosexuality, what Rubin (1984) coined as the sexual/gender system or sex hierarchy. As Ruth Matamoros, one member of GV explains:

When we talk about sexual diversity we work on the recognition that there is a dominant model of sexuality that view heterosexual relationships as the only valid model, motherhood as mandatory, and monogamy as an obligation for women but not for men. This model view women's sexuality only in function of reproduction and nothing of pleasure (Matamoros 2010).

The way in which some topics are addressed in the booklet about sexuality produced by GV mentioned before, better illustrates their views about sexuality. To a question about a married woman who felt attracted for another woman, the booklet answered:

Sexuality is dynamic, and exist more than one sexual preference. Maybe in the past we have experienced this curiosity but we have not let it out, because it was not allowed that we even think about it. [...] Experimenting does not have to define a tendency forever (Grupo Venancia, 2007:17).

GV also incorporates pleasure in its work on violence, in order to reverse the experiences of pain and fear with which many women start their sexual lives. According to Matamoros, many young women who were abused develop a negative view about their bodies. Through psychological services GV tries to reverse these negative feelings that women experience in relation to their bodies, partly by including the topic of pleasure in the therapies.

We work the topic of pleasure also to regain the love for the body. Sometimes the body is perceived as the element that caused sexual abuse. The sensation remains that if it was not for having a female body the abuse would not have happened (Matamoros, 2010).

In terms of the topic of motherhood, both organizations challenge its alleged inevitability, including voluntary and safe maternity as well as the right to abortion in their agendas. These topics are not seen only as health issues but as political issues as well.

We have come to realize that sexual and reproductive health is only one component of sexual rights, very important if we are talking about poor women, African descendants, or lesbians, because they are doubly or triply discriminated groups by gender, races, sexual choices and preferences. We have come to realize that it is much more than sexual and reproductive health, even being so important, because these services do not ensure the effective exercise of rights (Blandón, 2010).

In the previous examples it is shown that the organizations include topics that have been incorporated in the development agenda, as violence and sexual and reproductive health. However, both organizations also incorporate a political conception of sexuality and gender in their interactions with women, for example by working the topics of pleasure, abortion and sexual diversity. Their work is radical, considering that they are not only challenging dominant discourses about sexuality in Nicaragua, but also the tendency of development

agencies and feminist organizations of framing sexuality only as an issue of health, violence and unwanted pregnancies (see Antillón, 2009).

3.2.4 Qualifying change

Feminist organizations have been criticized when adopting the "empowerment/rights approach" and working with development funds. Part of the criticism is that the feminist agenda is coopted by a "developmentalist" view of processes of change, in which complex realities are de-politicized and simplified in order to fit the requirements of donors. Therefore social change is converted into projects with measurable results in a stipulated time. GV and LC, as most feminist organizations in Nicaragua, have taken part of a general process of *NGOization* of feminist organizations that is the focus of the mentioned criticism (see Alvarez, 2009).

This section responds to this criticism by looking at how LC and GV negotiate the donor agenda, which is more project-oriented, with a process-oriented agenda that acknowledges the complexities of social change. More specifically this section explores how these organizations understand the "outcomes" of their work with women.

According to Blandón the most important outcome of the educational programs of LC, is to provide the spaces for reflection that expands young women's life options and strengthen their sense of responsibility. There are not specific changes in terms of conducts that are suggested, but changes in the way these conducts are decided.

> *It can only choose who has several options. [...] Everybody has to assume the responsibility of one's actions, but the freer the election the better, because then one can deal better with the consequences of one's actions* (Blandón, 2010).

GV challenges the idea of empowerment from a project-oriented perspective that looks at specific outcomes in terms of conducts. The leaders of the organization have realised that changes are not linear neither homogeneous and that the process of empowerment, which they link with women being able to challenge dominant norms and making their own decisions, is different in each women. According to Matamoros, the changes that women experience are also related to different reinforcements that are outside the reach of GV hence change cannot be measured in a simple way as is often required from development donors.

> *Every little change in every woman means a revolution for her and for the others. Each woman lives her own process, and this process has to do with her relationships. This* [the interaction with the organization] *is only a small stimulus among many others that women receive in their daily life* (Matamoros, 2010).

3.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter has shown some characteristics of the context in which young Nicaraguan women are situated. It has also reviewed dominant and alternative

discourses about sexuality to which young women organised in GV and LC are exposed.

When looking at the organization's work it was identified that both organizations explore the sexuality realm restoring its political dimensions. They also go beyond the traditional approach to sexuality as a cause of gender oppression, and include in their work other axes of power such as gender identity, sexual preference, ethnic origin and geographical location.

Additionally, both organizations recognise *diversity* as an important factor of sexuality, especially through their work on sexual diversity, and the inclusion of diverse women in their activities. However, they work with the RBA, which has been criticised for its universalistic and individualistic biases. The questions that emerge are, to what extent these organizations in their use of the RBA assume certain homogeneity among the women they work with, and therefore establish a limited definition of oppression and resistance? Are not the specific contexts in which these women form and experience their sexuality, as well as the different power dynamics that they face related to their structural positions, also influencing the ways in which they live different types of oppressions and decide to resist?

Chapter 4 explores possible answers to these questions, drawing on young women's experiences and the ways in which they negotiate and give meaning to their sexuality in their contexts. This analysis allows recognising the complex ways in which power is exercised in the construction of young women's sexuality, as well as the ways in which young women have resisted, and have given meaning and dignity to their bodies.

Chapter 4
Zooming in Women's Experiences

Chapter 3 explored socio-economic and cultural factors of the context in which young women are positioned in Nicaraguan, as well as the dominant and alternative discourses to which they are exposed. This chapter answers the second specific question of this investigation, *how these young women experience and gives meaning to their sexuality in their daily lives?*

First, it addresses their experiences regarding sexuality that have shaped the way in which they give meaning to their bodies and sexuality. Next, it explores how these young women have re-signified their experiences and views about sexuality through their interaction with LC and GV. Then, it continues with the analysis of the power relations that shape the way in which young women negotiate these meanings. And finally it reflects on the challenges that the processes of life of these young women pose to the project-oriented views about change that are dominant in development projects regarding gender and sexuality.

4.1   Young women's experiences of pains and pleasures

When the interviewed looked back at their life stories and reflect about their bodies and sexuality, two narratives emerge. One is about pain, fear, guilt, ignorance; and the other is about discovering, amazement, self-fulfillment and pleasure. These two narratives have been intertwined along their lives, as shown below.

4.1.1 The unknown body

As it is the case of most women in Nicaragua, the interviewed also started to experience their sexuality with little information, feeling that their bodies were dirty and that touching them and feeling pleasure was sinful. For some, everything related to sex was a no-go area. Despite the doubts and curiosity in relation to their sexuality, most of them felt it was a topic that they should not talk with other people.

> *I used to be afraid to ask, even here in (GV). I preferred to keep the doubts. I thought that other people were going to think I was stupid, or that I was a woman that asks too much. I had many doubts that I wanted to clarify* (Martina).

They had their first sexual encounters knowing little about their bodies, which made difficult for some to be able to differentiate between pleasure and pain, or between what they wanted and what they did not want. These dynamics resulted in most of the cases in poor sexual experiences in terms of pleasure.

> *One is always available when the other wants. One only thinks in the other person's pleasure and don't think in one's pleasure. One doesn't enjoy. One doesn't feel anything* (Lucia).

The little access to information about the body is also associated with the risks of unwanted pregnancies, abortion and STDs.

It makes me sad to think in the ways in which I exposed myself to dangerous situations many times, because I didn't have the information and because I was doing what my partner wanted instead of thinking in myself first (Alicia).

Rural promoters of SRR include these topics in their work with other women in their communities, because they have identified that this information is necessary in order to avoid the risks that sexual encounters with little information bring to young women.

We give them information about contraceptives. We talk about motherhood and about their bodies because not all of them know their bodies. Nobody know how it is inside [the body]*, or the name of its parts. So when they have a boyfriend and have sex, they immediately get pregnant* (Lucia).

4.1.2 The painful body

For some women their sexuality has been related with traumatic experiences that still impact their life. Amanda for example, was raped by her stepfather when she was seven years old. She decided to keep the secret for a long time, and she is still not able to tell her story to her family. Amanda went through long episodes of depression due to this experience, developing a violent temper which she associates with fear.

That experience traumatized me. I used to feel depressed all the time. I felt alone, and I used to think in horrible things. [...] I became a very violent person. I used to beat everyone who was staring at me. I do not know what was happening with me, I think it was fear (Amanda).

Two interviewees, a lesbian and a transgender woman, faced discrimination for their sexual preferences and identity. For them, the more painful source of discrimination came from their families.

My mom realized my sexual preference when I was 17. Since then everything was discrimination, discrimination, discrimination. She used to tell me, 'why you are not like your sisters who are normal, not damaged like you?' (Ana).

The body as a source of discrimination is also perceived in the work environment. Flor, a transgender woman was fired twice because of her gender identity. She was able to keep her job when she was identified as a gay man, but as soon as she started changing her image to a more "feminine" one, she got fired. She started engaged in sex work which was a source of risk and violence.

I saw that the world that some friends described about that life [sex work] *was not as they described. 'You will make money and there are parties all the time'. It is true, there are parties all the time, but there are also risks, violence and an income that is not stable. I told myself, 'why am I here if I have a career[8]?'* (Flor).

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[8] She is an accountant.

Violence is also experienced by heterosexual women in their homes. The phenomenon of domestic violence was more often expressed by rural women.

> *I suffered violence from him* [her husband]. *I suffered violence when I was pregnant and when I was not. I was a teenager, I was fifteen or sixteen"* (Clara).

Urban women referred more often to other expressions of violence such as misogynistic comments, degrading images of women in the media, and discrimination based on their gender and age in their work environments. Monica, a professional in communications, received inappropriate comments about her performance as a consultant in an NGO. The feedback was centred in the way Monica was sitting instead of focussing in the quality of her work.

> *I think it was incredibly disrespectful. If I were a man or an older woman they would not have told me that. But since I am a young woman they tell me whatever they want.*

4.1.3 Individual and relational pleasures

Hand in hand with the narrative of pain is the narrative of pleasure. They discovered that the body is not only a source of oppression and suffering, but a source of power and liberation. Through interactions with other women and their own process of reflection, these young women started processes of transformation of fears and pain to courage, curiosity and pleasure. However, not all women experience and understand pleasure in the same way.

For some, pleasure is about knowing their bodies and accepting them. It is also important to feel the confidence of experimenting with their bodies, touching them and identifying what they like. They also value to be able to live and enjoy their sexuality individually. Accordingly, for most of them masturbation was one of the most exciting "discoveries". Not needing a partner in order to be able to enjoy their bodies makes them feel powerful and independent.

> *It is especially important that we don't have to be with someone to feel pleasure* (Maria).

> *I am happy with my body with someone else or alone. That gives me a freedom, a sense of individuality rather rich* (Alicia).

Masturbation is only one among other important ways in which they enjoy their sexuality, recognizing the interaction with their partners as a source of pleasure. They find out that being able to explore their own bodies also helps them to interact with their partners in a more egalitarian base, and to experience pleasure with them.

> *You have to discover your own pleasure in order to ask for it to your partner* (Celeste).

4.1.4 Questioning sex hierarchies and norms

In relation to sexual diversity women have different views. Some look at sexual diversity as related only to sexual minorities. Their view is that sexual minorities have to be respected and should enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals. For others, sexual diversity is not about sexual minorities in relation to heterosexuals, but is about heterosexuals as well. In the case of this last group it is not

only about questioning homo, lesbo and trans-phobia, but also the alleged "normalcy" and "naturalness" of dominant models of heterosexuality. In this sense, part of what they find pleasurable is to live their sexuality in a more fluid way. This includes having sex with men and/or women, having multiple partners (questioning monogamy), exploring different sexual positions, having casual sex, for example.

> *Recognizing that there were other ways of being, of loving, of desiring in the world was crucial for me. This has changed the way I relate to people. I learned to respect, and I have learned to un-label myself, and to stop identifying myself as a heterosexual woman. [...] What we should do is dancing and moving between these different desires we have, which do not have to be tight to a single body* (Alicia).

While women such as Alicia deeply question fixed identities and preferences and advocate for more fluidity in the experience of the body, other women's pleasure lies precisely in their identification with a gender or sexual identity. In the following quotations of two transgender women who participated in the educational programs of LC, it can be seen that pleasure resides in choosing their gender identity and being recognised as women.

> *I want people to call me woman, not transgender, not homosexual, only woman* (La Corriente, 2010a).

> *I am 30 years old and I think that I have given away 28 years of my life, because I assumed my identity as a woman only two years ago. At this point in my life I live my identity very happy, discovering a lot of pleasure* (La Corriente, 2010a).

Some interviewees expressed views about women's pleasure that are closer to dominant norms about women's sexuality in Nicaragua. Although they defend women's right to pleasure, when asked about specific examples their reactions were ambiguous. Clara's view illustrates this point.

> *That a girl wants to walk with a short skirt does not mean that she has sexual desires. The problem is that men always have a negative perception towards women. Men think that women dress to provoke them, and thus they* [men] *cannot handle their sexual desire.*

Clara is questioning the alleged irrepressible sexual desire of men, as well as the idea that women dress sexy to get men's attention only. But she is also implying that dressing sexy to actually tempt men (behaving like Eve) is negative. She reinforces this idea with her opinion about women who desire and has sex with multiple partners.

> *I think they* [women who have multiple partners] *have problems. There are psychological, emotional, and economic problems. All those factors have to do* [with their behaviour] (Clara).

4.1.5 Becoming Lilith? Orgasm's stress

The process of identifying their desires and source of pleasure is not easy. The internalized ideas that they do not know about their bodies are so strong that they require time and experimentation to be able to relax and feel pleasure. The stress they face is not only related to the remaining feelings of guilt or lack of

knowledge, but to the idea that there is *one* way of doing and feeling when it comes to sexual activities.

> *It was hard for me when I began to touch myself and experiment more with my body. I even felt that I was doing it wrongly. I was always thinking in the other person, not in myself. What pleasure could I have feel by doing that?* (Emilia).

Their feelings of insecurity show the dangerous effects of some normative discourses about pleasure that couple it with sex and more specifically with orgasms. Feminist women are often exposed to the ideas that their sexuality has been oppressed and that a way to challenge power relations is by experimenting sexual pleasure. The model of the "liberated woman" resembles Lilith[9]: a woman who knows how to obtain pleasure and is active on seeking for it. In the model of the Western "liberated" woman there is not much room for women like Eve, and much less for women like Maria. This creates a sense of inability and insecurity in women that do not experience the dominant descriptions of what an orgasm is and how to experience it. It also fails to acknowledge the diversity of ways in which woman may enjoy their bodies.

Women worry about a variety of issues, such as not being bold enough, not having multiple orgasms, not being able to apply the acquired knowledge, and not being able to be a liberated woman. Some even worry about their own fears and doubts[10] (La Corriente, 2010b).

This is extremely relevant because it means that a work that is supposed to liberate women of certain oppressions can be creating anxiety and stress. These findings show the importance of a feminist project that liberates sexuality from pleasure-normative tendencies, and start recognizing diversity not only in terms of color of skin, sexual preferences or gender identities, but also in terms of desires and pleasures. Drawing on the ideas of Connell (1995), the acknowledgement of diversity would include recognizing traditional desires and pleasures as valid as those that transgress, and shift the attention from sexual practices to the meanings that those practices have for women. Some of these meanings are visited in next section.

4.2 Re-visiting the "serving body"

Chapters 1 and 2 showed how feminists have linked women's sexuality with power. According to Lagarde (1990) women's bodies are constructed as bodies in service of others, which is basic for sustaining a patriarchal order. This section shows how these women give meaning to these political ideas.

4.2.1 Motherhood

Motherhood was undoubtedly the topic that young women mentioned more recurrently as a result of their processes of reflections with the organizations. Questioning whether to have children or not as well as models of motherhood,

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[9] These biblical characters can be seen as ideal types of femininity.
[10] These are testimonies of young women participants of the educational programs of LC.

were considered by them exercises of independence and self-determination. They value to feel comfortable when questioning motherhood independently of the answer. For example, a lesbian girl after reflecting on this issue decided that she does want to have children, while a married heterosexual woman decided not to have children despite being expected to do so. For most, the exercise of considering their own desires in relation to this topic was what mattered. *"I never asked myself if I wanted or not to be a mother, because for me that was a fact"* (Alicia).

Motherhood is relevant for some, because they view it as a source of gender inequality. They relate motherhood with sacrifice and being in function of others, as Emilia illustrates.

> *Many of the decisions I've made are based on what I've been taught, on taking care of others, on being a mother. I often assume a protective role with other people. [...] Sometimes I don't express my discomfort in order not to affect my relationships. These decisions are based on what we are taught, on assisting others, on being the mother.*

In some cases they see unwanted pregnancies as something that impedes a pleasurable sexual life, depicting women's sexuality as either erotic or for procreation, as described by Lagarde (1990). Viewing motherhood as the opposite of pleasure may reinforce a binary conception of women's bodies that is not able to recognize that the same body can be a source of pleasure as well as a source of care: a nurturer body.

However, as next section shows, even when understanding its political meaning, some women also enjoy working for others.

4.2.2 Pleasure beyond sex

For most women, sexuality and pleasure goes beyond physical sensations situated in the body. They identify the importance of pleasure in other aspects of life, as Clara states, *"sexuality is not only sex. It has to do also with how one feels"*.

For most of them sexual pleasure is as important as experiencing pleasure in working in the topics they like, and engaging in leisure activities. It is noteworthy additionally that a major source of pleasure for many, lies in helping other women. *"My work helping other women makes me feel very satisfied. My challenge is to enjoy everything I do without feeling guilty at the end"* (Maria).

Alicia also expresses the same feelings in relation to her activism as a young feminist. *"We have to bet for a feminism that is not a horrible burden. We want to practice a feminism with good mood"*.

What can be concluded from this analysis is that despite motherhood and working for other people are topics that have been linked with women's oppression, some interviewees find an enormous source of pleasure in helping other women. At the same time, they show that rather than looking at how much they work for others or if they decide to have children or not, what has to be analyzed are the processes that take place behind their decisions. In these processes different actors intervene, with whom women have to interact. Some of them are presented in the next section.

4.3 Unveiling power relations

The way in which young women give meaning to their sexuality is not fixed. They are in constant negotiations of those meanings rather than only accepting what is considered "normal". Several actors take part in these processes of negotiation, such as the state, churches, and their communities in general. However, this section will focus in the more immediate actors with whom these young women interact: their families and partners.

4.3.1 The family: patronizing or empowering?

Looking at patriarchy from a juridico-discursive model of power as described by Foucault (Mills, 2003), means to portray men are oppressors and women as victims. This view of patriarchy was dominant in the earlier stages of the feminist movement, and despite this view is still dominant, it has been challenged for its emphasis in the category of gender, over other axis of power that influence women's experiences of oppression.

When speaking with young women about their sexuality it becomes clear that while they recognize men as relevant actors with whom they interact, it is at the level of their nuclear family where the most important power relations are exercised. Families, and specially mothers, are identified as key actors in the construction and re-construction of these women's sexuality[11].

Celeste explains how her mother had prevented her to have boyfriends, determining who is adequate for her, even though Celeste is 27 years old.

> *It is difficult for me to tell her* [her mother] *that I met a boy and that I want to have something with him. It is difficult that she accepts. I broke up with my boyfriend recently because of this. My boyfriend and I were going out, so I told my mother that he was coming to the house to meet her. She frowned at him, so he waited for me outside. Then my sister told me, 'go and tell him you are not going out'.*

The experience of Martina is similar. Her mother taught her to be afraid of men, which according to Martina has limited her experiences with men.

> *My fear was dating a man. My mom instilled those fears in me. She used to tell me 'if you go out with a man the man is going to tell you things. Men are like that'. She has always been very careful with those things. But I used to think 'I have to break the fear. I have to practice. I have to see what happens'.*

For many young women, their mother's life experience serves as a positive or negative model. In many cases their mothers experienced violence and were too dependent on their partners, which is something these young women want to avoid.

> *My mother is this kind of woman who says that women have to serve men, even if the man beats the woman. She taught me that I have to obey. I tell her that I do not like masochism. I tell her that if a man beats me I beat him back* (Nubia).

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[11] It is important to clarify that most of the interviewees were raised by their mothers only, which partially explains why they refer more to their mothers.

When these young women engage with the organizations, are exposed to a series of alternative discourses about gender and sexuality. They obtain elements to question certain norms also inside their houses, including dominant models of femininity (to which sometimes their mothers are closed). This triggers family reactions that are extremely important for young women. Most start experiencing more conflicts which is painful for them.

> *Obviously this changed my family dynamics* [to be more active in LC]. *I used to be a loving, peaceful and passive young woman, and became conflictive with what before had seemed normal to me. [...] I felt very guilty for acknowledging my liberties at the expense of not finding my family recognition* (Alicia).

For Emilia, living this process of feminist reflections has pushed her to seek for more autonomy. She decided to leave her house and now shares an apartment with a friend. The most difficult part of this process has been the emotional cost it has had in the relationship with her mother. She remembers an episode in which her mother asked her to come back to the house. *"Remembering her face was really hard for me. I've never seen her like that. I was going to work and my tears were coming out. For a moment I thought on going back"* (Emilia).

As it was seen the relationship between young women and their mothers is relevant in multiple ways. In many cases mothers serve as guardians of their daughters' sexual moral, exercising different mechanisms of control to influence the way in which daughters develop their sexuality.

This power relation shows many important elements of how power is exercised in the realm of sexuality. It shows that dominant norms regarding sexuality are not imposed over but are *exercised* by women. In some cases the mechanisms of control are attempts to protect their daughters from the risks that non-compliance with certain norms may bring to them. In this exercise mothers taught their daughters how to behave in a way that is "normal" for women, which was illustrated in the examples of Martina and Celeste.

The examples also show how power is *productive*, in the sense that non-compliance brings many emotional (among other) costs for young women, as it was illustrated in the cases of Alicia and Emilia.

The abovementioned examples illustrate the complex ways in which power relations operate and the role of women in the reproducing of dominant structures of power. At the same time, it shows the intersection between axes of power in the reproduction of these structures, for example age in these cases.

What is relevant to observe in the examples is that power is not centralized in the subject (in this case the mothers), but exercised relationally, which makes its resistance more complex.

4.3.2 The partnership

The way in which relationships with partners change when young women engage with the organizations and challenge dominant norms is diverse.[12] How-

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[12] I only consider heterosexual women in this section. Unfortunately I do not have data of this type about non-heterosexual women.

ever, in general terms all informants that are accompanied consider their current relationships as more egalitarian than before. What is clear is that this their interaction with their partners involves process of continuous negotiation.

This can be illustrated with the case of Emilia. She enjoys stimulation through masturbation during sexual intercourses with her partner. But her partner does not like it, which has been a source of conflict. Emilia has been emphatic in expressing her desires in this respect. However, in relation to other issues she has been more flexible, for example regarding monogamy. Emilia used to enjoy having an open relationship with her partner, but when he proposed to have a monogamous relationship, she accepted to stop seeing other people. Emilia's decision can be interpreted as an act of submission. However, if considering the decision in a broader context, an alternative interpretation emerges, that took place between them is a process of negotiation. It is this process of negotiation and not its outcomes what is relevant to understand when exploring women's lives.

The case of Clara is also illustrative. Her husband used to be violent with her. He did not allow her to go out of the house, not even to study or visit friends. When she started to be more independent and to question his authority, the husband abandoned her and their children. From this difficult situation she obtained the courage to do things she had not dared before. *"I'm building my house. I have my small terrain. I bought it with my own efforts, with no help from anyone"* (Clara).

After some time Clara and her husband decided to be together again. According to her, she has set different rules for the relationship now. By the time of this interview Clara was not entirely satisfied with the relationship, and she was not sure if the relationship was going to work. However, what is relevant to point out is that she felt secure about what she wants and her capacity for making decisions.

> *Now I go out at any time, wherever I want, and I do not ask for permission. [...] I tell him, 'if you feel bad we leave each other and that is all, because I am not going to accept any abuse'* (Clara).

This is a substantial difference in comparison with her situation the first time, illustrating that what is relevant to observe in women's lives are the processes of negotiation that take place in their interactions with other people, and not only the specific outcome that are visible.

4.3.3 An individual and collective experience

Feminist organizations such as LC and GV emphasise women's individual rights to live free of violence, make decisions over their bodies and experience pleasure. While individual rights are relevant for most of these women, the previous section has shown that the experience of those rights is relational. There are processes of negotiation that shape the way in which rights are exercised, experienced and assigned different meanings.

Another key element of these women's processes is the collective experience they have in these organizations, as Ana relates. *"Coming to these activities helped me a lot to end with my tendency of being isolated"* (Ana). Recognizing them-

selves in other women's experiences and ideas, listening to others, sharing their experiences, and identifying similarities with other women help them to feel reassured in relation to their own decisions, as is the case of Maria.

> *When we spoke of motherhood I shared my experience for the first time, and I cried, I cried and cried. I do not want to be a mother, and in the workshop I found that motherhood is not something that should be imposed. I reaffirmed my position in front of my family, who criticizes me for the wanting to be a mother.*

These feelings of not being alone but sharing perspectives and experiences with other women that are living similar processes are especially important when the family, the partner, and the society in general exclude them.

But in these spaces they also find differences among women. This makes them realize how each story is unique, and how their social positions are different and influence the way they live their individual processes. Therefore, they also find their individuality inside the collective, as Alicia reflected. *"We should not even be talking about feminism but we should speak in plural. There are many ways to be a feminist and there are many bodies to be feminists".*

4.4   A life-long journey

As shown in previous sections, young women experience and give meaning to their sexuality in a constant process of negotiation with multiple actors. Through the analysis of their narrative of pains and pleasures, it can be seen how pain and pleasure have different meanings for them, and are experienced in different ways, which makes impossible to talk about *one* refrained and oppressed women's sexuality. In their identification of pleasures the individual experience of the body plays an important role, as well as the sexual experiences with their partners in more creative and equalitarian ways.

In relation to sexual diversity some women question all kind of normative approaches towards sexuality, including the fixation of identities and sexual preferences, while others look at sexual diversity as related only with "sexual minorities". Working on the acceptance of "sexual minorities" is an important task. However, the risk of not questioning heterosexuality in a more straight-forward way is that it tends to normalize it. This means that dominant heterosexuality remains the standard against which other practices, identities and preferences are measured. This reinforces inequalities based on sex hierarchies (Rubin (1984) as described in chapter 2).

All these complexities show that the ways in which young women experience and give meaning to their sexuality are not homogenous, and that their processes of change are not linear. It is also shown that the specific outcomes of these processes are not as important as the processes of negotiation themselves. Contrary to more project-oriented notions of change, these processes are not finite. This means that even if these processes produce certain outcomes along the way, they do not have a clear end.

In this sense, there are not ultimate truths in relation to these topics, but daily life reflections and experiences that change the way in which each of these women look at themselves, their context and their futures.

This road is not easy. Changing is painful, especially when these changes involve reshaping their relationships with their families, partners, colleagues, and society in general. Young women also face internal constraints related to the confusions and doubts the process generates.

Getting rid of the dominant paradigms, social norms and codes of conduct that family and society provide, involves navigating through life without certainty for some time. This uncertainty and the sensation of not having a safe harbour, added to the changes in their relationships, generate mixed feelings. However, despite the complexities none of the interviewees regretted to be living these processes. On the contrary, they find a lot of value in having these spaces of reflection and questioning of dominant norms, because they learn things that are going to be useful during their lives, as Emilia expresses.

When I can identify something new, like talking with you today, I think in a lot of things that I had not thought before. This experience fills me despite all the rocks and the falls, because I'm growing.

Chapter 5
Conclusions: Re-visiting the "Empowerment/ Rights Approach" from Women's Experiences

The previous two chapters engaged with the main empirical findings of this research: the ways in which young Nicaraguan women experience and give meaning to their sexuality in their daily lives, and in their interactions with feminist organizations LC and GV. This concluding chapter aims to use the analysed case to reflect on its implications for the theoretical reflections and dilemmas addressed in chapters 1 and 2 regarding the "empowerment/rights approach". In order to review these implications, I will elaborate on the criticism of the abovementioned approach in what follows.

5.1   From power as a possession to power as an exercise

The way in which power has been conceptualized in the "empowerment/rights approach" suggests that the state to some extent, and men in general, possess power and that this power is imposed over women's sexuality, restricting them from enjoying it and reinforcing gender inequalities. The assumption behind this thinking is that women's desires are homogeneous, and that gender equity and sexual freedom are constitutive of each other. This also assumes that once the oppressive power is removed, for example through greater access to information, resources or laws, women's sexuality should be "liberated" and they should begin to enjoy more, and to relate to men with more equity.

The case challenges these assumptions showing for example that one of the most important power relations that young women face is with other women (their mothers) and not only with men. While young women feel "empowered" to challenge their male partners and even to end relationships when they do not feel satisfied and respected, it is more difficult for them to challenge their mother's authority.

To conform to certain norms is not only a result of *oppressive* power but it is also *productive*. To be a "good" woman by conforming to norms means to be accepted by their families, partners, and society in general. It also means to have more access to certain resources. For example, as the case showed, a transgender woman is more vulnerable to be fired than a heterosexual woman. Additionally, when young women engage with feminist reflections and start questioning norms, the emotional burden of not being accepted by their beloved is very high.

The case also shows that one of the most difficult obstacles that these women face is not in their interactions with others only, but in their own fears of transgressing what is familiar to them. The political engagement that they have with some ideas is not automatically translated in changes in actions even when they actively aim so.

When analyzing the different ways in which women experience and give meaning to their sexuality and to pleasure, the idea of an oppressed female

sexuality is challenged, specially the assumption that once women's sexuality is liberated it leads to certain specific outcomes. As it was shown the "outcomes" are diverse, which is related to the conditions in which women make daily life decisions.

With the analysis of the case it can be concluded that young women's sexuality and power interact in very complex ways. Power is not centralized and possessed by men or the state, but it is exercised at the micro-level of society, in relationships that intersect more than one axis of power. Power is not repressive but productive, offering young women the possibility of creating specific identities, and of being accepted and valued by their families and society when they conform to dominant norms. This means that projects that are designed to reverse power imbalances should focus in the complex ways in which power operates, looking at intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of change, and incorporating other actors in the analysis.

This does not mean that other forms of power that are indeed oppressive and exercised from men and/or the state towards women do not exist. The differentiated access of women to material and symbolic resources influences the way in which they live and give meaning to their sexuality. Certain laws for example, do not affect all women in the same way. The access to certain type of education also influences the way in which women exercise their sexuality. Therefore the role of the state is still relevant and should be made accountable.

5.2   A tailored "empowerment/rights approach"

The second set of critics is related to the alleged de-politicization and de-radicalization of the feminist agenda with the insertion of the "empowerment/rights approach" in their work with women. According to this argument, this approach does not necessarily address the sources of inequalities based in gender and sex, but deals with the consequences of those inequalities. In this sense, to advocate for some rights might ameliorate to some degree the situation of inequality that some people face, but does not question the set of beliefs that created inequality.

The analysis of the case allows us to argue that this criticism, while valid, cannot be generalized. By the examination of the work of LC and GV and the ways in which young women refer to the empowerment/rights discourse, it can be identified that its use is not apolitical. On the contrary, the organizations focus in challenging dominant norms regarding sexuality and gender that produce inequality.

The ways in which young women deal with the challenges posed to those dominant norms are not homogeneous though. This can be illustrated with the topic of sexual diversity. While some women question the discrimination against non-heterosexual people, others question the heterosexual/non-heterosexual divide based in the alleged "normalcy" of the former and the "deviancy" of the latter.

What can be stated is that the empowerment/rights approach does not create any specific tendency, but it is used and negotiated by feminist organizations and women at the local levels. The meanings that these discourses acquire are related to these women's experiences, as well as to the ways in which

the organizations address these topics. To assume that these discourses are de-politicizing the feminist agenda fails to recognize the agency of these feminist organizations and of these women in using these instruments according to their needs.

5.3 Beyond the individual/liberal paradigm

The third criticism of the "empowerment/rights approach" is that it assumes Eurocentric notions of sexuality as universal, and that it is based in individual-istic and liberal conceptions of society.

One of the problems of working with this approach in the sphere of sexu-ality is that in trying to guarantee that certain basic aspects of women's lives are not violated, it determines which spheres of their lives should be prioritized and in which way. Therefore these instruments fail to recognize that, as socially constructed, sexuality might have different expressions in different parts of the world, and that even in the same geographical setting women might give mean-ing to their sexuality differently.

According to Connell (1995), the individualistic bias of the right's ap-proach does not address issues of inequality between individual bearers of rights. Connell suggests that instead of focusing in individual's rights to exer-cise specific practices or identities, the task should be to identify what are the meanings of those practices, and if they lead to more egalitarian relationships.

An individualistic view of sexuality fails to understand the ways in which young women in Nicaragua give meaning to their sexuality in their interactions with other people and with different discourses. As the case reveals, although most young women referred to the right's discourse, those rights take different forms and meanings for each of them. Hence, what should be identified are those meanings and the processes of negotiation that produce those meanings, instead of the specific outcomes or rights achieved.

This is especially relevant in the case of these young women, because they are in contact with contradictory discourses regarding gender and sexuality. On the one hand they are taught to become mothers and wives since they are born, but when they engage in feminist collectives they are confronted with ideas of motherhood as oppressive, and of one's pleasure as a right. What has to be valued is not the decision that these young women make at the end, whether having or not children, but the processes through which they make these decisions, and how they feel about it.

Paying too much attention to the outcomes of women's processes of change, assumes that these outcomes can be measured and classified hierarchi-cally. This in turn implies a high degree of regulation and standardization of the processes by which women go through, which are not homogeneous, as it was shown.

5.4   Conclusions: Eve, Lilith and Maria sharing their experiences

Engaging with the topic of young women's sexuality and power was not only an academic enquiry for me, but a genuine desire of understanding how women live their sexuality and resist power. The most important question I have had in mind is how to interpret the diverse ways in which women choose to exercise their agency regarding sexuality in their daily lives.

As a young feminist, I have a strong commitment to work for a project of social change that leads to more egalitarian relationships between people. When I realized the exercise of power that is present in any project of change, as described by Mahmood, Foucault and others, I began to question the idea of social change itself. If women's desires are socially constructed, and desires should not be seen in hierarchical ways as Mahmood argues, is social change needed and desirable? If so, whose visions should guide these changes?

The risk I see in Mahmood's position is that it may easily lead to cultural relativism, making difficult to address injustices without feeling guilty for playing the role of "judge". I acknowledge the importance of being aware of one's position of power when interacting with others; and I also recognise the way in which certain discourses have been manipulated with political and economic purposes. However, does this mean that in order to avoid *epistemic violence* (Santos et al., 2007) well-intentioned human beings should refrain themselves from engaging with others in solidary ways?

Taking as an example the women that I have been presenting as ideal types of femininity (Lilith, Eve and Maria), does it mean that they cannot talk, listen to each other and share their life experiences? I firmly believe they could and would enjoy doing it. The Nicaraguan case analysed in this investigation backs this view. As it shows, all young women interviewed, independently of their class, gender identity, sexual preference, level of education or geographical location, consider that their interactions with other women in the spaces provided by LC and GV are a major source of satisfaction. The experience of finding coincidences and differences between them, and discussing about different topics without necessarily agreeing in all of them was one of their most valued experiences, as Alicia explains.

> *I am aware that the feminist movement has been middle class. And I am also aware that for me is easier to talk about emancipation in certain areas of life because I do not have needs that other women have, especially in this country. For that reason getting to know these women, women who work the land, has opened a whole different picture to me.*

I can conclude after engaging with this topic for several months, that change is a journey not a destination. A radical way of challenging social inequalities will include going through this journey hand in hand with other women and engaging with them in respectful dialogues. This requires being reflexive about one's position and power, and being curious and perceptive enough, to be able to discover the complexities of other human beings.

Appendices

Characteristics of the young women interviewed

In order to maintain the anonymity of my interviewees, I am presenting them with different names.

Name	Organi-zation	Age	Geographi-cal Loca-tion[13]	Years of educa-tion	Activity	Other
Alicia	LC	24	Urban	15+	Work in a women NGO	In a relation-ship with a man
Emilia	LC	24	Urban	15+	Work in NGO	In a relation-ship with a man
Ana	LC	22	Semi/Urban	12+	Study / temporal jobs	Lesbian / single
Amanda	LC	18	Semi/Urban	10+	Study	Heterosexual / single
Celeste	LC	27	Semi/Urban	15+	Work on SRR	Heterosexual / single
Maria	LC	28	Semi/Urban	15+	Work in SRR and as a teacher	Heterosexual / married
Flor	LC	30	Urban	10+	Work in NGO for trans-gender women	Transgender / in a relationship with a man
Monica	LC	24	Urban	15+	Work as a con-sultant	Heterosexual / single
Lucia	GV	22	Rural	11+	Work on SRR	Heterosexual / single
Antonia	GV	30	Rural	12+	Work on SRR	Bisexual / open relationship with a woman
Martina	GV	21	Rural	11+	Work on SRR	Heterosexual / single

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[13] I am referring to urban or rural based in the setting in which these Young women interact more. Some of them are from rural areas but have been live in urban areas, studying and/or working.

Clara	GV	25	Rural	11+	Work on SRR	Heterosexual / married / 2 children
Nubia	GV	20	Rural	10+	House-wife	Heterosexual / married / 1 child
Juana	GV	18	Rural	9+	Study	Heterosexual / single
Jeanete	GV	23	Rural	11+	Work on SRR	Heterosexual / single / 1 child

List of Interviewees

Coordinating staff of "La Corriente"
    Maria Teresa Blandon
    Alondra Sevilla
    Oscar Acuna

Coordinating staff of "Grupo Venancia"
    Geni Gomez
    Ruth Matamoros
    Edurne Larracoechea

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