WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE

The broad women's movement in Nicaragua resisting patriarchal and socio-political violence

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This report was written by Ana Clara Buendía, Mar Cervantes, Carmen Flores, Mery Ellsberg and Ana Lucía Álvarez Vijil in the context of the collective learning and collaborative work promoted by the WEAVE Collective. We are a team of feminist women from different generations who have also been part of the broad and diverse women's movement of Nicaragua through different paths. As such, we are therefore affectively linked to the experiences, forms of violence and resistances recounted in this study.

In the context of the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship in Nicaragua, signing with our names to an investigation about our struggle against all forms of violence puts our lives and the lives of our loved ones at risk. Therefore, some of the team members use pseudonyms to protect ourselves and continue our silent resistance in defense of a life free of violence.

We are deeply grateful for the confidence and solidarity of the Nicaraguan women who participated in the interviews, focus groups and workshops. The dialogue between their experiences, emotions, and wisdom is the basis of the results of this research. We've always been here, and we continue weaving hope together. We would also like to express our gratitude to Madelaine Caracas for her powerful cover illustration, as well as to those who have contributed to the translation, editing, design, layout and photographs of this publication. Their names are kept anonymous for the protection and safety of themselves and their families.

This document was finalized at the end of 2023; therefore, some of the background or contextual information reflects that period.

I. INTRODUCTION

Conducted in 1995, Confites en el infierno (Candies in Hell) was the first study to measure the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Nicaragua. The results revealed that 52% of the women surveyed had experienced physical violence from their current partner or a former partner at some point in their lives and that 27% had experienced the same type of violence in the 12 months prior to the survey (Ellsberg et al., 1997). This research, carried out in rural and urban areas of the municipality of León, Nicaragua's second largest city, became a reference point in the process of bringing about significant changes in national-level legal frameworks. It was also a reference point for the women's movement of the time, strengthening both the discourse and political action aimed at the prevention of violence against women in Nicaragua.

Two decades later, the study Confites +20 (Candies +20) (Ellsberg et al., 2020) identified an encouraging reduction of women reporting physical violence from an intimate partner at some point in their life (from 55% in 1995 to 28% in 2016) and in the 12 months prior to the study (from 28% to 8%). It also revealed a reduction in emotional violence during the women's lifetime (from 71% to 42%) and in the 12 months leading up to the survey (from 43% to 23%). There was, however, no statistically significant variation with regard to sexual partner violence.

The results of Candies +20 suggest that these changes are the result of multisectoral efforts promoted by civil society, including organizations belonging to the Network of Women against Violence (RMCV, for its acronym in Spanish), the government of Nicaragua and international donors.

Ellsberg (2021) highlights that, in line with the results of other global-scale studies,[1] the most important factor in explaining the reduction in violence was the constant work of the Nicaraguan women's movement. This is a broad, diverse and consolidated network with many years of experience in organization and resisting the different intertwined forms of violence that affect women and their territories.

1. A study of 70 countries over four decades (1975-2005) demonstrated that, beyond having left-wing governments or economic factors such as the GDP, the mobilization of local feminist organizations is the main factor behind a change in VAWG-related policies and legislation (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

In the mid-1990s, armed with data from Confites en el infierno, work led by the RMCV was key to the success of a national petition to pass Law 230. At the beginning of the same decade, it was the organized women's movement that brought the issue of gender violence into the public arena; developed capacities for psychosocial and legal accompaniment; supported the strengthening of the recently-created police stations for women and children, defending the need for a comprehensive care model; and demanded improvements in the path of access to justice. It also developed large-scale communication campaigns aimed at promoting women's recognition of their rights and fighting the culture of impunity related to machista violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Unfortunately, the multisectoral efforts and the social fabric that explained the reduction in VAWG in Nicaragua at that moment—including laws, policies, national plans, comprehensive care centers, campaigns and other communication for social change actions—have gradually been dismantled. This has happened in a context of the deterioration of institutional conditions and the rollback of human rights, particularly the right to live without violence, that has characterized the government of Daniel Ortega and the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) since their return to power in 2007. The self-proclaimed "government of reconciliation and national unity" has increasingly limited any possibility of coordinating with women's organizations, particularly feminist ones, denied access to public information and, since 2017, used the police force to stop public protests by feminist collectives.

On top of this, the regime of Daniel Ortega and his wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo responded with a disproportionate use of force to the civic uprising of April 2018, committing abuses that have been characterized as crimes against humanity (GIEI, 2018; GHREN, 2023) and initiating a grave human rights crisis that resulted in the deaths of over 350 people (CIDH, 2021), the detention and torture of hundreds of opponents, and the establishment of a police state that continues to restrict the population's freedoms and rights.

In recent years, the Ortega-Murillo totalitarian regime has institutionalized political repression through the passing of a set of unconstitutional laws[2] that seek to criminalize, persecute and eliminate all kinds of actions by civil society organizations, the media and the political opposition.

From 2018 to December 31, 2022, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) registered at least 2,018 people arbitrarily deprived of their liberty (GHREN, 2023), who have also been the victims of constant torture and human rights violations. While we were conducting this research, on February 9, 2023, a total of 222 political prisoners—including 33 women—were deported to the United States and stripped of their nationality. As of June 2024, there were 147 political prisoners in Nicaragua, 24 of whom were women (Mecanismo para el Reconocimiento de Personas Presas Políticas, 2024).

The sociopolitical violence and intensified repression through detention, criminalization, migratory detention, exile, harassment, and ongoing threats have affected the lives of thousands of Nicaraguans and the daily work of human rights activists and organizations, including those fighting for women's right to a life free of violence.

According to the registry kept by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM-Defensoras), 212 organizations working for women's human rights have had their legal status cancelled since 2018, some of which have had their premises seized by the police and then illegally confiscated (GHREN, 2023). IM-Defensoras has also recorded the arbitrary detention of more than 300 female human rights defenders and activists and the criminalization of 123 since the beginning of the crisis (GHREN, 2023).

While this situation of state repression has had a negative impact at different levels, it has particularly put the lives and bodies of women human rights defenders at risk, leaving the women and girl victims of violence they accompanied even more unprotected.

In a context of generalized repression in which the Ortega-Murillo regime has reduced as far as possible the space in which organized civil society can promote transformations in the social sphere, the Nicaraguan broad women's movement has had to reconfigure its resistance strategies, daily practices and political agendas since the collective struggle for justice and democracy that started in 2018. The criminalization of human rights defenders has forced many to work in hiding on issues related to prevention, care and denunciation in response to machista violence.

2. Law No. 977 against laundering assets, financing terrorism and financing the proliferation of arms of mass destruction; Law No. 1040 on the regulation of foreign agents; Law No. 1042 on cybercrimes; Law No. 1055 on the defense of the rights of the people to independence, sovereignty and self-determination for peace; Law No. 1058 on Reform of and Addition to the Penal Code that establishes life sentences for those who commit hate crimes; Law No. 1060 that reforms the Penal Procedure Code to allow a person to be detained for more than the 48 hours established in the Constitution; and Law No. 1145 that regulates the loss of Nicaraguan nationality for "traitors to the homeland."

This report is the result of the Nicaragua case study carried out in the context of the collective learning and collaborative work promoted by the WEAVE Collective[3] in relation to the contribution and challenges of feminist movements addressing VAWG in contexts of authoritarian regression, the reduction of democratic spaces and the criminalization of activism. The objective of this research is to further explore the contributions of the broad and diverse women's movement in the collective struggle for the vindication of rights that started in April 2018, and to describe how the movement's agendas, strategies and practices have been reconfigured in order to continue its VAWG-related work in the current context of worsening socio-political violence.

This document summarizes the results of the qualitative research and is structured in the following way. First, we present the theoretical reference framework related to patriarchal violence, socio-political violence, anti-VAWG strategies and the intersectoral and generational feminist approach that we incorporated into the research. Then we describe the feminist participatory research-action methodology employed in the study and the ethical and safety challenges involved in researching in a context of fear and repression such as exists in Nicaragua.

After that, we analyze the main milestones, successes and challenges of the non-lineal, complex and diverse journey of the broad women's movement in Nicaragua from 1980 to the present day. The following chapter more deeply explores feminism's forms of participation and practical and epistemic contributions in the collective struggle for justice and democracy that started in 2018, including certain reflections on the participation of feminists from new generations and from the country's Caribbean Coast region.

The third part then examines how the worsening socio-political violence has affected both VAWG and the dynamics of the broad women's movement, reconfiguring our agendas, strategies and practices. Finally, our conclusions highlight the main findings of this research process and reflect on the challenge of carrying on together, finding chinks of hope and motivation to continue defending the right to a life free of different forms of violence.

3. The WEAVE Collective (Women Engaged Against Violence Everywhere) was forged from a shared commitment with feminist movements that are addressing violence against women and girls and to highlight and weave together the crucial stories emerging from the margins. Researchers and activists from Australia, India, South Africa and Nicaragua have joined together to explore how feminist movements contribute to ending violence against women and girls at a local, national and global level. Using feminist and participatory methods, each country has its own path, history and journey to share.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interwoven forms of violence

The patriarchy, racism, colonialism and neoliberalism coexist, fuse and mutually strengthen each other, structuring and intensifying inequalities that express themselves in the *continuum of violence* that affects poor, feminized and racialized bodies (Cockburn, 2004; Medina Garcia, 2018). These forms of violence are expressed both in the context of socio-political conflict and in daily life. In this research we take up the perspective of Aluna (2022) to analytically differentiate three inter-related planes of violence: socio-political violence, patriarchal violence and violence aimed at women human rights defenders.

We understand patriarchal violence to be violence against women and girls (VAWG) and other feminized and dissident bodies due to the fact that they are women or subverting the gender-based binary order. On this plane, the violence can be exercised by partners, former partners, family members, the community, male political activists, or state actors.

Socio-political violence, meanwhile, is a concept that allows the naming of contexts of systematic and ongoing violence to control political subjects fighting for social transformations. Aluna (2022) defines socio-political violence as "that subtle or open strategy used by the State with the objective of controlling the population to impose politico-military, economic or ideological interests." (p. 16) From a human-rights point of view, the state is the actor responsible for either taking action, being negligent or being complicit in relation to this type of violence. Therefore, in the context of Nicaragua, we call any action of parastate or state repression that seeks to sustain political and economic power groups "socio-political violence."

By incorporating a feminist perspective that recognizes the unequal and hierarchical gender-based power relations prior to the socio-political crisis in Nicaragua, it is possible to identify that socio-political violence is particularly expressed against women defenders. While different kinds of violence intersect in this typology (see Graphic 1), naming them separately is a useful theoretical abstraction strategy to identify the relationship between the effects of socio-political and patriarchal violence aimed at defenders from Nicaragua's broad women's movement in terms of the reconfiguration of their agendas, strategies and practices to respond to VAWG and fight for the vindication of their rights.

Graphic 1. Interwoven forms of violence

Anti-VAWG strategies

In the framework of this research, we understand "agendas" to mean the priority subjects and demands promoted by the broad women's movement. And when we talk about "strategies," we are referring to the set of actions and practices planned and implemented by collective actors to achieve their objectives. In this sense, we are exploring in greater depth the strategies of Nicaragua's broad women's movement to respond to one of the most relevant subjects on the feminist agenda: violence in all of its manifestations.

Candies in Hell and *Candies +20* both employ the socio-ecological model (Heise, 1998) that conceptualizes VAWG as depending on the interaction of risk and protection factors occurring at different levels: individual, family/relational, community and societal. In order to analyze the strategies used in the current context, we took as a reference the categories of strategies employed as a framework for evaluating national efforts to eliminate VAWG (Bott, Morrison, & Ellsberg, 2005):

1. create an enabling environment based on a political commitment to gender equality and human rights, the participation of women and girls in public life, and multisectoral coordination among international organizations, donors, governments and civil society;

2. increase women's access to justice and rights through laws, policies, education and protection referral systems;
3. increase women's access to support services—including psychological, medical and legal support—and safe shelters; and strengthen the organizations providing such services;
4. prevent violence through awareness-building, changing community attitudes, and improving the status of women in society.

Similar to the socio-ecological model, an ecological and multi-systemic vision of resilience moves away from understanding it as an individual psychological capacity, defining it as a process in which multiple systems (biological, psychological, social and the environment) interact to respond to the complexity and uncertainty of extreme contexts of crisis and/or marginalization (Ungar, 2021). Along these lines, this research documents the collective resistance strategies as a process of resilience, emphasizing those interactions and practices that strengthen the Nicaraguan feminist movement's capacity for agency, resources and social capital.

Intersectional feminism and the generational approach

Based on the recognition that gender is one of the fundamental aspects structuring power inequalities in the patriarchal system, we will use a feminist perspective to more deeply explore not only the patriarchal and socio-political violence against members of the broad and diverse women's movement in Nicaragua, but also the capacities for agency and the resistance strategies employed in response to the *continuum of violence* against their individual and collective bodies.

This research study includes a cross-cutting, intersectional perspective as an analytical tool for understanding the complexity of the human experiences, power relations and social inequality based on the intersection and interaction of more than one axis of social division (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Our analysis recognizes that the different dimensions of a person's identity (particularly race-ethnicity, sexuality, class and age) create structures of power and oppression (Lugones, 2008) that shape experiences, forms of violence and resistance strategies.

Along these lines, considering the leading role of young organized women in reshaping the broad women's movement, we have included a generational approach to further examine inter- and intra-generational relations, highlighting the fact that each person's characteristics, needs and risks are marked by age and the social, historical and cultural context in which that particular stage of their life cycle is being developed.

Based on the contributions made by Mannheim (1952), we understand "generations" to be a concept that is not only biological, but also situated by the *generational link* caused by local or global historical events that mark a before and after in the process of people's socialization (Leccardi & Feixa, 2011). In line with these approaches, this study reflects on the contributions and challenges of the leaderships from new generations and the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by a feminist epistemology and methodology of participatory action research. This questions the objectivity and traditional forms of building scientific knowledge and prioritizes qualitative methodology for the co-creation of knowledge based on the critical, collective and situated reflection of members of the broad women's movement of Nicaragua. The results of this research are therefore the product of intersubjective dialogue over the different experiences, emotions and knowledge of the research team and the 33 Nicaraguan feminist women that participated in the study.

In this sense, it is important to position ourselves as a research team of feminist women from different generations who have also been part of the broad and diverse women's movement of Nicaragua through different career paths. As such, we are therefore affectively linked to the experiences, forms of violence and resistances recounted in this study. This gives us a privileged role in terms of generating horizontal dialogues of proximity, collaboration and trust with the other participants and fostering a dialectic process of collective reflection and learning aimed at strengthening our daily praxis in the fight against VAWG and the vindication of rights in Nicaragua.

We initially reviewed secondary information on the theoretical approaches and existing literature on the feminist movement in Nicaragua. Then we held 15 virtual semi-structured interviews with feminists from different regions of the country: young women, exiled women, former female political prisoners, trans women and Afro-descendant women. These interviews provided a flexible framework for dialogue and listening between both parties.

After this, we held three virtual group spaces that enhanced our perspectives based on collective reflection: a focus group with five young feminist women;[4] a group interview with three women defenders who continue working in their territories on VAWG prevention and accompaniment in different Nicaraguan municipalities; and a virtual workshop with the participation of 10 feminists to jointly build an approximate history of the broad women's movement in Nicaragua since 2018.

Considering the sensitivity of the subject and the context of repression in Nicaragua, the whole process of collecting information implied taking physical and digital security measures, a commitment to confidentiality and guaranteeing the integral wellbeing of the participants (see the box below: "Nicaragua: researching in contexts of repression"). The information gathered was recorded, transcribed and inductively codified using a qualitative text analysis system (NVIVO).

Finally, we discussed, analyzed and provided feedback on the main findings in the light of our own experiences, the theoretical reference frameworks and the collective learning process promoted by the WEAVE Collective.

4. Young organized women from generations born after the revolution of the 1980s whose development was marked by the events of April 2018 and who were identified as "new leaders" of Nicaragua's broad women's movement.

Nicaragua: researching in contexts of repression

The socio-political violence has also transformed the way social research is conducted in Nicaragua. On the one hand, the subjects and questions that mobilize us are marked by the socio-political context and the events of violence and repression we have witnessed and been victims of. And on the other, we face the challenge of adapting face-to-face and group-based participatory methodologies to virtual spaces in an environment of great fear and distrust when it comes to talking. Some informants and researchers are working in hiding or have had to move within or out of the country to protect their safety and continue their activism.

Both the subject and the context require special ethical considerations in terms of confidentiality, safety and guaranteeing the participants' comprehensive wellbeing, such as conducting all individual or group interviews and sending information using safe communication platforms. In addition, recognizing that the subjects could stir up very difficult personal emotions and experiences such as violence, grief and exile, the technical team offered virtual psychosocial accompaniment if emotional support was needed.

The bonds of trust previously built up with some members of the research team played a fundamental role in the women we talked to during this research study agreeing to participate, with most of them requesting anonymity. As one feminist leader mentioned during her interview, "I'm telling you because we're the same." We respected this trust by prioritizing their wellbeing, safeguarding the information in secure platforms, anonymizing the testimonies and omitting any information that could put them at risk.

Despite the measures taken, some women refused to participate in this study, particularly when we invited them to focus groups and workshops. They shared their fears and views about the risks of sharing their experiences and we therefore adapted ourselves to a method they would feel safe with. These fears and feelings of distrust are part of the findings of this research study, as they are rooted in the use of socio-political violence as an arm for destroying collective action.

Along the same lines, we recognize that meetings with other women defenders have a transforming power because collective spaces are a source of inspiration to continue their work, particularly in contexts of repression. Given the current socio-political violence and its effects on the dismantling and closing of physical meeting spaces, participants in this research study told us that the conversation with other women allowed them to reflect on their own emotions and personal processes, generating motivation, pride, connection, empathy and support among women engaged in the same struggle.

Another effect of the regime's state control of research processes was that we did not have access to official quantitative data or the ability to move around to generate such data autonomously at the local level. In this respect, we highlight the existing efforts—many of them cited in this document—to adapt and innovate methodologies that allow the continuation of research into the different manifestations of patriarchal violence. It is important to emphasize the existence of research and documentation efforts on the subject that remain anonymous or are conducted under cover to protect both the researchers and those interviewed.

We have identified that this self-censure has personal and political implications as it limits recognition of the identity and contribution of the researchers involved and the women interviewed. In this regard, one of the women we talked to said that *"from a sentimental and emotional point of view, it is difficult to process and accept because it implies a negation of myself, of what I have achieved, of what I am, of my experience. I can't say I'm researching this; I've been working on this subject for years and I can't say anything."* (EP1) Also, the lack of public access to the findings of other research studies generates processes of reflection and in-depth exploration that are closed, thus limiting their feedback and contributions to the development of the women's movement in all its broadness and diversity.

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IV. WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE: MEMORIES OF OUR STRUGGLES FOR A LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE

The women's movement in Nicaragua is a broad and diverse network with many years' experience of organization and resistance in response to the different intersecting forms of violence that affect women and their territories. Based on its diversity, this movement has managed to agree on a political agenda for the promotion of women's rights and coordinated strategies for advancing in that direction. Its ability to coordinate against all forms of violence has shaped it into a questioning collective body that discomforts and threatens the power-concentrating project of the political and economic elites with its strong patriarchal, racist and classist roots.

The relationship between this movement and the FSLN has been tense since its historical leaderships broke with the party at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, particularly after it supported Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter (Rosario Murillo's daughter), Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo, when she filed charges of sexual abuse against Ortega in 1998. Ever since, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo have demonstrated a particular hatred of the women's movement, expressing their rejection of Nicaraguan feminists by labelling them "false prophets," "schizophrenics" and "bitter women" who want to cause family disintegration and impose the social norms of the "empire" (Murillo, 2020).

In 2016, as part of the reflections on the reduced prevalence of violence against women identified in *Confites +20* (Ellsberg et al., 2020), we held a workshop to analyze the relationship between this reduction and the actions promoted by the women's movement. Seven years later, in April 2023, we came together again in a more discouraging context. The systematizations of both workshops, which are included in the annexes to this research study, have enabled us to summarize in this chapter the different moments, advances and setbacks in our struggles to achieve a life free of violence.

1979-1989: the recognition of equality

This decade was marked by the consolidation of the Sandinista revolution in the context of a war of intervention. The revolution produced a change in the roles historically established for women in terms of their participation both in the fight against the Somoza dictatorship and following the triumph of the revolution when they actively participated in different social, economic and political spheres. Although equality between men and women was part of the FSLN's historical program, guaranteeing the rights of women through profound social change was put on the back burner as the defense of the revolution was prioritized. Even merely making demands or pointing out inequalities were identified as a *betrayal of the revolutionary process.*

However, the feminists who participated in the 2016 workshop recognized that this period laid the foundations for awareness of their rights as female human beings. It also marked the beginning of both joint reflections within an emerging women's movement and advocacy actions for political and social change. They pointed out that, above all, this period raised awareness that "the personal is political" and that the legal frameworks could be transformed. These reflections were fundamental to the consolidation of the women's movement and its strategies for advancing in the area of rights in the following decades.

From the beginning of the revolutionary period, different Nicaraguan feminists promoted reflections and changes related to the situation of women. Some conducted emblematic research studies on maternal mortality and its relation to induced abortion, legal analyses, and actions aimed at highlighting topics such as sexual harassment, power relations in families, domestic violence and land tenure.

During the 2016 workshop, the participants highlighted that the country's first study on the violence experienced by women (El Matrato) analyzed users of the Women's Office and contributed to violence against women being recognized as a public problem. It was also during this period that the first women's center—Ixchen—emerged from civil society, establishing its main lines of work as violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights. Nicaragua's first legal congress in which violence against women and abortion were areas of discussion was also held during this period.

This decade witnessed important achievements in legal and public policy matters—many of them promoted by women—that marked a milestone in addressing the rights of Nicaraguan women and helped improve their everyday professional and intimate lives:

- In 1982 the Regulatory Law of Relations between Mother, Father and Children (Decree No. 1065) was passed, recognizing the equal conditions of mothers and fathers in relation to their children, abolishing the term "illegitimate children" and granting the mother custody in the case of separation.

- During this period, Child Development Centers were created as preschool daycare centers for children.

- In 1982, the Women's Office was opened in a district of Managua, initially to provide legal support and psychological care to women, although it did not establish any coordination with the police. The main problems attended to were violence, the custody of children and child maintenance demands.

- In 1987, Nicaragua's new Political Constitution recognized the equality of all people before the law; their right to equal protection and respect for their physical, psychic and moral integrity; and that nobody should be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading torture, procedures, punishments or treatment. The town hall-style consultation meetings held prior to the constitution's approval were another historical milestone, allowing women to present the reality of their situation and list their needs. VAWG was mentioned in these arenas and for the first-time women's reproductive rights, including abortion, were publicly talked about.

- 1988 saw the passing of the "Law for the Dissolution of Marriage due to the Wishes of One of the Parties" (unilateral divorce).

- The Ministry of Health's (MINSA) "National abortion care standards" were approved in 1989, establishing the parameters for the implementation of therapeutic abortion in public health units, with the woman's socioeconomic situation included as one of the grounds (Jubb, 2014). Although therapeutic abortion had been permitted since 1837, there had previously been no political framework for operationalizing it.

No legal setbacks were identified in the area of VAWG during this period, but challenges were recognized that were addressed by the broad women's movement in the following decades. For example, *"The Penal Code had no way of classifying the violence exercised in the framework of a marital relation or a de-facto union."* All that appeared were offenses and crimes under the category of "lesions," whose "seriousness was determined by the judge" and which were not defined in the context of couple relationships.

1990-2006: weaving networks against violence

The early 1990s were marked by the FSLN's electoral loss and changes to the economic model and the path the country was taking. For many women, the incoming conservative government represented a return to traditional roles in the domestic sphere. In addition, the promotion of "family values" led to reduced access to reproductive rights and symbolic acts such as burning MINSA's official guidelines on therapeutic abortion (Ellsberg, Liljestrand and Winkvist, 1997).

This period was also characterized by meeting spaces for regional- and international-level internal dialogue among the women's movement, access to cooperation funds to support the fight against violence toward women, and a number of important advances. The latter included Nicaragua signing the 1994 Belém do Pará Convention (Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women), which was the world's first binding treaty to recognize violence against women as a punishable human rights violation.

In this period, the strategies of the broad women's movement in Nicaragua were characterized by the coordinated promotion of different initiatives to create networks, generate evidence, raise awareness of *machista* violence through education campaigns, and promote multisectoral efforts and legislative changes. The following were the main milestones we identified in relation to these strategies:

- **The emergence of the Network of Women against Violence (RMCV),** among other women's networks, following the First National Women's Meeting in 1992 under the slogan "United in Diversity". The RMCV managed to consolidate its actions and expand its membership to over 150 organizations across the country. Local branches were also created that strengthened the work in the territories. The strategic lines promoted by the RMCV included denouncing, raising the population's awareness, promoting debates among men and women in the media, and advocating the reform of laws and disseminating their contents.

- The creation of new civil society organizations, particularly women's centers and feminist organizations at the community, local and national levels (Randall, 1999; Cuadra & Jiménez, 2010). The 2016 workshop highlighted that the early 1990s saw an "explosion" of women's centers and feminist organizations with a presence in different territories, such as *El Colectivo 8 de Marzo* (March 8th Collective), ITZA, the Matagalpa Women's Collective and SI Mujer, among others.

- **The promotion of reforms to the legal framework** in order to respond to the violence experienced by women. In 1995, the proposed reform was drawn up by the RMCV's legal commission and presented to the National Assembly with a six-month lobbying process. This was accompanied by a national advocacy campaign under the slogan "There are NO excuses for violence" that collected over 40,000 signatures in support of the proposed Law 230. This campaign employed statistical information about the prevalence of violence in Nicaragua, including the results of Candies in Hell: over half of the women (52%) had suffered physical violence during their lifetime and almost one in three (27%) had suffered it in the last 12 months. That was the equivalent of 250,000 women at the national level, while just 3,000 women pressed charges in the whole country (Ellsberg et al., 1997). Other epidemiological studies by the same team found links between violence and low birth weight, infant mortality, adolescent pregnancy and mental health problems.

- **In 1998, in response to the "earthquake" and polarization generated by Zoilámerica Narváez's public accusation of sexual abuse** by her stepfather, Daniel Ortega, who was the FSLN's political secretary at the time, the RMCV decided to support all women in pressing charges, believing their testimony and accompanying their personal recovery process and demand for justice (Delgado, 2003). This created an appropriate context for talking about sexual abuse publicly for the first time in Nicaragua, highlighting the importance of further exploring the issue and generating actions for its prevention and access to justice.

The three governments of this period (those of Violeta Barrios, Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños) were openly conservative in relation to women's rights. Despite this, however, the advocacy of the broad women's movement, coordinated in networks and non-governmental organizations, took advantage of the institutional channels of a nascent liberal democracy to promote and achieve concrete advances that had a positive impact on women's lives and their right to live free from different forms of violence.

The following were the main advances during this time:

- **1993 saw the opening of the first Police Station for Women and Children** (**CMN**), which emerged as a joint effort among the Police, the Women's Institute (INIM) and alternative women's groups to improve access to justice, care and prevention. A total of 10 CMNs were opened between 1994 and 1998, all of them financed by bilateral funds, while a total of 22 women's centers provided complementary services (legal, psychological, forensic and accompaniment). In this respect, INIM was the counterpart that administered the funds (Jubb, 2006; *Policía Nacional Dirección Comisaría de la Mujer y la Niñez y PNUD*, 2009). In this process, the CMNs achieved training and awareness raising on this issue, a comprehensive care model and the coordination of social organizations with state institutions (Matamoros, 2016). The CMNs were located in police stations and the women who requested services were attended by trained police women and civilian social workers (under INIM's responsibility) and were also referred to women's centers when required for legal or psychological support, counselling or forensic examinations. In alliance with the women's centers, INIM facilitated the specialization in forensic medicine of various female doctors from these NGOs, thus increasing access to medico-legal examinations for women pressing charges.

- **In August 1996, the National Assembly passed the Law of Reforms and Additions to the Penal Code of Nicaragua** (**Law 230**)**.** The most relevant characteristics of this reform were: a) recognition of intrafamily violence as a public order crime; b) recognition of psychological wounds as forms of violence; c) the establishment of protection measures (such as preventing aggressors from going near the woman's house or confiscating weapons).

- **The institutionalization of the Police Stations for Women and Children in October 1996**, when they were included in article 63 of the National Police Law (Law 208, Regulation of the National Police Law, Decree No. 26-96, 2996), was an important milestone. The CMNs strengthened throughout the decade and even in 2004 they were managed by a tripartite technical committee made up of the Police, the state (INIM) and civil society, represented by the Network of Women against Violence. This allowed the establishment of a referral and counter-referral system among the CMNs in which the entry point of the path to justice for women could be the CMN or any of the 40 women's centers in the country providing care and accompaniment (Matamoros, 2016).

- **The passing in 1998 of the Legal Code for Children and Adolescents (Law No. 287),** which included the addressing of intrafamily violence; and the development of public policies with a gender and child-protection focus starting in 2001. Some examples of the latter include: the National Plan for the Prevention of Intrafamily and Sexual Violence 2001-2006, the General Health Law (Law No.423 /2002), the Public Policy against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents (2002), the National Child and Adolescent Comprehensive Care Policy (2002) and the Equal Opportunities Policy for Rural Women. These were promoted by those ministries with a responsibility for addressing the problem (MIFAM, INIM, MINSA, the Ministry of Labor) with financial support from cooperation and United Nations agencies (Jubb, 2006). In this context, projects were promoted in coordination with MINSA that helped strengthen the health personnel's capacities for addressing violence (Pan American Health Organization, Finnish Cooperation's SAREM project, German Technical Cooperation - GTZ, PROSILAIS, Centro de Derechos Constitucionales), training them in medical-legal aspects, the strengthening of registration and surveillance, and the promotion of intersectoral coordination (Ellsberg & Clavel, 2002).

- **In 2002, as part of the modernization of the legal system, the new Penal Procedures Code (Law No. 406) was enacted and came into force.** As a result, the legal system changed from an inquisitorial written system to a public oral trial system. This implied the creation of the Office of Public Prosecution, or Public Ministry,[5] whose main function is to promote and implement public penal actions. In the same year, the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) issued the "Procedural Protocol for Crimes of Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault: A guide for police, prosecution, forensic medicine and judicial personnel." This protocol established the actions that these officials should take in response to these crimes, including routes for coordinating with other institutions and women's centers.

- **Starting in 2005, the National Gender-based Violence Prevention and Response Program 2005-2009** and the National Gender Equity Program were established. The latter was consulted and included in the country's National Development Plan in 2005.

5. Law 330 for the Partial Reform of the Political Constitution of January 2000—in accordance with the promulgation of The Public Ministry Organic Law (Law 346) of October 2000—and the Regulation of the Public Ministry Organic Law in 2001.

Three main setbacks were also identified during this period of many achievements in terms of legislative and institutional changes:

- **The consolidation of a family-based focus and a close relationship with the Catholic Church.** The government of Arnoldo Alemán, who became President in 1997, promoted a strategy of discrediting civil society organizations that was particularly aimed at those made up of women (Babb, 2012; Kampwirth, 2003). Among the first measures taken by this government was the creation of the Ministry of the Family (known at the time as MIFAMILIA), which promoted a model based on the nuclear family, whose mission was procreation and caring for children.

- **The criminalization of the feminists who supported "Rosita,"** a nine-year-old Nicaraguan girl who was the victim of rape in Costa Rica. The daughter of agricultural migrants, she became pregnant as a result of the abuse she suffered. The country was polarized over the possibility of practicing a therapeutic abortion and the health minister established that no health unit could interrupt the pregnancy. MIFAMILIA prohibited the girl from leaving the country and as a result, the girl's parents, accompanied by the RMCV and other organizations, arranged for an abortion to be carried out in a private clinic. In response, Catholic Church leaders threatened to excommunicate the people who had decided on and carried out the abortion and in alliance with the Nicaraguan Pro Human Rights Association (ANPDH) filed a lawsuit against those who had supported the girl. A total of nine women defenders were accused of various crimes, including "covering up the crime of rape," "illicit association to commit a crime" and "incitement of the crime". The Office of Public Prosecutor opened a criminal investigation against them that lasted for almost two and a half years, until it decided to dismiss the case in February 2010. However, this ruling did not order the defamatory purpose of the actions against them to be publicly redressed. Instead, it pronounced in favor of greater surveillance and regulation of those organizations offering services to women and child victims of intrafamily violence, which resulted in additional obstacles to the work of women defenders.

- **The criminalization of therapeutic abortion in 2006** as a response from political parties to the demands of religious sectors. In the context of an electoral campaign, the Catholic church led anti-abortion marches and, as a result, on October 26, 2006, therapeutic abortion was unanimously repealed a few days before the elections. The right to therapeutic abortion had previously been allowed for health-related reasons since 1837 (Granelli, 2010/2011). Subsequently, in November 2007, the National Assembly included the total criminalization of the practice of abortion in Nicaragua in the penal code in force at the time (Law No. 641), establishing sentences of one to three years in prison for anyone carrying out an abortion and of one to two years for women who seek one.

2007-2017: resisting institutional setbacks

Between 2007 and 2017, the broad women's movement continued with advocacy actions similar to those of the previous decade: networking to increase women's access to support, psychological, medical and legal services in response to VAWG; constant mobilization in the streets to demand rights; advocacy actions aimed at legislative-level changes; and promoting communication campaigns, observatories on violence against women, and research into issues such as adolescent pregnancy and early unions, therapeutic abortion, and violence against women in general and sexual abuse in particular. Also worth highlighting was the creation of the Strategic Group for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion (GEDAT) in 2006 and the Movement against Sexual Abuse in 2007, resulting from the denunciation of the priest Marcos Dessi in Chinandega.

The following were the main advances in this period:

February 2008

Approval of the Law of Equality of Rights and Opportunities (Law No. 648), which says that state institutions must develop prevention methods and techniques against all forms of violence against women. It also includes in the Health Ministry's general guidelines the development of programs for the detection of, prevention of and response to physical, psychic and sexual violence against women and the family.

November 2009

Establishment of the standards and protocols for the prevention of, detection of and response to intrafamily and sexual violence, published by the Ministry of Health.

January 2012

The passing of Law No. 779 (Comprehensive Law against Violence towards Women and Reforming Law No. 641, the Penal Code Law) following a broad discussion process. It came into force in June of that year as the first special law on violence in Nicaragua. It sought to ensure the prevention of, response to and protection from violence against women. It defined the state's responsibilities in terms of preventing and protecting women from gender-based violence and also classified violence as something that happens in the private and public spheres in interpersonal and interfamily relations and even with public officials. This law also classified the different types of violence (physical, psychological, sexual, institutional, labor, economic/patrimonial, misogyny, femicide) and established that mediation was not allowed in any of these cases. In 2012, courts specializing in violence were also created for the application of Law 779, while the first Women's Police Stations implementing the Comprehensive Care Model with the presence of legal and forensic medicine and public prosecutors were inaugurated in Bilwi and in District V of Managua.

However, with Daniel Ortega's return to the presidency during this period, the country embarked on a gradual process of de-democratization, switching from an incipient liberal democracy to a regime that resembled the Somoza dictatorship (Martí i Puig and Serra, 2020). Thus, the women's movement found itself facing off against a government that is not only conservative and anti-feminist like its predecessors, but also closes down arenas for dialogue with civil society, denies access to public information and is willing to develop new types of aggression and persecution against Nicaraguan feminists.

Its actions included limiting access to funding for certain women's organizations on the government's "black list"; organizing counter-marches or the disproportionate use of force against feminist mobilizations; raiding and criminalizing the Autonomous Women's Movement and Grupo *Venancia* in 2008; and arbitrarily detaining and criminalizing women's defender Aydil Urbina for "obstruction of functions" and "obstructing the authorities" (IM-Defensoras, 2017). The activities of the women's movement were also restricted by reduced access to cooperation funds during this period.

The most important setbacks in relation to protection policies and laws to respond to *machista* violence were:

- **The gradual closure since 2013 of intersectoral spaces for coordination** with women's organizations and organizations working with children, including referral to alternative centers, the local violence prevention commissions and national coordination spaces. Since then, women defenders have not been allowed to accompany women when they file charges.

- **The reform of Law 779 in September 2013** to include mediation in the case of minor offenses, while also granting Daniel Ortega the power to regulate Law 779 by decree. Decree No. 42-2014 (Regulation of Law 779, the Comprehensive Law against Violence towards Women and Reforming Law No. 641, the Penal Code Law) distorts that law's objective by limiting femicide to the private sphere (partner femicide) and violence against women to "family conflicts." Also, the response route included mediation bodies before and at any stage during the penal action and the reception of denunciations by "family councils". The reform also authorized the creation of community- and institutional-level "family counselling bodies" under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Family, Adolescents and Children.[6] These counselling bodies include "the network of family counsellors, which is made up of family counsellors from the schools for the promotion of family values, voluntary promoters, judicial facilitators, family pastoral care, religious leaders and the Family, Community and Life Cabinets."[7] The regulation was also questioned by the broad women's movement, jurists and academia for contravening the hierarchy of the law, because a regulation cannot reform a law.

- **From 2014 the Police Stations for Women and Children were gradually closed down.** The National Police stipulated that the body that would receive denunciations would be the police's Judicial Auxiliary Investigation Unit. At the beginning of 2016, the Nicaraguan regime announced that for budgetary reasons the women and children's police stations assigned to the National Police would be closed and their functions were transferred to the police's Judicial Auxiliary Directorate. At that time, there were women's police stations in all 153 of the country's municipalities and in the seven districts of Managua, many of which were created following Ortega's return to power (*Expediente Público, 2020*).

6. Article 8. Sphere of attention of the family counselling bodies. The family counselling bodies will operate in the community and in the Ministry of the Family, Adolescents and Children.

7. Political-party structures of the governing party.

- **In February 2016, the judges specialized in the area of violence received an order from the CSJ not to issue prison sentences** to people defaulting on their maintenance payments and for other crimes contemplated in Law 779 (Vásquez, 2016).

In this respect, one of the women we talked with in the context of this study told us:

> *"In Nicaragua the whole vision we had of how to treat violence against women with a preventive focus has started to be dismantled. We had built processes for awareness building, training, capacity building, creating a path for accessing justice, sensitizing the police, specializing people in the treatment of violence against women... And that whole process has been taken apart."* (EP4)

In 2020, in a context of socio-political crisis and the denunciation of an increase in femicides and violence against women, the Ortega-Murillo regime announced the re-opening of certain women's police stations. Some feminists have suggested that this was a strategy to clean up the police's image (La Prensa, 2022). Meanwhile, one woman defender told *Expediente Público* (2020) that it is "a smoke screen and a lie because women are saying that their denunciations aren't being received, there aren't any specialized bodies, that we're facing public officials with a great deal of ignorance about gender, who are reactionary and aren't prioritizing the issue."

All of these changes taken together were part of an FSLN strategy to move from the comprehensive protection- and rights-based focus promoted by the broad women's movement in Nicaragua to one of "family values" aligned with a conservative, anti-feminist discourse (Jubb, 2014; Kampwirth, 2008). In addition, this indicates that the achievements of the previous period responded to recognition in the legal superstructure and an implementation that was dependent on international cooperation. It did not, therefore, amount to the state's structural commitment to prevention, response and access to justice with respect to cases of violence against women.

2018-2023: reconfiguring our struggle in response to a dictatorial context

Throughout this report we analyze in greater depth the broad women's movement's contributions, agendas and strategies aimed at achieving a life free of different forms of violence. This section introduces the period 2018-2023 in a brief summary of the most relevant milestones identified during the April 2023 workshop with women from the feminist movement.

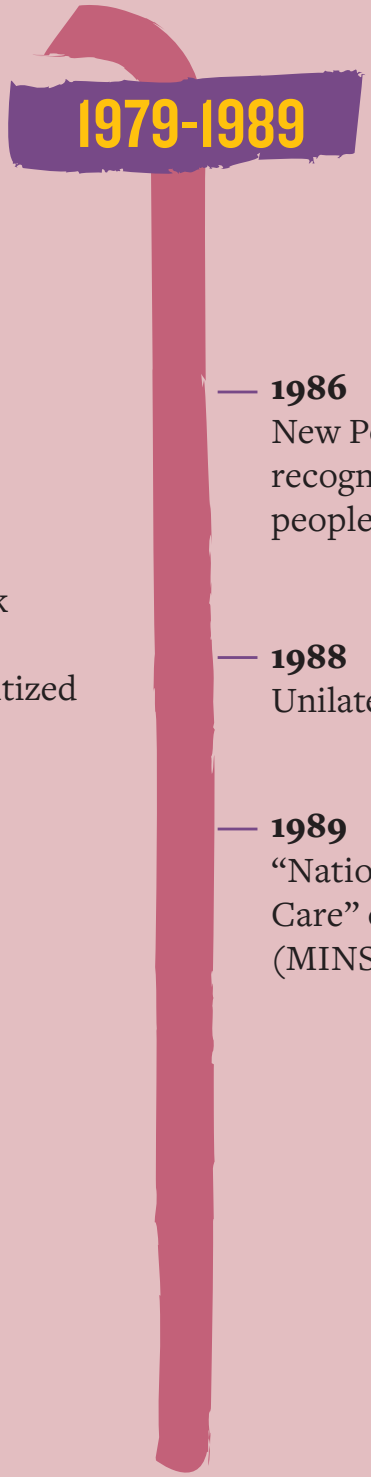
In relation to setbacks, the workshop participants mainly stressed:

- the absolute prohibition of citizens' organization with the closing of social organizations that had defended women's rights for decades;
- the assaults on, criminalization of and psychological, physical and sexual torture against women in general and feminists in particular;
- and the forced displacement of an important number of the local and national leaderships of Nicaraguan feminism, including both historical feminists that led organizations and networks; and new leaderships that emerged from young feminists' collectivization processes in the context of the socio-political crisis that started in 2018.

The following **relevant achievements in a critical context of repression and the violation of all rights by the Ortega-Murillo regime** were also recognized:

- continuing with strategies such as communication for social change campaigns focused on preventing *machista* violence;
- actions aimed at the security, cybersecurity and protection of women defenders at the territorial level and caring for their lives;
- psychosocial care in response to *machista* and socio-political violence based on new support networks;
- and developing research studies and processes for the monitoring, registry, documentation and denunciation of grave human rights violations, highlighting the different forms of violence against women, women defenders and their organizations.

Timeline 1979-2023



THE RECOGNITION OF EQUALITY

THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION
Guaranteeing the rights of women was put on the back burner as the defense of the revolution was prioritized

1986
New Political Constitution recognized the equality of all people

1988
Unilateral divorce

1989
"National Norms for Abortion Care" of the Ministry of Health (MINSA)

1990-2006

WEAVING NETWORKS AGAINST VIOLENCE

Return of conservative governments with a family-based approach and close relationship with the Catholic Church

1992
The creation of the Network of Women against Violence (RMCV)

1994-1995
Favorable international context for promoting women's rights Belém do Pará, Beijing and Cairo conference

1996
- Reforms to the Penal Code of Nicaragua (Law 230) promoted by RMCV to respond to VAWG
- Institutionalization of the Police Stations for Women and Children

1998
Zoilamérica Narváez's public accusation of sexual abuse against her stepfather, Daniel Ortega, who was the FSLN's political secretary at the time

2001-2006
Public policies with a gender and child protection focus addressing VAWG

2006
The creation of the Strategic Group for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion (GEDAT)

Criminalization of therapeutic abortion

2007-2017

RESISTING INSTITUTIONAL SETBACKS

DANIEL ORTEGA'S RETURN TO THE PRESIDENCY

2007
The creation of the Movement against Sexual Abuse

Criminal investigation of nine feminists who supported "Rosita," a nine-year-old Nicaraguan girl who was the victim of rape in Costa Rica

2009
Standards and Protocols for the Prevention of, Detection of and Response to Intrafamily and Sexual Violence

Reduced access to funds from international cooperation affected civil society organizations

2012
Law No. 779 (Comprehensive Law against Violence towards Women and Reform of Law No. 641, the Penal Code Law)

2013 - 2014
Gradual closure of intersectoral spaces for coordination with women's organizations

The reform and regulations of Law 779 include mediation and distort the law's objective.

2014
The Police Stations for Women and Children were gradually closed

2016-2017
Massive marches against femicides and VAWG. The government responds with counter-marches, blockades and repression by riot police

2017
Obstruction of the work of accompanying women in the police stations

Arbitrary detention and prosecution of human rights defender Aydil Urbina

APRIL 2018-APRIL 2023

RECONFIGURING OUR STRUGGLE IN RESPONSE TO a dictatorial context

2018
THE APRIL UPRISING
Start of the socio-political crisis during which the Nicaraguan state has committed crimes against humanity.

2018
The accompaniment of women who experience violence and are referred through networks and organizations was reduced to its minimum expression

2018 -2023
Initiatives to document human rights violations

Care and accompaniment for victims of socio-political violence

2018 -2023
Campaign for the freedom of female political prisoners

2018
Participation of feminist leaders from different generations in marches and political spaces for justice and democracy

Inclusion of historical feminist leaders in the May 2018 dialogue roundtable

2018
Activation of international feminist solidarity networks with ongoing and sustained actions starting in 2018

2018
The whole state apparatus is geared towards repression

First testimonies of sexual violence as a form of political repression

2018
Creation of new young feminist collectives

Creation of the psychosocial accompaniment network

2018 - 2023
Forced exile of Nicaraguan feminist leaders, including both historical and young feminists (many were later stripped of citizenship and property)

APRIL 2018-APRIL 2023

2018-2023
Criminalization and incarceration of feminist activists

2019 - 2021
New forms of protest were devised in response to the prohibition of public protests:

- Ciberactivism
- Lightning picket lines or one-off actions.
- Replication of the performance "Un violador en tu camino" (A rapist in your way)
- Marches inside of the Central American University

2020
Hundreds of denunciations of machista violence were published on this virtual platform run anonymously by young feminist women (El blog de la denuncia)

2020
Tribunal of Conscience for Nicaragua: "Sexual violence: Crime against humanity"

2020
Denunciations of misogynist attitudes and assaults by leaders of the "blue and white" political opposition

2021 - 2022
Massive closing and confiscation of assets of social organizations that had defended women's rights for decades

2021
Denunciation of sexual violence made against a member of the UNAB

2021 - 2023
Reorganization of the social fabric of the movement with women in the diaspora

2022
Creation of the United Nations experts' mechanism included a gender mandate

2023
Release of 222 political prisoners who were stripped of their citizenship and property

V. THE BROAD WOMEN'S MOVEMENT'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STRUGGLE OF APRIL 2018

In response to the question "How did the broad women's movement involve itself in the struggle of April 2018?", there is a consensus among the women we talked with that "we did not involve ourselves; we were already involved." The feminist position recognizes that the struggle for women's rights involves the profound questioning of the social, political and economic system, and therefore feminist leaderships have been involved since the end of the 1980s in the debate, organization and mobilization against authoritarian power, corruption and the loss of the country's democratic institutional structure.

For example, some of the women interviewed participated in and led protests against the Ortega-Alemán pact, accompanied the struggle in Mina El Limón[8] or were actively involved with environmental organizations in the dissemination of information explaining Law No. 840 on the Interoceanic Canal[9] to peasant sectors that would be affected by it. It is even currently recognized that the feminist movement was the first social movement in Nicaragua to warn that a dictatorship was being established in the country[10] with the complicity of collaborationist parties, sectors of the Catholic Church and the country's economic powers:

> *"We were already denouncing a series of problems with the economic development model Daniel Ortega was implementing in collusion with COSEP [the Superior Chamber of Private Enterprise], the upper business echelons and companies, using the state to that end."* (EP4)

8. Protests in October 2015 in response to the social and labor conflicts in Mina El Limón (El Limón Mine), located in the municipality of the same name in the department of León, Nicaragua. On that occasion, the government responded with the disproportionate use of force in clear coordination with and protection of the economic interests of the transnational B2Gold company.

9. The "Special Law for the Development of Nicaraguan Infrastructure and Transport pertaining to the Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua and Free Trade Zones," approved by the National Assembly of Nicaragua in June 2013. This law provides a 50-year concession to the Chinese company Hong Kong Nicaragua Development (HKND Group), extendable for a further 50 years, for the construction and operation of this megaproject and associated projects.

10. In its July 17, 2009, pronouncement, the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM) talked about "entering into opposition against a Somocismo disguised as the Left, and which has all the characteristics of a new family dictatorship in the making." (Lacombe, 2010)

As shown in the previous chapter, for decades now feminists in Nicaragua have been mobilizing to demand legal frameworks and social transformations that guarantee women and girls a life free of violence and respect for their sexual and reproductive rights. One feminist who participated in the workshop held to reconstruct the broad women's movement's path in recent years told us that:

> *"Prior to the uprising, we had increased activism in the streets in response to the issue of violence and femicide, despite the repression or the obstacles... a very visible and particularly powerful feminist activism in repudiation, rejection and denunciation of violence against women and femicide, because there is a very real increase in that dynamic of violence that is linked to the lack of institutional protection..."* (T3)

Additionally, many of the historical feminist leaders were Sandinista militants in the 1980s and therefore had a profound knowledge of the logic behind the party's functioning and repression. Since even before 2018, these experiences have generated processes of resilience: the development of collective protection mechanisms and the search for justice in response to everyday violence; the capacity for rapid clandestine responses to urgent needs; and the creation of close relations with local, territorial and international networks. In this sense, the lessons learned from the path taken by the broad women's movement in Nicaragua have played a key part in the different expressions of resistance that emerged during the April 2018 uprising and that continue being promoted today.

In a country in which abortion has been penalized, even when the woman's life is at risk, supporting women in the interruption of pregnancy and researching that subject implied the need to take safety measures to avoid the criminalization of activists. Many organizations and collectives in the broad women's movement had been working against VAWG on a daily basis and therefore had extensive experience in processes of psychosocial accompaniment and the search for justice. These experiences have generated resilience, the development of safety and protection mechanisms against *machista* violence, and also a capacity to respond to urgent needs in a rapid and clandestine way.

Another relevant contribution from organized feminists is their capacity and experience in terms of creating and strengthening thematic and territorial networks at the neighborhood, national and international levels. The broad women's movement is a diverse and consolidated network with an extensive reach in many of the country's territories[11] where relationships of trust and communication have been woven based on day-to-day work for women's rights.

Being able to count on these networks has been fundamental to protecting life and coordinating political participation and actions of resistance as the regime's strategies for repressing and containing the civic unrest have included a strong territorial component, using the control and surveillance structures built up through the Citizens' Power Councils and the Sandinista Leadership Councils. In the words of one young woman who has worked on the struggle against VAWG at the community level: *"...it was due to this community fabric that there was organization in the territories, where the women were well-established... even the shelters functioned as a space for sanctuary, protection..."* (EP7)

Practical contributions

In the framework of this research study, we gathered testimonies in León, Matagalpa and Managua, which revealed that the first protests in April involved the organization and/or participation of different generations of feminist leaderships.

One of the first people injured in Managua on April 18, 2018, was feminist defender and public health expert Ana Quirós, who was subsequently punished by being expelled from the country where she had lived and fought for 40 years and then stripped of her Nicaraguan nationality. The photo of the aggression against her was disseminated throughout the country via the social networks, generating widespread indignation among the population.

As we have always been present in social struggles, it was to be expected that a "feminist bloc" would be visible in the marches held in 2018, starting in April, and that the purple flags handed out and carried a month earlier on March 8 would again be used in the streets, accompanied by the slogan "the revolution will be feminist or it won't be a revolution."

11. The presence, trust and coordination of what we call the broad women's movement is more reduced in certain areas of the country, particularly in Nicaragua's south and north Caribbean regions, which have historically been excluded and distanced from networks or efforts aiming to have a national reach. In this respect, Blandón (2011) recognizes that "many of the rural, indigenous, Afro-descendant and lesbian organizations have not had a solid link with what have been intended to be national networks or coordination bodies, nor have they had a visible leadership." (p. 31.)

We identified that feminists from the broad women's movement participated in calling peaceful protests; providing material, logistical and survival support for protesters; psychological accompaniment for victims and victims' relatives; and the documentation and denunciation of human rights violations.

While in many cases the participation of feminists was anonymous or "low-profile," in others it led to spokespersonship or representation that generated wide recognition of women as relevant subjects in the April rebellion and the acknowledgment that this self-convened mobilization would not have been possible without the participation of women and feminists.

In this respect, we have identified three main roles that describe their incorporation into and practical contributions to this collective struggle: **political representation, the sustainability of life, and the fight for justice.**

1. Political representation

The broad women's movement was always involved in the struggle for freedom, justice and democracy, the main standards that unified broad sectors of Nicaraguan society in April 2018. This allowed these women not only to participate organically in the first rejections of the fire in the Indio Maíz Reserve or the reform of the social security system, but also to assume roles of leadership, spokespersonship and representation in different organized expressions that subsequently emerged.

Even in the face of rejection from the most conservative sectors of the opposition, student, social and political leaderships have carried the purple flag and defended the inclusion of feminist demands in the opposition bloc's agenda.

One of the most relevant milestones related to political representation was the recognition of historical feminist leaderships among the voices present in the first National Dialogue.[12] Within what was called the "social sector" of the opposition represented by the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy (ACJD, for its acronym in Spanish), the participation of Azahálea Solís—a historical feminist and a member of the Autonomous Women's Movement—and Sandra Ramos—leader of the "María Elena Cuadra" Movement of Working and Unemployed Women—was proposed and then subsequently approved by the Ortega-Murillo regime. During this first dialogue, the voices of young feminist students like Madeleine Caracas also played an important role.

Feminist representation in leadership roles in the different organizations and arenas that emerged from April 2018 onwards influenced the form and contents of the opposition messages, demands and strategies (e.g. the incorporation of inclusive language into communiqués). Another milestone in representation was the visibility and recognition of the political activism of LGBTIQ+ women, particularly trans women, in the visible leaderships of the student movement and neighborhood and political organizations. This strengthened—and was the result of—the social recognition of the political capacities of women in their diversity and of the relevance of recognizing their social demands.

> *"At the time of writing the pronouncements, I remember moments when they even wanted us to continue using sexist language, right?... that it was a sin for us to put 'men and women'. That's been hard for us; it's hard to believe... we were there in that struggle, from the form to the substance, but there's still a vision that democracy comes first, getting rid of the dictatorship's first, and those 'vindications,' in quotes, that they see as secondary, will come later."* (EP4)

12. The National Dialogue Roundtable between the government of Nicaragua and different sectors of the political opposition was facilitated by the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua and started on May 16, 2018. Its objective was to end the violence and find a consensual way out of the socio-political crisis that would include political reforms, guaranteed human rights and the establishment of conditions for free and fair elections. However, the negotiation process was suspended on various occasions due to a lack of agreements and of willingness to comply with the commitments assumed.

Unfortunately, in the subsequent processes to organize the political opposition, the doors were gradually closed. Women's participation was limited and they were increasingly excluded from decision-making spaces under the argument that their demands were generating divisions (Díaz, 2021). In some cases, this generated pressure to give up their participation in order to maintain their demands in other arenas.

Given the difficulty of breaking with authoritarian, strongman, adultist, racist, classist and patriarchal cultural norms, feminists face the dilemma of leaving or abstaining from participating in political decision-making spaces, or else assimilating the values, norms, languages and practices of the native political culture (if they had not previously been assimilated).

As a result, in the second attempted dialogue with the regime, the roundtable consisted entirely of men. In this respect, one of the feminists interviewed said, *"despite the fact that the movement, the rebellion, had involved significant participation of women, when it came to that second dialogue, we weren't represented..."* (EP4)

As the political processes advanced, the status quo of the male elite power that ignores the demands of the feminist movement and hides or instrumentalizes women's roles was maintained (Álvarez, 2020). In the words of one woman, we talked to, *"later, they came to their agreements, made certain (women) spokespersons during difficult moments and all that, but there was no, like, recognition or political will as we would've liked and as the country's women deserved."* (EP4)

One part of the political opposition declares itself conservative and rejects the feminist movement and agenda, particularly with regard to issues like abortion and the rights of the LGTBIQ+ community. In such a hostile context, certain openly feminist voices from different generations—such as Violeta Granera, Tamara Dávila, Suyen Barahona, Ana Laura Alvarado, Ana Margarita Vijil, Dora María Téllez and Ana Quirós—have been public figures participating in the different opposition processes to build unity and political organization. As a result, they have been the victims of countless forms of violence such as harassment, arbitrary detention, prosecution, torture, cruel and inhuman treatment, and more recently expatriation and the loss of their nationality.

2. The sustainability of life

This research study identified two different moments of participation by members of the broad women's movement focused on the protection and sustainability of life. In the first, women activated their pre-existing feminist networks at the local, national or international levels and developed other networks of a humanitarian nature in order to respond to the urgent needs of the direct and indirect victims of the repression.

During the first months of the uprising, these networks focused on providing medical, logistical (food and survival) and communication support to guarantee the protesters' physical integrity. In addition, from a perspective of comprehensive feminist protection, psychosocial accompaniment networks emerged for victims of the repression.

According to one trans woman we talked to, *"We were doing the more humanitarian work there. So, it was like looking for and obtaining provisions, cooking and taking food for the youngsters, certain medical supplies, bicarbonate for the teargas, white vinegar; anything we could find that we knew could be of use to them..."* (EP9)

Later, in response to the transformation of the Ortega-Murillo regime's strategies of repression, these networks also changed in order to provide, for example: humanitarian aid to direct victims such as wounded people, released prisoners or the relatives of political prisoners; support for the safe movement of women defenders in situations of risk; or advice for migrants from the Nicaraguan diaspora in countries of refuge.

Likewise, with the deterioration of material conditions in this crisis context, feminist defenders have also promoted initiatives for economic survival in Nicaragua or in exile, such as entrepreneurship networks or food production projects. Removed from the traditional understanding of political actions of the feminist agenda, this humanitarian and support role that interlinks with networks from the broad women's movement has been a manifestation of *"feminism put into practice... from the human side of feminism..."* (EP10), which has allowed the sustaining of life and, therefore, of the resistance against the regime.

This feminist participation in Nicaragua has been expressed both massively and silently, due to the urgency of the situation and fear of the regime's repression. It is therefore a vital day-to-day resistance that has remained anonymous and unrecognized.

3. The struggle for justice

While, as previously mentioned, Nicaraguan women have participated in different political actions in the struggle that started in April 2018, our most leading role has been in shaping the form and contents of the fight against impunity and the demand for justice (Álvarez, 2020; Yang, 2022).

Although many have worked anonymously, certain feminists such as Haydée Castillo, Sara Henríquez, María Teresa Blandón and Sofía Montenegro, have had a public role, initially in Nicaragua and later in exile, demanding justice and denouncing the regime's atrocious crimes to the media and international bodies.

This does not appear to be exceptional, as women human rights defenders have been at the vanguard of the struggle against impunity in cases of VAWG and in the demand for truth and justice processes in the region in contexts of dictatorship. Examples include the collectives of mothers searching for disappeared children in Mexico, the Latin American feminist movement promoting *"Ni una menos"* (Not one woman less) mobilizations to demand justice in cases of femicide, and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo demanding truth and justice in relation to the disappearance of their children during the Argentinian dictatorship.

Since 2018 in Nicaragua, women have been playing a fundamental role in the direct defense of female victims of repression; the processes of denunciation to regional and international bodies; and in forming and sustaining memory, registry and documentation initiatives related to the violation of human rights.

In 2020, feminist defenders promoted the Tribunal of Conscience on Sexual Violence that documented testimonies of sexual violence and analyzed expert reports on legal, command-chain, context-related and physiological matters. The symbolic jury concluded that "the sexual violence committed by the State of Nicaragua constitutes a crime of torture and that the said torture was systematically committed by State agents against the Nicaraguan civilian population." (Bernabéu et al., 2020)

All of these initiatives have been based on the fundamental pillars of justice: truth, penal justice, compensation and guarantees of non-repetition. It is important to point out that while not all women who lead or participate in organized expressions of the fight for justice identify as feminists, many of the political initiatives they are promoting have been created, accompanied, sustained or strengthened by members of the broad women's movement. Along these lines, Yang (2022) quotes the testimony of the young feminist Tamara Morazán, a member of the Mothers of April Association (AMA) and the sister of Jonathan Morazán:[13] *"it was women, feminists and female activists that helped to organize the Mothers of April and also accompanied the [female] political prisoners in La Esperanza [prison]."* (p.100)

The leading role played by women in the sustainability of life and the struggle for justice can be related to the socially-assigned gender-based roles. Men account for the majority of those murdered or politically imprisoned during the Nicaraguan crisis. They responded to hegemonic masculinity's mandate of violence and bravery on the front-line road blocks and barricades, facing off against the disproportionate use of police and parapolice force during the government's "Operation Clean-up."

Meanwhile, women's traditional "maternal" role of looking after others transcended the private sphere and was transformed into political resistance to protect lives and demand justice. With respect to this sexual division of the struggle, one of the women interviewed said:

> *"If you go to the political organizations, almost all of them are men; if you go to the human rights spaces, it's almost all women. And I believe it also has a lot to do with this division of care. We women remain closely linked to all the manifestations of caring that exist."* (EP12)

13. A young man wounded in Managua on May 30, 2018, when the Mother's Day march came under fire from police officers and parapolice forces. He died on June 1, 2018.

Feminist leaderships from new generations

The mass participation of diverse sectors of the country's youth—students, young people from poor neighborhoods, professionals—in the uprising that started in April 2018 broke with the collective image of the new generations as individualistic and apathetic to the country´s political problems, particularly in contrast to the committed and heroic youth of Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s (Rocha, 2019).

This image of a new, de-politicized generation failed to consider that in many cases what was being observed was really a rejection of the traditional way of doing politics based on the institutional structure and its actors. Their political participation had been developing prior to 2018 in social and environmental initiatives.

Given the urgent need for organization and the possibility of change at that moment, in a global and regional context of mass feminist mobilizations,[14] it is possible to perceive increased participation of young women and the emergence of new expressions of feminist collectivization, including the *Grupo de Acción Feminista* (Feminist Action Group) and different collectives (*Caóticas, La Digna Rabia, Las Brujas Mal Portadas, Las Malcriadas, Las Subversivas, Sanar and Volcánicas*). In our conversations with young feminists, one emphasized the following:

> *"From 2018, we've clearly seen how diverse feminist groups have flourished, even from younger generations than mine. They're arriving at university and there's a need to belong, to convene, to feel you're in a common space. So, probably, I think that the aspect and the world of feminism in Nicaragua is expanding and is very diverse..."* (EP11)

14. The #NiUnaMenos campaign against femicides, promoted in Argentina in 2015; #MeToo against sexual violence, which started in the USA in 2017; and Marea Verde (green tide) for the decriminalization of abortion, which has spread across Latin America.

Generational convergence and divergences

The conversations with feminists from different generations in the framework of this research study allow us to state that the courses, workshops, meetings and debates with young women promoted by feminist collectives and organizations in recent decades helped produce female citizens with political commitment and who question the unequal power relations. It is therefore no coincidence that in 2018 many of them actively participated in the opposition to the regime's violence.

The young feminist women we talked to said they had participated in training spaces with organizations such as *La Corriente Feminista, Colectivo 8 de Marzo, Puntos de Encuentro's* Women's University, *Grupo Venancia* and *Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa.* In this respect, one feminist who has participated in the women's movement for decades proudly told us:

> *"I feel the April rebellion was like when we see the earth and the seeds, and then three days later you see a load of tiny green seedlings flower in the middle of the field and of the earth that is black from humus... That's my perception when I've seen so many women and student leaders blossom in this struggle in different spheres, because you've got young women, female university leaders, female leaders even in high school, female leaders in the professional associations, female social movement leaders. So, it's been an experience that's renewed, strengthened, enriched our struggle..."* (EP4)

We also identified new feminist leaderships that did not recognize themselves as part of the women's movement before 2018 because they did not belong to any organization or "band" of historical Nicaraguan feminism. However, the explosion of 2018 allowed them to meet up with others, to discover, strengthen and decentralize the Nicaraguan women's movement, turning it into something broader, more inter-generational and diverse:

> *"I felt that [the feminist organizations] were privileged places for people that knew someone who could get them into some collective or space. However, I feel that 2018 allowed us to get to know young feminists, that the young feminists learned from feminism and were able to organize and make their own collectives. I felt we were so eager to shout about everything we were going through and that also enabled us to a give a voice to other women to tell their stories and get organized."* (GF4)

The emergence of new experiences of autonomous feminist collectivization has also implied addressing generational differences in organizational experience and positioning with varying degrees of radicality or pragmatism. One of the young feminists we conversed with had the following to say in this respect:

> *"...all of the young generations that create a movement have an element of radicality, because it's almost inherent to young people to be defiant, radical, much more transgressive in what we do and will do. And I also think that the contribution has been, like, that we've come this far, so let's keep pushing, let's not give in, let's keep pushing. And I think that's also important, to keep raising the bar of questioning. It really is important to question, but we can question even more, even in relation to ourselves..."* (EP11)

One of the challenges is therefore to broaden the dialogue and intergenerational exchanges in order to strengthen experience through the contributions of new generations that want to expand the possibilities within Nicaragua's feminist struggles. One feminist from previous generations put it this way:

> *"It's believed that new things can only come with new people, young people; and in this sense we've also understood that you can be young and not necessarily have renovating ideas... One wants to revolutionize everything, but that can't also lead you to reject history, experience. And in that sense, it's neither one nor the other. Those of us who come from a previous generation mustn't feel superior, but rather open up opportunities for these young, extraordinary women leaders; and the youth also mustn´t consider us previous generations to be like a waste product."* (EP4)

Along these lines, many of the young feminists we talked to recognize the contribution that historical feminism has made to the country and to their own paths, including the training and inter-generational exchange spaces and the close and empathetic accompaniment provided in cases of machista and socio-political violence. However, they also demand the need to build their own spaces where they can develop, make their own mistakes and forge their own paths of struggle.

The contributions of new leaderships

Regardless of their previous links to organizations or leaderships of the women's movement, we identified that the visions of new generations of feminists in Nicaragua, marked by the self-convened revolt, have played an important role in the resistance against the patriarchal and socio-political violence. The emphasis has been on a central role for wellbeing and healing, as well as questioning and denouncing expressions of violence within the feminist movement and the "blue and white" (opposition) political organizations.

Young, organized women are undertaking daily political actions to recognize the need for wellbeing and to resignify trauma and grief. *Sanar* (heal) is an initiative led by young female psychologists that puts the issue of individual and collective healing at the forefront of the current resistance and struggle. They provide free and safe virtual crisis containment and accompaniment.

Another example is how a new generation of women artists (plastic artists, moviemakers, singer-songwriters, embroiderers, illustrators) are creating cultural products focused on healing the wounds of current and past violence.

> *"For us, self-care was something we hadn't taken on; it was something we knew was there but wasn't something we'd particularly made room for. In 2018 it was, like, 'just a minute, girls, you're not doing anyone any good if you don't take care of yourselves.' That also made us think that our communication and training activities should also include self-care... previously it wasn't an area that was stressed, and I think that's something the young women have insisted on..."* (EP1)

These practices go hand in hand with both the belief in non-violent struggle and the questioning of the logic of sacrifice that are being championed by new generations of feminists. Some of the women we interviewed in the context of this study had the following to say on this point:

> *"We changed one of the most violent slogans in the history of revolutions, which is 'patria libre o morir´ (free homeland or die). I remember we were walking in the UCA [Central American University] and someone cried out 'Free homeland...' and two of three people said '...or die!' And the rest said 'No, no, no: nobody wants to die here; it's free homeland to live!' And that got changed. It makes me emotional just to think about it. That terrible slogan that's so dehumanizing has been changed into something that really gives you hope."* (EP9)

> *"We keep on trying to break that activism, that way of doing politics that's very kind of martyrological. I think my life in general has been really marked by that. Since 2018, I've really questioned myself and I've learned a lot from self-care, collective care and healing as a form of vindication and doing politics based on that."* (EP16)

One characteristic of the new feminist leaderships has been the questioning of internal practices that reproduce forms of violence and authoritarianism in feminist organizations and networks themselves. In this sense, they are committed to horizontal organization processes and the rejection of all types of complicity with different forms of violence:

> *"One of the contributions of the young feminists is also, like, the questioning of forms of violence within feminist spaces themselves... I don't know how it was before, but I think those forms of authoritarianism and abuses of power weren't talked about very much in those spaces. Now we're naming them much more and we're also taking actions to repair those damages and be able to create new ways of interacting and organizing the spaces."* (GF2)

Along the same lines, young voices have played a fundamental part in denouncing aggressions and all forms of machista violence in platforms representing students, youth and the political opposition to the regime. For example, the new generations have denounced how they have been silenced and how machista violence has limited women's political participation.

> *"Your opinion is less important than the opinion of others... you've been saying something for a year and suddenly someone says the same thing later and he's listened to because he's a CIS adult male. So, it's like I've always said, for young women it also gets more complicated to be listened to, and as a trans woman it's worse because they think you're saying everything out of like madness, idleness or political ignorance."* (EP9)

> *"There're internal forms of violence within the groups and those movements that mostly come from male abusers that force—or in many cases have forced—many of us women to withdraw from those spaces in which these forms of violence continue to be perpetuated... It's the women that have to be distancing themselves, running away, and not vice versa."* (GF2)

One emblematic case was the public denunciation of sexual violence made against Guillermo Incer Medina, a member of both the political council of the National Blue and White Unity (UNAB, for its acronym in Spanish) and the Social Movements Coordinating Body (AMS, for its acronym in Spanish), two of the Nicaraguan opposition's most important political platforms. Following the accusation, both organizations decided to remove Incer Medina. On this determination to denounce all forms of violence and refuse to remain silent in the name of the fight against the dictatorship, D'León, Martínez and Zeledón (2019) have stated:

> *"For us, it is essential to situate/name the forms of violence, silencing, discrimination and desubjectivizing tactics reproduced in the spaces of the civic rebellion of April 2018, in the same way as we vindicate our skills of resistance to the dictatorial nation-state that continues to oppress us."* (p. 589)

The feminist leaderships of the Caribbean Coast

The channels of communication and synergy between Nicaragua's Caribbean and Pacific regions have to contend with the historical wounds of the Caribbean's forced incorporation, exclusion and abandonment, and the racism, repression and attempts at cultural homogenization that its multiethnic and diverse population has faced. Neither the broad women's movement nor the attempts at national-level organization by the opposition to the regime are removed from this repeated disconnection from and neglect of the Caribbean Coast's problems by the centers of power on the Pacific side of the country.

During the conversations with Caribbean Coast feminists there was a consensus that the state violence which exploded in the Pacific region in 2018 had already been experienced for a number of years in the Caribbean. According to one feminist who was in the city of Bilwi when the uprising started:

> *"Everything we know is through the television and social networks. We weren't indifferent. That was a complaint I received directly, that we were indifferent to what was happening in the Pacific, particularly, and in central Nicaragua... 'The people,' in popular terms, aren't indifferent; when you go to them and ask what they think, like in informal chats, they tell you, 'The people on the Pacific side are experiencing what we've been going through for a very long time."* (EP5)

One finding is that we did not identify evident participation and positioning of the organizations working for women's rights in the North Caribbean region in April 2018. This could be explained by various factors: the number of Caribbean voices we managed to listen to for this research study was limited; the protests and police response did not have the same characteristics as in other areas of the country; and some of the organizational expressions of the region's women that we talked to prioritized keeping on the regime's good side in order to continue functioning and responding to the multiple forms of violence against indigenous and Afro-descendant women.

In the South Caribbean region, meanwhile, the leaderships of women's organizations with experience working in national-level coordination bodies, such as the RMCV, played a key part both in roles of local- and national-level political representation and in the organization of marches and then other creative expressions of protest when marches were banned at the end of 2018. These women participated in the mobilization and coordination of territorial alliances with youth, professional-association and political sectors.

Women defenders of the Caribbean Coast, many of whom do not identify as feminists but do extensive work in defense of women's rights, highlighted demands for the Caribbean Coast's full autonomy, as well as the ongoing forms of violence against their bodies and territories since even before 2018. Similar to what happened with the women's movement's agenda, in national arenas they also had to contend with discourses that sought to put their demands on the back burner:

> *"When we got involved in those national arenas, we said we really couldn't see the point, because we're in a space just to say there's representation from the Caribbean, but they aren't really taking our demands as people from the Caribbean into account with respect to our particular characteristics. So, our participation was often limited because we could see that our voices weren't being listened to or they didn't respect our demands. So, we saw that it was really difficult and a great challenge to power to incorporate or coordinate ourselves at the national level with the other sectors."* (EP15)

Epistemic contributions

The aforementioned path taken allows us to identify that these actions have also made an epistemic contribution beyond the important practical contributions of feminist participation in the resistance, thus transforming the way in which we understand and interpret political matters, the socio-political violence, justice and democracy.

1. Care is political

From the patriarchal logic of the world's binary and gender division, "masculine" is associated with strength, the public sphere and the political, while "feminine" is associated with weakness, the private sphere and care for the family. Organized women in Nicaragua are challenging not only the state's repression, but also those gender mandates through their everyday political actions that place care for life at the center of things. These political practices of resistance break the barrier between the political and care, proposing a new interpretive framework that recognizes that caring for life is political when faced with a policy of death.

This epistemic contribution of understanding personal and collective care as a political strategy goes hand in hand with a commitment to non-violent struggle that grows out of the recognition of the consequences of violence on the lives of our peoples in general and of women in particular. Thus, politicizing care in Nicaragua contrasts with learning inherited from the revolution about an ethic of sacrifice and martyrdom (Yang, 2022), of the heroism of "dying for the homeland" in the context of the Sandinista people's revolution, or what subsequently turned into total and voluntary dedication to activism following the revolution. One of the women we talked to shared her reflections on this issue, recognizing the role of the new generations in changing the paradigm:

> *"We were built in a certain way, in those times when we said we were willing to give our lives to conquer rights, conquer freedoms, to escape from those authoritarian regimes. And a first very beautiful thing given to us by this new generation of young men and women is the proposal that this time the fight has to be civic and peaceful and that the slogan previously very popular among us, 'Free homeland or die!', which accompanied many activist movements in Latin America, was changed to 'We want a free homeland and to live' by the youth in the 2018 rebellion. So that gives you a profound, even philosophical, connotation, right? That in reality it mustn't be an obligation to offer one's life to conquer rights. We have the right to have rights and also stay alive."* (EP4)

2. Socio-political violence is part of a continuum of violence

The path taken by the different forms of feminism in Nicaragua helps to interpret socio-political violence as a manifestation of unequal power relations that is expressed as a *continuum of violence* that did not begin in April 2018 and that especially affects poor, racialized and feminized bodies.

The daily forms of violence against women's bodies, which are generally silenced and consigned to the private sphere, are recognized as part of the political problem when the dimension of a conflict exposes them to the public sphere. In this sense, the current socio-political violence is also patriarchal, classist and racist. It manifests itself reproducing historically perpetuated forms of violence in which women's bodies are assaulted through slogans and messages that express sovereignty, dominion and control over the victims and their associates (Segato, 2003).

Based on this structural reading of the different forms of violence, organizations and leaderships from the broad women's movement have stressed that the agendas for the autonomy of bodies and territory adopted by the different forms of feminism and women defenders of the Caribbean Coast are both relevant and urgent in the current context. They have also contributed to the registry and analysis of the patriarchal manifestations of socio-political violence and the gender consequences of the crisis affecting the country.[15] And finally, they have also influenced the incorporation of a gender analysis into human rights reports, including the report by the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN, 2023), which highlights that:

> *"The violations adopted expressions and had specific components based on the victims' gender as a result of the general environment of discrimination for reasons of gender and sexual orientation. The said expressions included the use of different forms of sexual violence, of sexist or homophobic insults or discrediting terms, and of threats focused on maternity."* (p. 209)

15. See publications such as Quebrar el cuerpo quebrar el alma: la reconfiguración de las violencias hacia las mujeres en Nicaragua 2018-2022 (Cuadra, 2022), La suma de todas las crisis y las resistencias feministas (Programa Feminista La Corriente, 2020), Violencia de género a través de la Tecnología contra mujeres políticamente activas (FUNIDES, 2019), and Mujeres Jóvenes feministas ante la crisis sociopolítica de 2018 (EnRedadas, 2018).

3. Democracy and justice start in our bodies-territories

Democracy and justice are two concepts that can be very abstract and removed from everyday life. However, those were the demands we shouted in the streets during the April insurrection when the participation was massive, popular and diverse. Feminism questions the liberal conceptualization that limits the scope of these concepts to state/institutional actions to which we can aspire in a hypothetical political transition.

The broad women's movement has also provided a deep reflection on how women's agendas were put on the backburner during the Sandinista popular revolution, while impunity was perpetuated and a neoliberal development model consolidated in the name of peace and democracy during the political transition processes of the 1990s. This has contributed to the debate on coherent resistance strategies and transforming agendas that include criticism of the punitive nature of the justice system and the reproduction of structural violence in liberal democracy.

We also understand justice and democracy based on our everyday actions to defend life, hope and our power of agency. In other words, both concepts grow out of practices in our individual and collective bodies-territories: *"The task of feminism in this context is for it to be understood that democracy starts with our body, the care for the territories; care for the land, for the body is part of democracy, it's part of our freedoms and not something abstract."* (EP4)

This implies that the violences and resistances that happen in our bodies, houses, communities and organizations are also political, and therefore cannot be left on the backburner or for when the socio-political crisis is over. In relation to this epistemic contribution of the broad women's movement, one feminist who works against *machista* violence toward women in her territory said the following:

> *"When we talk of democracy, we're not only talking about political participation, the way political parties talk, or about elections... for us, democracy is respect for life, respect for words, respect for the participation of women, men, the youth, children. So, we're talking about a democracy that transforms people's lives."* (EP3)

VI. REINVENTING OURSELVES TO CONTINUE THE FIGHT FOR A LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE

As described in the above section, the context of authoritarian policies and worsening state violence has weakened the broad and diverse women's movement in Nicaragua. However, the sense of urgency and the motivations and convictions of thousands of women inside and outside of the country keep the movement alive, resilient and constantly reinventing itself, continuing to promote old and new agendas linked to a life free of violence.

This chapter describes how the socio-political violence has negatively affected VAWG and the broad women's movement, generating changes in terms of contexts, political agendas, resistance strategies and everyday practices.

The impact of the socio-political violence on VAWG

VAWG is rooted in the system of patriarchal domination in which social relations (work, sexuality, reproduction) have a hierarchical order that legitimizes male domination and justifies the exercising of different expressions of violence (sexual, physical, psychological, economic and symbolic) to control the bodies of women and people with non-heteronormative identities.

The levels of state violence and the collapse of the independence of institutions, which has accelerated since 2018 in Nicaragua, have aggravated other social problems, including violence against women in general and femicides as a more extreme expression of power and dominion over their bodies.

In this sense, the socio-political violence in Nicaragua has negatively affected individual, family/relational, community and social risk factors identified by the socio-ecological model (Heise, 1998). Despite the lack of access to public information and the distrust of official figures, which should allow us to gauge the effects of the socio-political violence on VAWG, there is a consensus among the feminist leaderships we talked to: the situation of violence against women, girls and feminized bodies is alarming and has deteriorated since 2018, in terms of both quantity and the cruelty of its expressions.

The data on femicides recorded by the organization Catholics for the Right to Decide (Expediente Público, 2022) signal an increase in the last five years. A total of 49 and 51 femicides were recorded in 2016 and 2017, respectively, while the number of women murdered has risen since the beginning of the socio-political crisis.[16]

Meanwhile, a report by *Divergentes y Connectas* (2023) shows that only 19% of the 18,207 accusations of sexual violence between 2017 and 2020 were resolved in a trial. According to the same source, 56% of the 8,062 cases of rape confirmed by the Institute of Legal Medicine have not been resolved. The problem is much more critical if we consider that many of these legal rulings do not imply the conviction of the aggressors and that VAWG is widely under-registered as the context discourages women from filing charges.

The problem is much more critical if we consider that many of these legal rulings do not imply the conviction of the aggressors and that VAWG is widely under-registered as the context discourages women from filing charges.

During this period, Nicaraguan women have been facing new risk factors when it comes to suffering violence due to the deterioration of their living conditions and to repressive laws, policies and practices that feed impunity and seek to destroy the civil society organizations that have historically supported them.

16. Sixty-one femicides in 2018, 63 in 2019, 71 in 2020, 71 in 2021, 68 in 2022 and 74 in 2023.

I. The deterioration of living conditions

Poverty, constant exposure to socio-political violence, citizens' insecurity, drug trafficking and stripping indigenous communities of the right to land are some of the problems that have intensified in Nicaragua in the last six years. This context of deteriorating living conditions has particular consequences for the physical and mental wellbeing of urban and rural women, both those who have remained in their communities and those who have been forcibly displaced either inside or outside of the country.

The current political and economic crisis has translated into the exodus of thousands of people in recent years. According to data shared by political scientist Manuel Orozco in the *Confidencial* news bulletin (Regidor, 2023), a total of 604,485 Nicaraguans left the country between 2018 and 2022, of which 328,443 migrated during 2022.

It should be stressed that the migratory routes taken expose women to new violations of their rights such as the risk of falling victim to physical and sexual violence during the journey at the hands of coyotes, organized crime or state agents in the different countries involved. In addition to setting up in a new country, the women tend to lose family and community networks that were protecting factors against VAWG. The migration of men and women also causes family disintegration, often leaving children without their main figures of protection against violence.

2. Generalized impunity

The levels of impunity have also increased as the FSLN's control of decisions made by the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) has been used as a reward mechanism to maintain loyalties and repressive structures that sustain the regime's power. In this sense, the women we talked to expressed particular concern about the existence, functioning, access to arms and impunity of people who participated as state/parastate agents.

Another factor has been the mass release of approximately 26,000 prisoners who had not served out their sentences, including at least 514 who were convicted of violence against women and girls according to the RMCV registry in 2020 (Nicaragua Investiga, 2021). In December 2022, one of the men released early from prison under the concept of "family coexistence" murdered his older sister just eight days after being let out (*Confidencial*, 2023).

The use of police agents and public officials for repression, criminalization, judicialization and surveillance against the political opposition has fostered the citizenry's distrust of state institutions in general, and the National Police and the justice system in particular. In the case of the Caribbean Coast region, the manipulation of community-level political power has also reproduced the culture of impunity in the community justice system, as the *wihtas* (community judges) are endorsed by the governing party.

This lack of trust in and fear of public and community authorities that are part of the current path for attending to VAWG means that many women decide not to file charges, thus affecting both the under-registration of cases of violence and the impunity of their aggressors.

3. The closure of women's organizations

The Ortega-Murillo regime has increased the violence against the social movements and implemented different strategies to wipe out any organized civic expression. This has significantly limited the VAWG prevention work and the accompaniment of women victims of violence that had been carried out for decades.

In the current context, women living in Nicaragua perceive a greater vulnerability to violence for reasons of gender as many of the organizations that previously supported them have been closed, with their members threatened, unjustly imprisoned or in exile. In the words of one young feminist:

> *"...with all that legal status stuff against women's organizations, I feel we're much more vulnerable... Before, we had a response, somewhere to go, someone to go to when such a situation occurred; but not now; we're more vulnerable..."* (EP14)

The closure of the physical offices of women's organizations and the exile of territorial- and national-level historical leaderships has limited the information available on the pathway for accessing justice and unpicked a large part of the community social fabric woven through the joint work of different territorial actors (community, social and religious leaderships) to attend to women's needs.

The vulnerability is demonstrated by the fact that women being threatened or suffering some kind of violence have to seek justice and healing without the advice, economic support, accompaniment and backing previously provided by women defenders. If women defenders were prevented from accompanying victims to the special women's police stations or the courts even before 2018, since that date the situation has grown worse due to criminalization of and threats against the covert work still being done by organizations and networks. Women defenders we talked to had the following to say in this respect:

> *"Most of the women feel unsupported, without resources to get out of the violence (...) and the women aren't getting that accompaniment, they're completely alone... they aren't even letting women defenders, lawyers and psychologists enter—they aren't letting anyone into the courts or the special women's police stations."* (EP7)
>
> *"There's a lot of fear of going to the police; there's a lot of fear of pressing charges, of accompanying. The women's human rights defenders that were at the community level are also not acting visibly for their own safety."* (EG2)

The broad women's movement after 2018

The dictatorial context and the direct aggression against feminist organizations and leaderships have left the broad women's movement at a critical point in its history. In this respect, María Teresa Blandón—a feminist stripped of her nationality in 2023, whose organization "*Programa Feminista La Corriente*" was closed and confiscated in 2022—said that *"it's never been easy, but from the '80s to the present day, this is probably the worst moment the Nicaraguan feminist movement has experienced."* (DesAutorizados, 2023)

Violated, displaced and exiled leaderships

With Ortega's return to power, the feminist movement was the first to suffer direct aggression through the raiding and criminalization of the leaderships of the Broad Women's Movement (MAM) and the Matagalpa-based *Grupo Venancia* in 2008. Since 2018, and on a mass level since 2021, the persecution of feminists and the organizations they belong to has intensified.

In addition to defying the regime's power, women human rights defenders disobey gender roles by invading the public space through their political participation. The hounding, harassment, threats and psychological, physical and sexual torture to which they have been subjected are loaded with messages of punishment, humiliation and control of their bodies and territories that are rooted in the patriarchal, racist and classist culture.

We identified particular cruelty against feminist women and organizations, which the regime considers to be "traitors" for breaking their previous links with the FSLN and for undermining the gender order due to their political participation and, in the case of lesbian and trans feminist women, their sexual orientation or identity.

Examples of this cruelty include the isolation of detained feminists and the use of their maternity as a mechanism of psychological torture. Other examples are the detention of Dora María Téllez[17] in a men's wing due to her sexual orientation, or of trans women defenders Victoria Obando and Celia Cruz in a male detention center due to their gender identity.

17. Dora María Téllez was a Comandante in the Sandinista Popular Revolution that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. She is currently a leader of the Unamos political party and is a former political prisoner who was exiled and stripped of her Nicaraguan nationality due to her opposition to the Ortega-Murillo regime.

As former political prisoner Tamara Dávila—a feminist and a leader of the Unamos[18] political party who was exiled from Nicaragua[19]—said in an interview for the *DesAutorizados* podcast (2023):

> *"The torture mechanism used by Rosario [Murillo] and Daniel Ortega in El Chipote [prison] is to break the body, the soul and the spirit through psychological torture... They were insidious in that: you're going around in the streets when you have a small daughter, you were asking for it, you should be caring for her... questioning me about my role as a mother, but also questioning my decision to be and to participate actively in my country's politics."*

Generally speaking, another strategy to disable political leaderships has been to drive them into exile, forced displacement or banishment by subjecting them to torturous environments marked by continuous harassment and the use of the legislative apparatus to remove their nationality.

This has affected feminist leaderships, many of which are now outside of Nicaraguan territory experiencing an "emotional earthquake," coping with processes of mourning and emotions such as sadness, desperation and guilt: *"I didn't want to leave, I wanted to be there alongside the people, as I've always done."* (EP4)

Many of the feminists we talked to also recognize experiencing personal and collective processes of emotional mourning for two reasons: the implications of their forced displacement in terms of their emotional bonds, their families and their life projects; and the pain of the closure of feminist organizations and projects to which they had dedicated many years of important work.

18. Formerly the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (Sandinista Renovation Movement).

19. On February 9, 2023, while we were conducting this research, 222 political prisoners, including 33 women, were deported to the United States and stripped of their nationality.

The attempted destruction of the collective body

Meanwhile, to stop the resistance and collective struggle of the broad women's movement, the Ortega-Murillo regime has promoted denying freedom of mobilization and association as one of the most extreme expressions seeking to destroy the collective body. The cancellations of legal status in the framework of Law 1040 for the regulation of foreign agents have personally and collectively affected those who form part of the broad women's movement.

> *"When the foreign agents' law was passed, the women's organizations, among others, had to start deciding if we were registering as foreign agents or not. There was a series of meetings and discussions about whether or not it was a good idea and what the strategy was. It was a moment of great tension for us because we could already feel that much more control was coming, an absolute control over the organizations..."* (T7)

Following the mass cancellation of NGOs, those women's rights defense organizations that have remained active have been forced to limit their access to funds and to dedicate time and resources to complying with controls and responding to institutional surveillance mechanisms (Cuadra, 2022). This situation has cornered organizations into reducing the scope of their work or forced them to close. According to one of the women we interviewed:

> *"Now they closed the local-level organizations, where is that group of people that went to the other organizations going to go? They come to the only one open. You have a greater demand for services, but you have much more limited resources—human, economic, everything—so you end up drowning all the same; they strangle you one way or another."* (EP13)

It is important to recognize that the constant forms of violence and the regime's efforts to break up the social struggles have generated internal tensions, distrust and ruptures in recent years. For example, the regime has cornered the women's organizations and played them off against each other in terms of deciding whether to publicly denounce the dictatorship's grave human rights violations, or to keep quiet and subject themselves to surveillance in order to continue carrying out certain projects in the territories:

> *"There's that dichotomy, a fragmentation, about how we should contribute to this fight... There were various questionings that registering as a foreign agent was like we were following the flow of this dictatorship. Others said, no, that it's a way of surviving, that it's the only way to continue helping and accompanying women."* (EP7)

> *"Closing the organizations doesn't just imply closing the activities, but also closing off women's hopes of having someone there who can listen to them and someone that can accompany them. That's the dilemma we find ourselves in."* (EP13)

Similarly, the historical divisions of the women's movement have also surfaced in debates on the movement's autonomy and involvement in political platforms. The interviews identified different perspectives between those who emphasize the need to participate in spaces where conservative and anti-feminist actors converge, and those who criticize feminist leaderships continuing to participate in opposition political platforms that involve forms of violence against women and the silencing of women and the feminist agenda.

> *"Right now, it's all rights or none at all, and so it's like they [the feminists who participate in political platforms] still see being in political spaces as the most achievable success. And I understand that Nicaragua isn't going to change overnight, but if we don't ask for everything now, we'll never get it all..."* (EP9)

Additionally, as a result of the forms of violence described above, women defenders have to face fear and distrust in their own communities. This affects collective work and the broadness of the movement's territorial communication networks as their openness and growth is limited by the fear of being infiltrated by people close to the regime. Some of the territorial women defenders shared with us their concerns about this kind of fear and its effects on the community social fabric and VAWG-related accompaniment work:

> *"There's a lot of fear; really, a lot of fear. And a great deal of insecurity among absolutely all of the organized and non-organized women. So we've been talking about that and it's tearing the community social fabric we've been building for years."* (EP7)

> *"I used to give my support to everyone, but now I have to be very careful because it could be a trap. So that's also hindered our work, because now we have to work thinking that not all the women who come to us are victims; they could be women used to incriminate us. So, now we're working in fear; that's the difference with the women defenders, that we're working in fear, uncertainty, and it's hard."* (EP15)

Reconfiguring agendas

Following the repression of 2018, activists and the media have focused on denouncing the violation of rights by the Ortega-Murillo regime.[20] This reconfigured the priorities of the social movements' agendas, including those of the broad women's movement in Nicaragua. In this regard, one of the feminists we interviewed stated that:

> *"There was a moment when the broad movement, all of us, turned to the political struggle; in other words, to denouncing the dictatorship, to denouncing all of these specific and particular forms of violence of the repression; and for a while the feminist agenda stopped being talked about."* (EP1)

However, despite the profound changes in the context, the women's movement of Nicaragua has maintained VAWG and the fight for justice as central issues. In this sense, public denunciations, the registry of data and demands for justice have continued in relation to femicides and *machista* violence. Certain efforts have also been included to highlight the impact of the socio-political violence on women and other feminized bodies. Autonomy and "territorial cleansing" is another subject that has remained central to the movements, networks and organizations of indigenous and Afro-descendant women in a context of increasing invasion and violence in the Caribbean Coast region.

The debate around the meaning of political rights was also taken up again, generating internal debates. In the words of one woman we talked with:

> *"From 2018 we've gone back to valuing and placing on the agenda the fact that politics as such is an issue that has to be permanently on our agendas, because we also realize that in dictatorships, in authoritarian regimes of the left or the right, it's more difficult for our demands to prosper... [the socio-political crisis] has led us to redefine and give more importance to the link between the political, the economic, the development model, the exercise of power, and our own struggles and demands as women."* (EP4)

20. For example, in 2018 it became more difficult to collect information on femicides from the Nicaraguan media, so it is estimated that there was under-registration of such deaths.

Living in a context of the absolute limitation of political rights in Nicaragua has facilitated the following consensus: we cannot advance in other rights without the right to freedom of expression, participation and organization. This has allowed a common point for dialogue between women's movement leaderships and opposition actors such as the church or political actors with conservative and "family-based" positions that have historically been against feminist demands. Along the same lines, another constant issue added to the movement's agenda has been the demand for the freedom of female political prisoners, many of whom have actively participated in feminist movement initiatives. One example of this was the "*¡Que las liberen!*" (Let them be freed!) digital campaign promoted by *IM-Defensoras.*

Other issues that have renewed the movement's political agenda in the last six years are memory and self- and collective care based on the ethical need for comprehensive feminist protection. Recent events have promoted unprecedented reflection in Nicaragua on "the truths" and silences of the country's official history, thus presenting the collective memory as a disputed field.

In this sense, Nicaraguan feminists have played leading roles in new initiatives, research studies and artistic productions focused on the active and critical building of memory from a feminist point of view. Such initiatives include the *Semilleros de la Memoria* (Seedbeds of Memory) critical reflection space promoted by *Hora Cero* in 2021, and the *Nada está olvidado* (Nothing is Forgotten) multimedia special with facts, art and exploration created by *La Digna Rabia.*

Meanwhile, collective care to guarantee the comprehensive wellbeing of both direct victims of VAWG and women defenders has taken a central place on the agenda of the broad women's movement. Putting care for life at the center of things as a political act that questions old logics glorifying sacrifice has translated in practice into the creation of collective spaces focused on protection, mental health and psychosocial healing processes. According to one young woman:

> *"At the personal level, I think the psychosocial work, the work based on emotions, is very, very important. And as women defenders, let's say, that must be like our first point: being well ourselves, based on self-care, our mental health. Because if there's no health, there's no activism, no sustainability for anything."* (EP7)

Finally, the leaderships we talked to said that the socio-political context has resulted in the fight for sexual and reproductive rights in general, and for the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion in particular, having less relevance at the discursive and public advocacy strategy levels of the women's movement's agenda, having been a central issue prior to 2018.

The transformation of strategies and practices

The results of Confites +20 recognize the impact of the strategies promoted by the broad women's movement of Nicaragua as one of the most important elements in reducing VAWG (Ellsberg et al., 2020). These strategies can be grouped into four categories that have been used as a framework to evaluate national efforts to eliminate VAWG (Bott, Morrison, & Ellsberg, 2005).

- **First,** efforts were made to create multisectoral linkage with international organizations, donors, governments and civil society with the aim of building the necessary institutional political commitment for an environment conducive to gender equality and the human rights of women and girls.

- **Second,** relations built up with different actors, community and civic mobilization, and the generation of empirical evidence allowed them to influence laws such as 230 and 779, public policies and protection referral systems to improve access to justice (e.g. the special police stations for women).

- **Third,** the efforts of many groups in the women's movement focused their strategies on guaranteeing access to or strengthening organizations that provided comprehensive services for safe refuge or psychological, medical and legal support.

- **And finally,** another strategy has been the development of media campaigns and programs to promote women's knowledge of their rights and change community attitudes in order to prevent VAWG and fight against the culture of impunity.

The socio-political violence in Nicaragua has steadily been removing any possibility of the broad women's movement engaging in multisectoral linkage and advocacy in the public sphere. The Ortega-Murillo regime considers civil society organizations and social movements in general—particularly feminism—to be enemies of its political project. Harassment, persecution and hindering the organizations' work has negatively affected even those that have not openly spoken out against the regime or been involved in initiatives of the political opposition. Some of the women we interviewed said the following on this subject:

> *"The threats of surveillance, of death, of imprisonment have stopped us from continuing in this fight a bit, and we had to look for new strategies; and it's been, and continues to be, a challenge when we can't raise our voice, we can't organize, participate or march..."* (EP15)
>
> *"Living under a de facto state of siege, we've had to change almost everything, because previously we could meet, hold our assemblies, plan, hold our marches, do training sessions, strengthen the path of access to justice for women. There was our whole role in the police stations for women and children, in sexual education, everything implied in our work as women on influencing the country's development model, the way of doing politics, the economy, the social agenda, human rights. But as soon as the dictatorship radicalized and all of its criminality came out into the light, with the crimes against humanity and everything that's happened, the change in how we operate has been practically radical."* (EP4)

However, far from completely paralyzing the work, the context has obliged them to be resilient, to learn how to work in difficult contexts and to constantly—and radically—rethink, transform and adapt the strategies and everyday practices to guarantee the comprehensive wellbeing of women defenders. In this sense, the focus has turned to silently promoting actions linked to the last two categories of national efforts to eliminate VAWG mentioned above:

(1) covering the lack of public services to guarantee access to safe refuge and psychological, medical and legal support.

(2) preventing violence through awareness building, changes in community attitudes and improving women's status in society.

The following is a description of the main changes identified in the strategies and practices promoted by the broad women's movement in Nicaragua.

1. From NGOs to a social movement

As mentioned in the first chapter, during the 1990s various women's organizations were legally formed in response to the political context of transition, public spending cuts and the state's abandonment of women's needs and demands. The institutionalization of feminist activism generated a profound debate, including warnings that the movement was bureaucratizing by limiting its actions to the implementation of projects and that it was losing autonomy by coupling its agendas to those of international cooperation bodies.

As a result of the repressive strategies and laws, the movement has had to transform its operational and funding strategies once more. Certain nongovernmental organizations have switched to the logic of social movements: no legal status, greater dependence on voluntary work and limited funding due to the legal requirements imposed by traditional donors.

Clandestine community networks of women defenders, female social workers, lawyers and/or psychologists that voluntarily accompany victims of VAWG are currently being maintained. As one of the feminists interviewed stated, *"They're contributing their social commitment. It's more than whether it's a job or not, it's what they are. They're women defenders and accompaniers and they're going to continue doing it."* (EP1)

However, this strategy adaptation driven by the urgency of the crisis context is not sustainable in the long term. In a context of deteriorating living conditions, which affects their physical and emotional wellbeing, the voluntary work and the means of protection required for both them and their families due to the regime's sustained repression implies an additional work burden for the women involved, who work both inside and outside of their homes. Therefore, one fundamental demand of the broad women's movement is access to funding from organizations willing to build flexible and horizontal alliances with networks and collectives that allows the wellbeing and protection of women defenders to be guaranteed.

2. From visibility in the territories to clandestinity

To prevent VAWG, the organizations of the broad women's movement had been developing extensive territorial work, providing training workshops and spaces for formation, reflection and debate with women and other actors at the community level. Likewise, advice for women on the path to justice implied physical accompaniment in the women's police stations and the courts. In the current context of repression, if the state knows that women defenders are accompanying or advising victims, it can be counterproductive for a victim's process of pressing charges and even result in attacks and criminalization. In this sense, the socio-political and patriarchal violence has led to the accompaniment during this stage being done in a clandestine way to guarantee the safety of both women defenders and the women, girls and female adolescents they accompany.

> *"Unfortunately, we can currently say we're working in clandestinity, which is really hard and difficult... I get emotional every time I use that word, but it's the way we're working... it can put us in danger, but it can also save many women."* (EG1)

Silence, the use of pseudonyms, signing anonymously or "talking in whispers" are everyday practices for continuing to strengthen community work while preserving the freedom and lives of members of the broad women's movement in Nicaragua. Continuing the work clandestinely is currently one of the few possibilities for resisting the different forms of violence in the national territory. Even those organizations that still have legal status or remain active as networks or social movements take particular care about what they do or do not disclose about the work they are doing.

Some of the people interviewed told us that one of the strategies to keep the regime and its territorial control structures from noticing their actions is to maintain a neutral, non-confrontative form of language in relation to the government or state institutions and to conceal their objectives if they could be linked to the agenda of the broad women's movement.

Working clandestinely has a negative impact on many areas of life in two ways. First, it implies reducing the scope of their work as there is no physical space to which the women can go, while no open and public calls can be made to participate in activities and support has to be denied when it could imply some kind of risk for the women defenders. It also implies investing a great deal of energy and resources in taking physical and digital protection and safety measures. Furthermore, working in silence and fear without being able to communicate what they do every day to society or to members of their family has a negative impact on the women defenders' comprehensive wellbeing.

In this respect, one of the feminists interviewed explained:

> *"We changed to prioritizing protection programs for ourselves as women human rights defenders, because now we—who in other times had been denouncing, accompanying, protecting—have to assume a double role of defending other women, supporting them, while at the same time seeking to preserve our own life and our own integrity, which is also at stake."* (EP4)

3. From the streets to cyber-activism and digital artivism

At the beginning of the protests of 2018, the social networks and digital media played a fundamental role in the mass dissemination of calls to protests and the audiovisual recording of both the repression and creative initiatives promoted from the political opposition, such as graffiti, songs and other artistic expressions.

With the increase in state/parastate violence, the forced displacement of many women defenders, the prohibition of street mobilizations, and the civic COVID-19 prevention measures[21] taken during the syndemic,[22] organization through virtual media and activism in the digital world gained importance as a strategy for accompaniment, organization, denunciation and resistance.

Along the same lines, organizations from the broad women's movement have taken to digital spaces as a strategy to continue accompanying and denouncing forms of violence and advocating at the social level. On the one hand, they have promoted initiatives involving training, communication, panel discussions, debates, podcasts, channels for denouncing *machista* violence on social networks, and virtual "marches" on commemorative dates such as November 25 (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women).

21. In Nicaragua, the authorities' denialism translated into a lack of COVID-19-related measures and the restriction of the right to information, attacking organized efforts aimed at documenting cases, prevention and the provision of care. As a result, measures aimed at ensuring isolation, reducing mobility and working online were initiatives self-established by the citizenry, private education institutions, social organizations and private enterprise.

22. A "syndemic" refers to the synergy of multiple overlapping epidemics that aggravate a population's situation. We have used the term here to refer to the pre-existing crises intensified by COVID-19 and to highlight the greater impact of a health situation due to its interaction with social and environmental conditions.

And on the other hand, strategies aimed at awareness building and providing access to information on VAWG that generally included campaigns in traditional press and publicity media have placed greater emphasis on digital media and social networks. For example, in 2020 the *Las Malcriadas* feminist collective ran anti-VAWG campaigns in conjunction with the *EnRedadas* collective, *Brujas Mal Portadas* and independent journalists under the slogans "It's not me; it's your violence" and *"Machismo* is a pandemic." Unfortunately, in recent years self-censorship has also been perceived in the social networks for fear of possible repercussions for women defenders both in Nicaraguan and living abroad and for members of their family.

It has also been identified that new generations have made greater use of digital art as an activism strategy in the women's movement. One of the young women we interviewed said: *"It's a resource that's always been used; it's not like it wasn't used before, but I think I've seen a wave of young women with the need to use artistic expression... to deliver a message and also to create new languages, to diversify languages..."* (EP11)

In this respect, we identified new feminist "artivism" and communication projects that use embroidery, collage, illustration, music, poetry, performance, interactive art and audiovisual production to communicate messages related to the forms of violence cutting through our bodies and territories. For example, the song *"Tusa feminista,"* created by the *EnRedadas* collective in 2020, achieved broad virtual dissemination both nationally and internationally, demanding our right to enjoy and experience violence-free relations.

It has been possible to employ cyberactivism and artivism strategies due to a local and global context of greater access to the internet, cellphones and new information and communication technologies among the citizenry. However, promoting virtual political advocacy and communication initiatives has also required greater emphasis to be placed on designing and implementing cybersecurity and digital activism strategies that reduce the digital gaps.

Meanwhile, some of the women we talked to also said that since the syndemic they have not been able to go out into the streets due to the regime's repression and that they cannot meet face-to-face in the territories. This generates concern about the loss of physical meeting spaces that are essential to building trust and support among the movement's members:

> *"With the pandemic, we also stopped meeting face-to-face, and that's been something we've talked about at different moments; that we miss not being able to go out into the streets and also not being able to meet up in the territories due to the pandemic and the political repression."* (T6)

4. From banking on penal justice to public denunciation and healing

Guaranteeing penal justice has been at the center of many of the VAWG-related strategies in both the broad women's movement in Nicaragua and the world. Given the deterioration of the pathway for pressing charges, however, and the distrust of a regime that guarantees impunity to allies who are perpetrators of *machista* violence, strategies that bank on non-punitive forms of justice have become more important, such as the social punishment of publicly identifying perpetrators and providing healing for the victims.

Public denunciation is a form of resistance and justice that responds to both legal impunity and social tolerance of *machista* violence. In 2020, thousands of denunciations of *machista* violence and its perpetrators were published on the virtual platform *El blog de la denuncia* (the denunciation blog), run anonymously by young feminist women. Charges had not been pressed with the penal justice system in relation to most of the stories shared due to distrust and/or fear of the National Police. In cases where formal charges had been pressed, they had been shelved. One young woman we talked with had the following to say on this subject:

> *"The digital platforms have also really allowed us to have these denunciation spaces and to be much more vocal and open about what we're saying, what we denounce, about our own experiences, because we understand there'll be a response and that is something very particular to the social networks... It's not just about denouncing the violence we've experienced; it's also about publicly saying that those who exercise violence are obviously going to be under the spotlight and that we're alert and ready and that there's a community responding, that there's a group of women that's going to respond if they mess with one of us."* (EP11)

Different organizations from the broad women's movement have accompanied public denunciations of sexual violence in which it has been decided not to take the legal path due to distrust of the regime's legal system. As previously mentioned, one emblematic case was the public denunciation of sexual violence made against Guillermo Incer Medina, a member of the political opposition. This accusation by María Eugenia Marcia in 2021, when she was 22 years old, was supported by the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua, the Network of Women against Violence, the Movement against Sexual Abuse, and other young feminist women. As she herself told us:

> *"All of the feminists of Nicaraguan gave me their support at a moment when I really needed it. And so you realize that for us women, feminist women, organized women, our fight is going to be a priority over and above the other things happening in the context. And I believe that it's something that, every time I think of it, I feel very emotional about because nowhere, in no other space, have I ever felt such empathy, such affection, that sisterhood, that sorority."* (GF1)

Another of the strategies for addressing VAWG that reflect a broad vision of justice that transcends punitive justice is to put the emotional healing and wellbeing of the victim at the center of things. This contrasts with practices of denouncing cases to national or international bodies in which psychosocial accompaniment is an additional step following penal justice rather than an intrinsic part of the processes of justice.

For example, concerned about the wellbeing of victims, other collectives have joined *El blog de la denuncia* to provide emotional accompaniment beyond the act of public denunciation. Likewise, women's organizations influenced the Special Monitoring Mechanism for Nicaragua's (MESENI) incorporation of support for people's healing processes as part of its process for receiving denunciations of socio-political violence.

As mentioned above, the feminist contribution of placing life at the center of things has promoted, strengthened and diversified networks and strategies focused on therapeutic accompaniment and healing as a way of resisting a state that violates and revictimizes women and girls in their attempts to access justice.

5. From national to international advocacy

Political advocacy initiatives aimed at national-level changes are currently limited by the closing down of democratic spaces and the Ortega-Murillo regime's control of all state branches without any counterbalances. Another of the adaptations made by the broad women's movement—and other social movements and political platforms—has therefore been to put a greater focus on denouncing human rights violations to regional and international bodies.

Leaderships from the broad women's movement have advocated in this respect in spaces promoted by the United Nations, the European Parliament, the IACHR and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, among others, sharing information about the grave human rights violations in general and their repercussions on the lives of women in particular.

In the same way, feminist leaderships in exile and/or from the Nicaraguan diaspora have actively participated in other collective initiatives to strengthen international rejection of the regime.

> *"One way of dealing with exile has been to turn it into a tribunal for denouncing what's happening in Nicaragua and helping to coordinate ourselves from outside—exile, diasporas—with the territories inside [the country] in order to build and maintain this fabric of resistance in some way."* (EP4)

As part of regional and international networks, the feminist movement has significantly contributed to disseminating the denunciation of human rights violations in Nicaragua and, particularly, to opening the eyes of international feminist and progressive sectors to the Ortega-Murillo regime's false narrative that what happened in 2018 was a US-funded attempted coup d'état. These networks have echoed the urgency of the situation in Nicaragua through regional or global campaigns to denounce abuses and express solidarity with and support for Nicaraguan women defenders. In relation to international feminist solidarity, some women interviewed told us that:

> *"As Nicaraguan feminists, we've felt well backed, supported, and that has been an essential element in keeping ourselves on our feet."* (EP4)
>
> *"There's been very powerful and really empathetic international solidarity with the country since 2018... feminist solidarity that implies concrete actions of support, denunciation, monitoring and awareness raising. I think it's important to highlight it in terms of that global action, [because] it transcends regional solidarity."* (T4)

Meanwhile, the feminist strategies for fighting VAWG have also achieved a new scope, transcending Nicaragua's borders due to forced displacement, the risks and vulnerability of women on the migratory route, and the historically high number of femicides against Nicaraguan women abroad.[23]

In response to this situation, communication strategies have been implemented such as the campaign *"Migramos para vivir: la vida de las nicas importa"* (We migrate to live: the life of Nicaraguan women is important), launched in 2021 by the *Volcánicas* collective in alliance with a wide-ranging group of Nicaraguan and Costa Rican organizations. This campaign was aimed at Nicaraguan women who are migrants, asylum seekers or refugees in the Costa Rican state and territory in order to present and inform about their rights regarding processes such as requesting refuge and denouncing gender violence.

23. According to a news brief published in *La Lupa* (2023), *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (Catholics for the Right to Decide) reported 14 femicides abroad (in Costa Rica, the United States, Guatemala and Honduras) during the first half of 2023: "It is the first time that the organization has recorded such a high figure in just the first six months of the year, and it is also the first time that the number of femicides abroad is almost half of the total femicides in the country."

VII. CONCLUSIONS: WE'RE STILL GOING BECAUSE WE'RE TOGETHER

The path taken by the broad women's movement in its efforts to ensure a life free of different forms of violence allows us reflect on the fragility of both the advances made at the legislative level and the inter-institutional coordination on VAWG-related prevention and response identified in the 2016 workshop. Paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir,[24] a political crisis was enough for women's rights to be questioned again, both by the dictatorial Ortega-Murillo regime and by conservative actors of the political opposition who insist that women's demands are issues that generate divisions and must be left "for later."

Prior to April 2018, the broad women's movement was already familiar with three main issues for the current context: clandestine work, the search for justice for victims of violence, and networking. This facilitated the movement's contribution in terms of representation in political spaces, actions to guarantee the sustainability of life and the fight for justice.

It implied not only a concrete contribution to the struggle for the vindication of rights that started in April, but also an epistemic contribution to understanding self-care and collective care as a political commitment, the socio-political violence as part of an ongoing and structural violence, and promoting a broader understanding of justice and democracy based on everyday practice.

In this sense, it is important to highlight the particular contribution of organized women in the Caribbean Coast, establishing the demand for full autonomy and emphasizing how they have continually suffered different forms of violence against their bodies and territories since before 2018. Meanwhile, new feminist leaderships have placed wellbeing and healing at the center of things and have questioned and denounced expressions of violence within the feminist movement and opposition political organizations.

It is clear that the sociopolitical crisis increased women's vulnerability to different types of violence due to the deterioration of living conditions, the generalized impunity, and the attempt to wipe out the different organizational expressions that accompanied victims of violence in their territories. We also identified the regime's constant attacks aimed at wiping out the collective strength of the broad women's movement, which generated painful impacts and grief in the lives of women defenders as a result of criminalization, torture, exile and having to give up life projects.

24. "Never forget that it only takes a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must remain vigilant throughout your life."

The difficult context of authoritarianism and the absolute closure of all arenas for democratic participation have forced a reconfiguration of agendas, strengthening the struggle for justice and a life free of all types of violence. The central importance of political rights in feminist agendas has also been recognized, while new issues such as memory and self- and collective care have been taken up. **We proudly highlight the resilience and collective strength of organized women to reinvent strategies and practices and continue their VAWG-related work based on clandestinity, virtuality, healing and international advocacy.**

> *"I get a bit nostalgic remembering so many things that we've done and built collectively based on the experience of each one of us; but it also makes me proud. We've done so much! And it's not just for the sake of it; it requires enthusiasm! Because we've left our mark and great contributions through that work throughout history..."* (T1)

> *"They can take our buildings, they can take everything, but they can't take our dignity. And as they say, 'nobody can take away the good times' and everything we've learned and shared or everything we're going to continue doing. And that's why I was left with a feeling of pride, of recognizing that whole path we've come down..."* (T2)

Despite the adverse times, the uncertainties and the forms of violence aimed at dismantling the broad women's movement, we are still going. **We are still collectivizing the indignation** because we do not know any other way of fighting than weaving networks with other women and supporting and energizing each other. We are still going because we are together, even in exile thousands of kilometers apart, even weighed down by our own fears and the grief of our personal and collective losses. We are still going with pride in the path travelled so far, **defending hope and committed to a life free of all forms of violence:**

"We aspire to keep on working, and above all to remain together, which is what has made us strong and allowed us to still be here... It's our commitment that motivates me to continue this difficult, tedious and risky work... And at the same time, undoubtedly, I'm motivated by hope; the hope that this will change. For me, it's so important to be together and feel supported, because the situations aren't so different and the hope is there in the territories. It prevails against everything." (EG1)

"I feel that the collective spaces when I'm with other women fill me with energy and inspire me... That exchange with other women, that collectivity, inspires me a lot... that moment of meeting with the women and feeling the recognition; while they learn from me, I learn from them. It's very important for me, even if it's complicated, complex, even if it's sometimes frustrating; I believe it's something that motivates me, feeling that what I'm doing is contributing to something bigger than me. I believe that's something that keeps me active in spite of everything." (EP1)

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