

***APRENDER PARA NO DEPENDER:***  
**An Analysis of *Casa de la Mujer* Women's Resource Centre in  
Nicaragua**

**By**  
**Samantha Blostein**

**A Thesis**  
**Presented to**  
**The Faculty of Graduate Studies**  
**Of**  
**The University of Guelph**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**  
**Master of Arts**  
**In**  
**Sociology**

**Guelph, Ontario, Canada**

**© Samantha Blostein, January, 2013**

## ABSTRACT

### ***APRENDER PARA NO DEPENDER:* AN ANALYSIS OF CASA DE LA MUJER WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE IN NICARAGUA**

**Samantha Blostein**  
**University of Guelph, 2013**

**Advisor:**  
**Professor Lisa Kowalchuk**

This thesis investigates an adult education program led by *Casa de la Mujer*, a women's organization in San Juan del Sur in the south of Nicaragua. At this centre, women acquire vocational skills and engage in workshops about women's rights, domestic violence awareness and sexual and reproductive health. Several gender and development scholars suggest that empowerment can be achieved through women's informal education programs that aim to facilitate critical learning for consciousness-raising and self-awareness. This was the topic of my field research at this centre. I conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation to gain an understanding of how those in the program feel that their participation has impacted their gendered power social relations and livelihood opportunities. My research indicates that despite facing various barriers, through the skills development and gender training programs participants of *Casa de la Mujer* are able to act as agents to make strategic life decisions.

This thesis is dedicated to Mayra Calderón who has committed her life to promoting women's rights in Nicaragua. Thank you Mayra and all of the women of *Casa de la Mujer* who supported me with my research and taught me to keep fighting for what we want to achieve.

-----

*Esta tesis esta dedicada a Mayra Calderón, quien a comprometido su vida a la promoción de los derechos de la mujer en Nicaragua. Te agradezco mucho Mayra y a todas las mujeres de La Casa de la Mujer quienes me apoyaron en mi investigación y me enseñaron a seguir luchando por lo que queremos lograr.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would foremost like to thank my brilliant Academic Advisor, Professor Lisa Kowalchuk, for her guidance and for propelling me to continuously excel, Professor Kerry Preibisch, for her critical comments and questions on my drafts, Professor Sally Humphries for her careful consideration of the details and arguments of my research, Shelagh Daly for being my Grad Mother, and Professor Vivian Shalla for her attention to my progress throughout the Master's program.

The completion of this thesis could not have been possible without the love and care of Alexzander Smith.

I am deeply grateful to my friends Olivia Kijewski, Alia Ziesman, Eduardo Huesca, and Amir Mostaghim for stimulating me intellectually and helping me laugh through it all.

I am filled with gratitude for my family, Arlene and Barry Blostein and Shawna Rathbun, who always ask enough questions to keep me on track and provide daily (and sometimes hourly) encouragement.

I would also like to express my appreciation for the work and struggle of Mayra Calderón and all of the women of the *Casa de la Mujer* who shared their stories with me as an ally in the fight for women's rights.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Overview of Education Policy in Nicaragua .....	3
Overview of the Women’s Movement and Gender Issues in Nicaragua .....	12
Women-led organizations: Empowerment and Adult Education.....	20
Conceptualizations of Empowerment .....	23
The Roots of San Juan del Sur’s <i>Casa de la Mujer</i> .....	24
<i>Casa de la Mujer</i> , Women’s Education, and Empowerment .....	29
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology.....</b>	<b>32</b>
Participant Observation.....	34
Semi-Structured Interviews.....	37
Coding.....	38
<b>Chapter 4: Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>40</b>
Resources.....	40
<u>Education</u> .....	40
<u>Social Networks</u> .....	59
Outcomes.....	61
Agency.....	69
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion.....</b>	<b>83</b>
Research Questions Addressed .....	83
Limitations and Future Research Directions .....	88
Implications of Research.....	88
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Appendix A: Interview Guide .....</b>	<b>98</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of the research for my Master's thesis is to examine an adult education program led by the women's organization, *Casa de la Mujer* (Women's House), located in San Juan del Sur in the south of Nicaragua. At this centre, women acquire basic literacy, job training, and practical vocational skills. They also engage in discussions about women's rights to control over their bodies and a life free of violence. I conducted interviews and participant observation at this centre from May – July 2011 and from February – March 2012, to gain an understanding of how those in the program feel that their participation has impacted their gendered power social relations and livelihood opportunities. This research is beneficial to the wider understanding of the relationship between empowerment and women-led organizations and will specifically add to knowledge about the impacts and outcomes of educational programs provided by women-led organizations.

At present in Latin America, neoliberal policies designed to reduce countries' financial deficits and international debt have exacerbated poverty. A severe reduction in state funded social services has intensified gender inequalities. Women are disproportionately affected by situations of poverty in which their agency is compromised by restricted access to education, abuse, and the inability to voice concerns. Specifically in Nicaragua, the neoliberal reforms that were implemented in the conservative administrations of the 1990's have led to state austerity measures, free market economic policies, increased inflation and rising levels of unemployment which have worsened gender inequality. As the FSLN came to power in 2006 abortion became criminalized in all cases, even when the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother. This has led to an increase in clandestine abortions and maternal mortality.

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, after Haiti. Forty-three percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day, and seventy-eight percent live on less than two dollars a day (Bradshaw, 2002). In Nicaragua, as a result of social service cuts that were implemented in the 1990's, local and foreign organizations have stepped in to provide informal literacy and job training programs to low-income adults. Many of these are still running today and many new groups have emerged to deal with Nicaragua's situation of poverty. Given women's subordinate socioeconomic status, literacy and job training are important methods of providing them with useful life skills. Several gender and development scholars suggest that one way to achieve gender equality is through women's informal education programs that aim to facilitate critical learning for self-awareness. This was the topic of my field research at *Casa de la Mujer*. By looking at the specific case study of *Casa de la Mujer*, my research examines the impacts of a women-led community education program in the specific context of Nicaragua. The questions that this

research seeks to address are: How, if at all, does *Casa de la Mujer* promote and facilitate women's empowerment? How, if at all, do courses and workshops run by *Casa de la Mujer* promote gender transformation, characterized by a change in power relations between genders? And what factors inhibit women from accessing the programs offered by *Casa de la Mujer*?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

### Overview of Education Policy in Nicaragua

With backing from a large section of the populace including women, in 1979 the Nicaraguan Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dictatorship after years of violent struggle. The attitude of the Somoza dictatorship towards funding education for all citizens is best summarized in the words of Antonio Somoza Garcia: “I don’t want educated people. I want oxen” (quoted in Brandt, 1991: 29). The Somoza regime focused on having an uneducated populace with an unskilled and easily exploitable labour force to support the agro-export economy. This helps explain why when the Revolutionary Sandinista era started, over half of the Nicaraguan population was illiterate (Brandt, 1989, 1991). One of the first undertakings of the new Sandinista government was to establish universal education with a mass literacy crusade that occurred between March 3 and August 23, 1980. Within this five-month period, the illiteracy rate dropped from 50 percent to about 13 percent of the population (Bujurd and Wirper, 2009). The campaign recruited and trained 50,000 young volunteers and sent them to teach in slums, factories and remote rural areas (Daniel, 2000). The expansion of literacy and educational opportunities were considered by many Nicaraguans to be the greatest accomplishments of the revolution (Tully, 2007). Although social change and political participation were part of the ideology driving the crusades and many women became coordinators, learners and teachers in the process, strategic gender needs— meaning long-term goals to eliminate women’s subordination— were not addressed by the literacy crusades. At this time, women participated in social action and community development; however, their involvement was based around short-term practical gender needs related to their traditional gender roles as caregivers of the household and the community (Daniel, 2000).

The literacy campaign in Nicaragua used the teaching methods of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose ideology was gaining prominence in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Freire espoused 'popular education', a community-based type of critical consciousness-raising philosophy and pedagogy that gained popularity as an alternative to the formal education sector (Arnové et al., 2007; Jara H., 2010; Kane, 2010). As Oscar Jara H. puts it, "popular education is 'substantively political' and it is underpinned by a liberating pedagogy... which builds people's capacities to question their reality and existing ideologies, and to learn and unlearn continuously" (Jara H., 2010: 287). In this way, popular education programs specifically address literacy while increasing political and personal awareness. The methodology of popular education promotes participatory learning that is egalitarian and eliminates power differentials between educator and learner. It aims to create a critical social awareness and an understanding of socioeconomic and political inequality. Importantly, popular education seeks to facilitate active involvement of students in the process of social change (Fink, 1992; Kane, 2010).

Beginning in 1980, Sandinista political goals were transmitted through the national political support of social organizations that provided adult education to Nicaraguans in poverty. The Literacy Crusades and later the Vice Ministry of Adult Education were driven by the teachings and methodology of popular education (*Informe de País*, 2008). In 1984, the "Purpose, Objectives and General Principals of the New Education (*Fines, Objetivos y Principios Generales de la Nueva Educación*)" cemented a place for adult education in the Political Constitution of Nicaragua. This institutionalized education for adolescents and adults and was led by the ideology of the Popular Sandinista Revolution (*Informe de País*, 2008).

In 1990, the conservative party led by Violeta Chamorro (National Opposition Union, UNO) defeated the Sandinistas in the Nicaraguan national election. The Chamorro administration instituted ideological shifts that were designed to alter

educational content, “in an attempt to erase *Sandinismo* and inculcate Nicaraguan society with conservative views about gender, family and motherhood” (Tully, 2007: 369). Humberto Belli, a charismatic Christian and new Minister of Education, promised to instill Christian values into education. He beseeched teachers to remove all ‘evil’ taught during the decade of the revolution. He introduced *Morals and Civics*, a new series of textbooks that stressed Christian values, fidelity, legal marriages, and above all traditional gender roles. In 1990 the Chamorro administration executed the first phase of educational reform that focused on dismantling of the political ideology of education that had been constructed during the Sandinista government’s administration (Gershberg and Meade, 2003).

One of the main elements of neoliberal reforms that Chamorro adopted during her administration focused on government cutbacks to spending on education. Her administration reversed the Sandinista policy of free public education by instituting fee-for-services. This caused restricted access to education and pushed many children out of schools and onto the streets. The neoliberal policy of user fees meant that poor mothers would often have to choose which of their school age children would go to school. The *Federación Nacional de Trabajadores* reported that in 1991, 250,000 primary and secondary students did not receive schooling due to a lack of funding and teachers (Tully, 2007). In terms of school governance, beginning in the 1990s the World Bank and other multilateral development institutions promoted neoliberal policies in Latin America that focused on decentralization of the school system. In 1993, under the administration of Chamorro, Nicaragua led one of the most profound decentralization of education in the world at that time with the implementation of the Autonomous School System (Gershberg and Mead, 2003). This school-based management method depended on school councils including students, teachers and a large majority of parents who decided how resources generated from fees charged to parents would be spent (Ibid.). The Autonomous School System was a definitive break from the FSLN policies regarding the promotion

of universal education. Expecting monthly financial contributions from parents for their children's class attendance, and charging additional fees for uniforms, testing and textbooks shifted the responsibility for education from the state to the parents and community. Since the Autonomous School System relied on parental contributions, schools in rural or low-income areas suffered because members of the community had less to contribute to their children's education. In the Nicaraguan Constitution there is a provision that guarantees free primary education and prohibits primary schools from charging fees for students. However, during the Chamorro administration it became routine to collect five *córdobas* per student a month (approximately \$0.20 CAD) as a "voluntary" fee for primary schools in the Autonomous School System (King et al, 1999).

The administration of Arnaldo Alemán from the PLC (Constitutionalist Liberal Party) came to power on January 10, 1997. The negative effects of the Autonomous School System could be felt throughout his administration. One of the key problems with the Autonomous School System was that there were no incentives for parents to enrol their children or force them to stay in school (King et al, 1999). Another key issue was that responsibility for funding education was taken off the government. According to the United Nations Human Development Programme, in 2001, the government of Nicaragua was only using 3.1 percent of the national GDP for expenditures in education. To give this some context, in the same year Canada was reported to spend 5.2 percent of the national GDP on education. At that time, Canada ranked 50<sup>th</sup> in the world and Nicaragua was placed at 106<sup>th</sup> ([www.nationmaster.com](http://www.nationmaster.com)).

On January 10, 2002, Enrique Bolaños of the same PLC party as Alemán came to power. His administration did nothing to alleviate the low school enrolment and high dropout rates in the country. In fact, in 2006 it was estimated that approximately 34 percent of school-aged children (500,000 children and adolescents) were not in school. This had the effect, or perhaps was caused by, children working to help support themselves and their families. According to the

'National Investigation of Child and Adolescent Labour', a report published in 2006 by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Labour, more than 265,881 or 13.4 percent of children and adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17 years old were actively working instead of attending school (*Informe de País*, 2008). This data was presented slightly different in an interview with Juan Bautista Arríen, a representative of the National Commission of Nicaragua for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conducted by the Inter-Press Service New Agency (IPS). Arríen explained that Nicaragua's poverty was responsible for the more than 300,000 children not attending school to work (Adán Silva, 2007). Regardless of the exact figure, this data is disturbing because it describes the wide reaching negative effects of the Autonomous School System and a lack of government attention to education. Out of the children that did go to school, only 40 percent managed to complete grade six. The Autonomous School system was in place until the FSLN party came back into power in 2007 (*Informe de País*, 2008).

When the Bolaños government lost the presidential election to Daniel Ortega of the FSLN in 2007, the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Censuses reported that 24 percent of the Nicaraguan population of 5.1 million was illiterate (Adán Silva, 2007). When the Sandinistas came back to power in 2007, 85.8 percent of the total population (950,000 students) were registered in primary education, however 136,000 children were not attending classes (Adán Silva, 2007). With an aim of improving these statistics, one of the principal goals of the new Ortega administration was for every citizen older than fifteen to be able to read and write. By accomplishing this goal the FLSN would be able to proclaim Nicaragua free from illiteracy. The new government also promised to declare education as free for all and proclaimed a "battle for sixth grade". These were quite ambitious tasks, given that at the time of their inauguration in 2007, Nicaragua had (and still has) among the highest primary school dropout rates and the lowest rates of enrolment in high school in the world (Rogers, 2012b; UNESCO, 2009).

Immediately upon their inauguration, the education authorities of the new Ortega administration banned fees in public schools and overturned the Autonomous Schools Law. This changed the law that previously did not require school authorities to report their educational activities or financial operations to MINED, the Ministry of Education (Jacobs, 2009). In 2008, the "*Informe de País*" was released by MINED from the Directorate-General of Literary and Education for Adolescents and Adults. In this report MINED explains how they plan to resolve the ills imposed by the previous three government administrations whose neoliberal models are blamed for leading to the perpetuation of poverty in Nicaragua. By 2009, according to MINED within just two years of being in power, the Sandinista administration managed to decrease the drop out rate from 12 percent to 6 percent and to reduce the number of students not in school by 25 percent or 360, 000 children. Besides not charging families to send their children to school, MINED introduced other incentives to keep children in school including free school meals, shoes and uniforms for the rural poor in areas where the rate of school abstention is the highest (Ibid.).

MINED spearheaded "Yo sí puedo," an adult literacy campaign meant to abolish adult illiteracy. By 2009, two years after the FSLN came to power, the government had succeeded in reducing the percentage of illiterate people by 17 percent (from 21 percent to less than four percent of the adult population) (Adán Silva, 2009b). Although this is a great achievement, in this same year there were 700,000 school-aged children outside of the educational system (Adán Silva, 2009a) and it was reported that 772,000 Nicaraguans over the age of 15 were illiterate; 52 percent of who are women (Adán Silva, 2011).

Despite major gains in improving access to education and significantly reducing national levels of illiteracy, according to UNESCO, in 2009 Nicaragua had among the lowest primary completion rates, and the highest primary school repetition and drop out rates in the world (UNESCO, 2009). Regardless of the FSLN's 'free for all' rhetoric and claims to have increased government funding to

education, national and international critiques argue that improvements have not been seen on the ground (Rogers, 2012b, Vogl, 2011; Adán Silva, 2011). Although the government is giving out uniforms and backpacks filled with school supplies they are not focusing on reforms to improve the quality of education (Rogers, 2012a). According to Adolfo Acevedo Vogl, the Advisory Economist for *Coordinadora Civil*, a coalition of over 350 NGOs and civil society organizations in Nicaragua, “Instead of being increased, (in 2009) the education budget was cut by 7.5 million dollars, leaving the Ministry of Education with 265 million dollars in its general purposes budget for this year, when it needs to spend at least 500 million dollars a year to even get close to the target of universal primary education” (as quoted in Adán Silva, 2009). The Central American Governance Institute reported in 2009 that Nicaragua’s annual expenditure for education was 42 dollars per citizen. In relation to the educational expenditure of other Central American countries such as El Salvador that spent 63 dollars per student, Honduras that spent 81 dollars per student and 240 dollars in Costa Rica per student, Nicaragua spends the least on education.

Based on current statistics, high-school age youth in Nicaragua have less of a chance of completing grade six than do those of the same age in the war-torn country of Uganda (Rogers, 2010). Nicaragua’s high school enrollment rate of 45 percent is one of the lowest globally. In an analysis of the 2011 national budget, Adelmo Sandino, an Economic Investigator of the Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policy, reported that government funding to primary education had been slashed by almost 50 percent since 2008. As stated by Sandino:

...The government is trying to “play with the numbers” by claiming a 6.5 percent increase in spending for education and a 4 percent increase in spending for health. Those figures, he said, are based on *córdoba* amounts. But if the numbers are dollarized to account for devaluation of the *córdoba*, next year’s health budget actually decreases by .5 percent and the increase for education is only 2 percent – insufficient to meet the demands of students and improve dilapidated school infrastructure (as quoted in Rogers, 2010).

It is noteworthy that besides not providing the promised funding to education, there are two major criticisms of the FSLN's educational policies in Nicaragua. The first is that the curriculum is far too partisan and focused on politically supporting the FSLN (Rogers, 2012a). The second is that educational institutions are not challenging gender inequality and are reproducing women's subordination (Rogers, 2010; Adán Silva, 2010). In an interview with Tortilla con Sal, an independent news source, the FSLN Minister of Education Miguel de Castilla explained that one of the main priorities of the Sandinista party has been to include youth as the protagonists of the national political culture and reality in Nicaragua (Jacobs, 2008). It is quite significant that political rallying is aimed at youth since they represent the largest demographic group in Nicaragua. Of all Nicaraguans, those under 30 represent 67.1 percent of the population (Jacobs, 2011). It is hard to escape the conclusion that there are not motives to gain access to a loyal and active FSLN voting base. As Tim Rogers, a reporter from the Nicaragua Dispatch aptly puts it: "Critics are also worried about the politicization of the education system, from hanging Ortega's propaganda in schools to the Sandinistas' rather unacademic practice of mobilizing students to skip class to march in the streets like an army of impressionable young apparatchiks" (Rogers, 2012a).

There are two main ways that the institution of education is sexist in Nicaragua. Seventy-five to eighty-five percent of primary school teachers and fifty to seventy percent of secondary school teachers are women in Nicaragua (UNESCO, 2009). It is significant then that the pay of teachers in Nicaragua places them below the national poverty line. Nicaraguan teachers are among the most poorly paid professionals in the country and are the worst paid compared to teachers in other Central American countries. Public school teachers earn only half of what is necessary to provide the *canasta básica* which is a list of 56 basic household and food items needed for supporting an average family. Public school teachers make less than sixty percent of the

average earnings for other jobs in Nicaragua (Rogers, 2012b). On top of being paid very little for their important work in developing the country's future workforce, teachers are expected to volunteer their time to travel to and participate in TEPCE's (Evaluation, Planning and Educational Training Workshops) that occur monthly in every municipality. In the interview, Education Minister de Castilla acknowledges that without the volunteerism of teachers, educational goals could not be met. However he states that because the government of Nicaragua "analyzes and agrees upon not just teachers' salaries but all public sector workers' salaries with the IMF," there is little hope of an increase in their wages (as quoted in Jacobs, 2008). This is particularly problematic for female teachers who are not paid for their extra time and who must attend trainings on top of their personal childcare and household duties.

The second reason that education as an institution perpetuates women's subordination is through sexist curriculum. In textbooks and in class instruction, students are taught about distinct roles, expectations and responsibilities for men and women. The traditional Christian beliefs expressed in the educational reform implemented in the school curriculum at the time of Chamorro's UNO party have not changed. In 2012, Ortega declared education free for all, and in the official statistics gender parity has been reached in rates of girls attending all levels of education. However, according to Nicaraguan sociologist Óscar René Vargas, in Nicaragua's educational system gender stereotypes are reproduced by what is taught in the classroom and this perpetuates women's subordination and discrimination (Rogers, 2010; Adán Silva, 2010).

The FSLN has succeeded in declaring Nicaragua free from illiteracy based on meeting the requirements set by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that to be free of illiteracy a country must have an illiteracy rate of less than five percent (Adán Silva, 2009). This is a grand achievement. However, Juanita Jiménez of the Autonomous Women's Movement in Nicaragua (MAM) points out that though it is important to fight

illiteracy by teaching people to read and write, literacy alone is not sufficient to challenge sexist concepts such as the belief that women are the weaker sex, that are taught and reproduced in Nicaraguan education. Furthermore she asserts that increasing literacy does not change the common notion that women only need literacy in order to help their children with homework. Jiménez states, “It is one thing to teach women to read and write, and another to promote gender equality and autonomy... In that sense, a literacy campaign is worthless” (as quoted in Adán Silva, 2009). According to Jiménez there is a contradiction in Sandinista policy when it boasts progress by educating women and girls while at the same time harassing feminist activists and restricting, “women’s right to health and life by making therapeutic abortion illegal” (as quoted in Adán Silva, 2009).

Despite progress in gender parity in school attendance, since the FSLN came to power in 2007, gender inequality and the reproduction of women’s subordination have remained part of the institution of education. This signifies that in the public school system women’s rights are not represented. This stresses the need for organizations like *Casa de la Mujer* that discuss women’s rights and attempt to provide non-sexist information that is not presented in the formal school system.

### **Overview of the Women’s Movement and Gender Issues in Nicaragua**

Not just today but since the Sandinista Revolution, the responsibility for representing and pressing for women’s rights has fallen on women’s organizations in Nicaragua. A brief overview of the women’s movement and the history of advancements and setbacks in the fight for women’s rights and gender equality will now be discussed.

Despite the patriarchal family structure that was in place at the time that the Sandinistas began organizing against the Somoza regime, over the past thirty years since the popular movement that led to the overthrow of the regime, there

have been many advances in the women's movement. There have also been setbacks in the fight for women's rights. Many women were mobilized leading up to the revolution. In fact, near the end of the guerilla period approximately thirty percent of the armed combatants were women. In 1977, two years before the overthrow of the Somozas, a women's organization was formed to represent a feminist view in the struggle for revolution. The group was called AMPRONAC, Association of Women Concerned about National Crisis (*Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional*). They were strongly aligned and deeply connected with the FSLN and assisted in the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. After the overthrow of the Somozas the group changed their name to AMNLAE (*Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa*). At that time they were the predominant women's group in Nicaragua that focused on women's rights such as access to health care and education. After the revolutionary war, AMNLAE advocated for legal support for women's issues and provided education and health services to women (Kampwirth, 2008).

AMNLAE was able to make significant social and legal advances for women's rights. After the end of the guerilla period, membership in AMNLAE increased rapidly and therefore they gained more national and international presence and strength. They established women's houses (*Casas de la Mujer*), which were centers created to offer services in health, legal and psychological counseling, and workshops for job training, contraception and sexuality. By the end of the 1980's there were over 50 *Casas de la Mujer* across Nicaragua (Kampwirth, 2008). At that time, women made up about 25 percent of the FSLN party and held about a third of government leadership positions (Lancaster, 1992).

Directly following the Sandinista Revolution AMNLAE was successful in pressing for the passing of new laws with the aim of promoting and increasing gender equality. The Provisional Media Law was passed in 1979 to prohibit the use of demeaning or ignominious images that exploited women's bodies for

commercial, advertising or media purposes (Lancaster, 1992). The Fundamental Statute of Rights and Guarantees established procedures for determining paternity and equal rights for illegitimate children, asserted equality under the law for women and prohibited sex discrimination. This language would later be codified in the 1987 Constitution. The legislation that AMNLAE led focused on reconceptualizing the family as an equal, responsible and reciprocal institution instead of one of machismo and patriarchy (Lancaster, 1992). However, with the onset of the Contra war in 1981, those in AMNLAE were encouraged to suppress their gender interests in favor of the FSLN struggle (Kampwirth, 2002; Molyneux, 2001).

In 1990, the FSLN lost the presidential election and the conservative UNO party came to power. As mentioned in the section regarding education, there was an ideological shift when the Chamorro administration took office. There was a re-focusing on traditional Christian family values. Due to the cuts to the public sector imposed by the Chamorro administration, jobs in the public sector were reduced. This specifically affected women, and particularly Sandinista women. They were pressured to leave work in the formal sector and return to their homes. Under the structural adjustment policies adopted by the Chamorro administration, government employees and especially women were encouraged to take severance pay and join the informal sector by selling items from their homes (Babb, 2001). Using the ideology of Christian morality, women were encouraged to return to the home where there were supposedly of the greatest value in their passive role as mothers and wives. This had the intended effect of removing women from the public sphere (Isbester, 2001).

Although this is a major setback from the time when women enjoyed political representation in office, some feminist scholars believe that the shift in government from the Sandinistas to the UNO in the 1990's was a time when women were able to use the organizational and leadership skills that they had developed through their participation with the FSLN and begin to freely organize

without alliances to the Sandinistas. It was at this point that many women turned away from the AMNLAE and formed autonomous women's groups that specifically addressed women's interests and rejected ties to political parties (Alvarez, 1998; Babb and Setright, 2010; Kampwirth, 2008). In the 1990's, autonomous women's groups started to proliferate (Kampwirth, 2002, 2004, 2008; Molyneux, 2001). No longer organizing based on political affiliation allowed for the formation of alliances of women's groups across classes and party lines. This led to some advances in women's rights in Nicaragua. In 1992, a network of 150 women's organizations, NGOs, church groups, unions, agricultural cooperatives and community associations formed the Women's Network against Violence (*Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia*). This was one of five groups that emerged in 1992 at the autonomous women's movement first national meeting "Women United in Diversity" to deal with women's issues. Attendees were from diverse classes and party affiliations. The Women's Network against Violence is one of the groups from this meeting that is still active today. Their landmark achievement occurred in August 13, 1996 when they managed to get the Law of Reforms to the Penal Code to Prevent and Sanction Domestic Violence (Law 230) passed by the national assembly. Law 230 put in place eleven measures to protect and support women by identifying intra-family violence to be a crime against public order and established psychological injury as a crime (Isbester, 2001; Delgado, 2003). AMNLAE, with clear Sandinista ties, was one of the organizations involved in this coalition of women's groups but other leading groups such as *Puntos de Encuentro* are not affiliated with any political parties.

In the early 1990's, women's organizations for gender justice with members from differing classes and party affiliations led to alliances that would have been inconceivable in previous decades before the Revolution (Kampwirth, 2008). Other examples of a coalition made possible by the joining of groups with sometimes opposing political views and class interests is the creation of the *Coalición Nacional de las Mujeres* (National Women's Coalition) and the

*Comisarías de la Mujer y la Niñez* (Women's and Children's Police Stations) (Kampwirth, 2010). The Women's and Children's Police Stations were meant to address violence against children and women by offering social services and policing. The first *Comisaría* was established in 1993 and by 1996 there were ten nationwide (Isbester, 2001). By 2000 there were fourteen *Comisarías* and thousands of women had used their services throughout the country (Kampwirth, 2010).

Despite these significant accomplishments, at the beginning of the 1990s the women's movement faced a number of setbacks to their achievements in the years after the Revolution. As pointed out by Kampwirth, "In the early 1990s, a number of day care centers were shut down, state-funded marriage counseling, workshops against domestic violence, and services for battered women were eliminated, and contraception counseling was no longer offered in public hospitals" (2006: 79). In 1993, the Nicaraguan Institute for Research on Women (INIM), the previously obsolete Sandinista government women's organization, was re-named the Nicaraguan Institute for Women. This name change retained the same acronym, INIM, which was previously used but co-opted its previous purpose. This was an effort by the Chamorro administration to propagate the ideal of motherhood into the women's movement by encouraging the inclusion of Chamorro's traditional ideology of the family (Isbester, 2001). This ideology was being taught and reproduced in the school system (as explained above). Although by the end of her time in office there were ten *Comisarías* across the country, the women's movement was set back during Chamorro's time as president. According to Isbester, "The (Chamorro) government's public policies that explicitly addressed women, idealized motherhood and the nuclear family, refused women their reproductive rights, and reduced information about and access to women's rights" (Isbester, 2001: 123).

When President Alemán took office in 1997, the situation did not improve for gender reform. His administration continued the structural adjustment policies

implemented by Chamorro and further increased budget cuts to education and public services. These cuts, coupled with the results of Hurricane Mitch, led to a progressively harsher economic situation for women. An institutional change that was proposed by the Aleman administration that was strongly opposed by the united but diverse women's movement pertained to INIM, the Nicaraguan Women's Institute the government agency that was created during the Sandinista administration of the 1980's (Kampwirth, 2004) and was later reinstated, redubbed and co-opted to reach Chamorro's ideological goals (Isbester, 2001). INIM was one of the main actors in the women's coalition from which the *Comisarías* emerged. Within his first year in office Alemán announced that the creation of the Ministry of Family which would subsume INIM and take away its independence as an agency. Although it did not reflect the reality of the majority of Nicaraguans living in mixed-family or women-headed households, the Ministry of Family attempted to define nuclear families as the ideal family institution<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the Ministry was to defend this narrow vision of the family institution by helping formalize common law marriages through matrimony. This emphasis on defending the traditional family in government policy relegated women to the family home with the role of mother and wife (Isbester, 2001). Cuts to public services meant that funding for *Comisarías* was either decreased or terminated. Due to women's restricted access to formal jobs, means of ownership, credit or trade skills, they struggled to find economic stability (Isbester, 2001). *La Boletina*, a feminist magazine published by *Puntos de Encuentro*, one of the strongest autonomous women's groups in Nicaragua published an article in 2000 arguing that the much-needed women's *Comisarías* were in danger of becoming obsolete. This article urged feminist groups, international donors and government authorities to pay attention to the negative implications that this would have on Nicaraguan women considering that thousands of women and children victims of sexual and domestic violence had

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Kampwirth (2001) proves that before the Sandinista revolution, as far back as the 1950's, studies consistently indicate a large percentage of single female-headed households.

been beneficiaries of the services of the *Comisariías* (La Boletina, Edición 41, 2000).

In the years of the Bolaños administration from January 10, 2002 – January 10, 2007, women’s groups managed to remain organized, although women in general continued to be oppressed in terms of gender reform and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights. An exemplary case of this was the devastating story of Rosa, a nine-year-old girl who had been the victim of rape. Her situation garnered international attention in 2002 because of the public protests from the still highly organized women’s movement. At this time abortion was illegal, however according to Article 165, therapeutic abortion was an exception to this ban (Kampwirth, 2006). Therapeutic abortion was permitted only in cases of serious damage to the fetus, instances of documented rape and if the pregnant woman’s life was endangered by the pregnancy (Kampwirth, 2008). Given Rosa’s young and not-fully mature body, her pregnancy was clearly a threat to her life. Bolaños himself, along with representatives from the Ministry of the Family, the Ministry of Health and the Catholic Church opposed Rosa receiving an abortion. This sparked a public and aggressive battle with the organized women’s movement, especially the coalition of the Network of Women Against Violence as well as international feminist groups. In the end, Rosa received the abortion but not in a hospital where it should have occurred to ensure safety. Rather the procedure occurred in a clinic in the middle of the night (Kampwirth, 2006).

Based on their historic connection with the women’s movement, especially AMNLAE, one would assume that in trying to win votes to get back to power, Ortega would have appealed to this support base. However, in 2006 as a campaign strategy when Ortega was trying to lead the FSLN back into the presidency after being out of power since 1990 he aligned himself with the Catholic Church and Evangelical Churches and denounced therapeutic abortion. This decision was a huge insult to the women’s movement and additional

impetus for many women's groups that originally supported the FSLN to cut their ties to this party (Kampwirth, 2008). However, as Kampwirth (2010) points out, despite this turn against them, due to personally identifying with the Sandinista party after participating in the Revolutionary War, many women still voted for Ortega in the 2007 election, even after he had elected to ban therapeutic abortion.

Despite higher levels of girls at least starting school (if not completing grade 6) the situation of women's subordination has not improved since Ortega came back to power in 2007 or since he won the Presidential election again in 2011. In the labour market in Nicaragua, the majority of jobs that women hold in the formal and informal sectors are in positions that are an extension of their domestic reproductive tasks and are in care-provision positions. Nicaraguan sociologist, Óscar René Vargas, researches women's predominance in the country's immense informal sector. In this sector, workers have low levels of protection and earn lower wages. According to his research, in the informal sector the gender wage gap is 30 percent. Working in the informal sector puts women at a disadvantage since the social benefits and labour laws that are offered in the formal economy do not cover them. Although both genders are employed in the informal economy it is women that occupy many of the lowest paying jobs (Adán Silva, 2011). They engage in income generating activities such as street vending, domestic work, childcare, doing pedicure or manicures, etc. Regardless of whether they are employed in the formal or informal sector, women are at a disadvantage and earn less than their male counterparts (Bradshaw, 2002).

Vargas' study on gender, education and work opportunities found that in Nicaragua women hold only 20 percent of managerial and executive positions (Adán Silva, 2011). In Nicaraguan society women have not been fully recognized, "as subjects of economic and labour rights" (Adán Silva, 2011). This is evident in the lack of women's recognition in the workforce and in their low

pay and restrained promotion opportunities. In large part this has to do with the fact that women are often exclusively responsible for reproductive work and the sectors in which they work are either a continuation of their reproductive roles or are in the informal market and are thus lower paid and less secure (Bradshaw, 2002). Engaging in work in the informal sector allows women the flexibility of time to fulfill community, domestic and reproductive tasks. The fact that many of the vocational training courses taught at *Casa de la Mujer* are geared toward employment in the insecure informal job sector is a point that will be discussed in the evaluation of the program's impact and outcomes.

### **Women-led organizations: Empowerment and Adult Education**

Education as a social institution is a key element in social reproduction and control; it fulfills the role of transmitting representations and beliefs about the appropriate and natural social order. Formal educational institutions are conservative settings that evince the rules of a patriarchal society. In Latin America, schooling at the primary and secondary level reinforces traditional messages about “feminine” occupations and women’s reproductive functions in family and household life. In this sense education can be seen as asserting patriarchal hegemony that reinforces women’s gender subordinate roles (Stromquist, 1992). Stromquist argues that since most formal education settings “present endemic institutional barriers to gender-sensitive changes, it is essential to consider the transformative role of adult education which lies outside of the formal system” (2007: 163).

Informal education generally targets marginal adults, such as illiterate women and individuals living in poverty. Organizations providing informal and popular education programs for women throughout Latin America have aimed to increase socioeconomic and political opportunities and have attempted to create a mechanism for personal growth and social change (Fink, 1992; Stromquist, 2007). Informal women’s education is provided in some cases when educational services are not sufficiently provided for by the state, or when state programs do not cover topics regarding women’s needs and rights. Women’s organizations

that provide this type of information aim to increase knowledge and skills pertaining to leadership and participating in a democratic system. The goal is to increase women's capacity to identify and analyze social and gender issues (Stromquist, 2000, 2008). In Latin America, women's civil organizations have performed educational work with women that begins with their immediate needs and encourage reflection on women's identities, fortifying self-esteem and raising consciousness of their rights (Kane, 2001).

Globally, topics that have been addressed by women-led adult literacy programs are domestic violence, legal literacy, income generation, and health education practices. In Latin America specifically, women-led organizations focus on issues of women's control over their bodies, knowledge about family and labor law, lobbying and advocacy skills, leadership and citizenship training, as well as women's empowerment (Stromquist, 2007). An example of a Latin American women-led organization that has been noted for successfully providing educational services that have increased women's opportunities is the *Centro de Investigación para la Acción Feminina* in the Dominican Republic. This organization offers courses that aim to create women leaders in democratic participation. They offer literacy courses regarding topics such as reproductive health, work, and women's sexuality, as well as workshops for community-level political participation. As a result of *Investigación para la Acción Feminina*, local women have become political representatives at the municipal level in the Dominican Republic (Stromquist, 2000).

Due to the poverty caused by neoliberal reforms in Latin America, there is an increasing necessity for women to work outside the home to support their families. This has resulted in the 'double shift', which occurs when women work (often in the informal sector) while fulfilling full-time household duties. Low-income women in Latin America are bound to their families by traditional customs of childrearing and familial obligations; this often results in women's isolation. Women-led organization programs attempt to break this isolation by

encouraging women to meet, as well as by aiming to offer them a support group and sense of community. This is particularly important because one of the outcomes of a woman's isolation is the tendency to blame family hardship on oneself or one's husband. When women share stories of daily concerns, they can recognize that they are not alone. From this understanding of joint grievances, women's informal education programs aim to encourage women to examine the root societal causes that go beyond individual fault (Ibid.) Fink refers to this as a "politicizing process that can eventually lead to broader types of social and political action" (Fink, 1992: 177).

The general objective of women-led organizations that provide adult literacy programs is to create safe physical spaces in which women can challenge the status quo and allow dialogue between their members with the goal of making possible the emergence of new forms of self-awareness (Stromquist, 2000). Adult educational programs offered by women-led organizations that occur outside of patriarchal state institutions may lead to a process of gender transformation, characterized by a change in the social power relations between men and women. The intention of these programs is to facilitate a process of critical learning and to encourage women to ponder their own experience in relation to broader societal conflicts, values, structures and power. The process of critical learning may facilitate women's ability to make autonomous choices (Stromquist, 2000). Self-awareness in terms of gender issues fosters oppositional discourse in relation to social justice, human rights, and equality. In this way, the type of informal learning that occurs in women-led organizations may create a mechanism for collective political and social demands to be made. This process of knowledge sharing and personal growth may allow for the promotion and fortification of new identities and visions of gender that lead to women's empowerment.

## Conceptualizations of Empowerment

For my research I use the theoretical framework of empowerment as presented by both Naila Kabeer and Nelly Stromquist. Kabeer contends that empowerment is the ability to exercise choice and is directly related to agency, resources, and achievements. Agency is about the ability to make choices and is the process through which choices are made and put into action. Resources are the methods or pre-conditions through which agency is exercised. Resources are not just material in the conventional, economic sense. They are also the various human and social assets that help one exercise choice. For instance, a social resource may be an individual's personal social networks that provide employment opportunities. Achievements are the outcomes of agency (Kabeer, 1999). Importantly, "empowerment is rooted in how people see themselves - their sense of self-worth" (Kabeer, 2005: 14).

Stromquist explains that empowerment has four dimensions: political (participating in power relations), economic (the generation and control of resources), cognitive ('emancipatory knowledge') and personal (self-confidence). Stromquist defines empowerment as the process of changing the distribution of power, and facilitating the development of critical thought and agency at the individual and collective level (Stromquist, 2008). In a similar notion to that presented by Kabeer, Stromquist argues that empowerment is, "the development of a sense of self-esteem, competence, and autonomy" (Stromquist, 1995).

The Gender and Development literature acknowledges that who has use of, control over and access to both material and ideological resources in social relations is determined by power (Monkman et al, 2008; Reeves and Baden, 2000). Therefore, in examining power relations there are three types to consider: 'power to' make decisions and effect change, 'power with' or the ability to work towards a common goal with others, and 'power within' meaning self-confidence. These concepts of power are proposed as an alternate

understanding of power as strictly meaning ‘power over’ others and encourage an understanding of power as relational. Thus because of the inter-dependency of women and men, gendered relations of power must be thought of as relational (Esplen, 2006; Reeves and Baden, 2000). Therefore, gender equality projects that aim to empower women must consider this relational aspect of gendered power relations (Esplen, 2006). Reeves and Baden (2000), of the BRIDGE Institute of Development Studies, explain that, “Women’s empowerment does not imply women taking over control previously held by men, but rather the need to transform the nature of power relations” (2000: 37). Approaches of projects that aim to foster women’s empowerment must analyze the socially and historically constructed relationships between women and men. In the Gender and Development literature, authors argue that not engaging men and boys in development interventions that aim to empower women may limit the effectiveness and even worsen gender inequality. Involving men in development projects that focus on transforming gender inequality can generate a broader consensus of topics such as sexual and reproductive health that have previously been thought of as issues that are only of interest to women (Esplen, 2006). There is an increasing awareness in the studies of women’s empowerment that when men are not included, gender projects and policies are restricted in their benefits (Chant, 2008). Thus, I will be exploring if and how *Casa de la Mujer* addresses men, and encourages or discourages male learning and participation.

### **The Roots of San Juan del Sur’s *Casa de la Mujer***

San Juan del Sur is a small port city, with a population of about 18,5000, that is located in the south of Nicaragua, about forty-five minutes north of the Costa Rican border. The closest Nicaraguan city to San Juan del Sur is Rivas, which is about 25 minutes north. In Rivas there is a larger *Casa de la Mujer* with more course offerings and where legal services are provided to beneficiaries from the centre in San Juan del Sur. Managua, Nicaragua’s capital city is a three-hour bus ride from San Juan del Sur. The geographic location of San Juan del Sur and Rivas are shown on the maps below.



(MAGELLAN Geographix, 1997)

On my research trips in San Juan del Sur, many local people described its immense growth over the past ten to fifteen years saying that at one time it was a quiet fisherman's port and now it is a bustling tourist hub. Foreigners from Europe, the United States and Canada are attracted to this area for its inexpensive accommodations and beautiful scenery. Although tourism is good for San Juan del Sur in the sense that many tourists come through and spend money, this industry also brings drugs, sex work and provides work in jobs that are often serving foreigners in the hospitality industry. This has increased the

need for local people to speak English to capitalize on formal and informal jobs related to tourism.

At the polls for municipal elections, the people of San Juan del Sur have generally supported the FSLN and a representative of the Sandinista party has been Mayor since the Revolution. In the late 1970's many young people from San Juan del Sur took to the mountains to organize for the Sandinista Insurrection. After the Sandinistas overthrew the Somozas, during the national reconstruction period many men and especially women participated as community educators by going into the countryside to teach literacy, basic health care and hygiene to the rural poor.

The San Juan del Sur chapter of *Casa de la Mujer* was created by a group of women who had first learned organizational and leadership skills during their participation in the Revolutionary War and their involvement in the subsequent Literacy Crusades. Of the group of twenty or so women who began regular meetings after the Revolutionary War, all were members of AMNLAE. Since the war there has been a women's group in San Juan del Sur whose membership base has been quite fluid and flexible over time but has always represented women's issues in the community. One of the women whose leadership, participation and dedication to women's rights has not faltered since the late 1970s is Mayra Calderón, the director and founder of *Casa de la Mujer*. Mayra first became involved with AMNLAE during the Literacy Crusades. When she talks about her past she describes herself as a very timid girl. She recounts that, after the war:

One of the women from AMNLAE called me and said why don't you participate with *alfabetización* (teaching literacy in the Crusades). And I thought that I could also change my way of being- painfully shy. And so I started to develop myself, with AMNLAE. And because of this I am a leader with AMNLAE because they have saved me. They helped form me, spiritually and intellectually (Mayra Calderón, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

Mayra grew up in a house with a very strict and harsh father. So having personally felt the positive impacts of community teaching and organizing, she decided from the young age of 18 that she would be a voice for women's rights in the communities of San Juan del Sur and the surrounding rural areas. Mayra began to educate women at 18 and has never stopped. Today she is the head of *Casa de la Mujer* and working hard to continually provide services to women on an extremely limited (if not completely non-existent) budget. When I asked her about the origins of the group that addressed women's issues in San Juan del Sur, she explained to me that the original group of women first began meeting to clean up the coast, parks and the health centre during the national reconstruction period after the victory of the Sandinista party in the Revolutionary War. The women also met to clear their minds from the atrocities and tragedies of the war. Most women had lost family members in the revolutionary struggle. Mayra explained:

The idea was to run a women's group that could occupy the women who had a lot of traumas, psychological traumas, so we tried to organize in this way. Cleaning and getting rid of garbage and after a while, there were a lot of us; we saw a lot of malnourished children so we coordinated with the health centre to weigh the children (...) and give out soybeans. We started with other women that came from Rivas to help us teach women in the rural areas how to plant soya and about the nutritional value that it had for the malnourished children, so like this we organized (Mayra Calderón, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

After the war in 1979 and the Literacy Crusades, which ended in 1980, the women involved with Mayra in the community development projects continued to meet and stay organized to discuss topics pertaining to women. Many women in San Juan del Sur have continued to share their life experiences and work together for the community and specifically on women's issues. Since the 1980's a group of women in San Juan del Sur have stayed connected and recognized the importance of acquiring their own location. *Casa de la Mujer* was constructed in 1998 through the joint efforts of these women with the leadership of Mayra Calderón and the financial support of The Netherlands. A Dutch organization sent

money, supplies and volunteers to help women build the women's centre. The very act of the women building the house themselves has enormous symbolic meaning. For the majority of the women, this was the first time that they had ever done this type of physical work. For most of the women participating in the collective construction of *Casa de la Mujer* it was their first experience breaking traditional gender roles. The fact that the house was built with their own toil also had the effect of making the women feel a sense of pride and ownership over the building itself. Maria<sup>2</sup> participated in the National Literacy Crusades and the building of *Casa de la Mujer*. After first taking the folkloric dance class at *Casa de la Mujer*, Maria later went on to teach it. She told me proudly of her initial experiences with the *Casa de la Mujer*:

My first encounters were very beautiful because at that time they were constructing the house. And I helped them with the construction. I participated by carrying the concrete, the sand, and different materials. I helped with the columns to make the walls with *compañeras* and with teachers, with Mayra... After I realized that it was important that we helped build the women's centre, for women. After it was constructed, little by little it grew and improved... (Maria, *Zona Central*, July 2, 2012).

*Casa de la Mujer* was built largely because of the need to have a safe place where women could meet, talk and learn about each other's experiences locally. The fact that it had been built with the hands of local women themselves was important to help claim it as a space for women in the area. The initiative of building the women's centre was also community-driven. It was not just women who worked in the construction of the house but their fathers, brothers, sons, and other men in the community helped them. Many high school students got involved in the initiative as well. This was facilitated through relationships that Mayra had with teachers in the high schools in and near San Juan del Sur. I conducted an interview with Fernando, who taught physical education at the local high school closest to San Juan del Sur. Fernando brought his students to

---

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned for all interview participants with the exception of Mayra Calderón.

help with the construction of *Casa de la Mujer*. With the help of student volunteers they also built a vegetable garden out back.

Once the Casa was constructed, the next task was finding materials such as chairs, desks and a black board to be able to offer classes. International donor governments and organizations paid for these items. When *Casa de la Mujer* first opened in the late 1990's, Mayra would teach all morning in the primary school and in the afternoon she would offer courses for women at *Casa de la Mujer*. Carmen explained to me that by constructing *Casa de la Mujer* in San Juan del Sur “we had this house as a meeting place where women could defend our rights” (Carmen, *Barrio Gaspar*, June 15, 2011).

### ***Casa de la Mujer, Women's Education, and Empowerment***

The local chapter of *Casa de la Mujer* in San Juan del Sur provides job training, employment resources, language and computer classes, as well as workshops in health and nutrition, domestic violence awareness, family planning, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. They also assist battered women by providing legal advice and accompanying women to file reports against domestic abuse. The stated goal of the local San Juan del Sur chapter of *Casa de la Mujer* is to be “a collective voice for those who share a commitment to issues concerning women in the greater San Juan del Sur area. Our mission is to facilitate the empowerment of women by providing support, education and alternatives (*Casa de la Mujer* webpage, 2008).

As previously stated, over 50 *Casas de la Mujer* (women's centres) were established by AMNLAE throughout Nicaragua after the Revolution. I mentioned that *Casa de la Mujer* in San Juan del Sur has been kept running over the years in large part by the dedication of the founder and director, Mayra Calderón. However, she is not the only woman or person in the community to keep it going. Delfa is a 36-year-old woman who volunteers at *Casa de la Mujer*. She helps to organize the domestic violence classes, plan events such as

International Women's Day, and gives legal advice to abused women. Yelba is a woman who is one of the founders of the *Casa de la Mujer*. She is a retired public school teacher and she was a literacy and community health teacher in the Literacy Crusades. She helps with outreach to promote classes, workshops and events at *Casa de la Mujer*. She was the Mistress of Ceremony for the 2012 International Women's Day celebration that I attended at *Casa de la Mujer*. Abril is the seamstressing teacher. She has been teaching this course for the past few years. Alexandra is the Assistant Director at the *Casa de la Mujer*. She is 33 years old and first came to *Casa de la Mujer* to take a course in 2008. She really liked the Cosmetics and Beauty course and eventually became the teacher for new students in this course. After teaching this class, she became involved in helping Mayra organize other classes and workshops about sexual and reproductive health and domestic violence. In fact she also takes abused women to the Women's and Children's Police Station to report abusive husbands. Since 2009 she has worked to get sponsorship from local businesses to have women's sports teams. She believes that by encouraging women to get involved with sports, she is offering them a positive activity where they can get together and forget about their household and work responsibilities for a short time. Mayra and Alexandra are the official staff of *Casa de la Mujer* although neither of them gets a livable salary for their work.

Over the years since it has opened *Casa de la Mujer* has relied on the help of volunteers both local and international. Locally women have helped out with events such as International Women's Day by cooking, cleaning and finding donations for the event. At various times they have had course facilitators from Spain teaching about domestic violence and an American College Instructor for computer design who set up computers in her home in San Juan del Sur to teach computer basics. Most of the instructors for the vocational courses have been local women. For instance primary school teachers have taught the folkloric dance and typing course even gathering typewriters for the women to use. Although some of the teachers get paid, their payment often comes late if

at all indicating that those teaching courses do so for reasons other than economic gain. Many women that first came to *Casa de la Mujer* as students in a cosmetics or seamstressing class have gone on to further participate in activities offered at the centre such as other vocational classes or women's rights workshops. Some women have even gone on to teach courses that they themselves first took at *Casa de la Mujer*. For instance, Maria and Alexandra first started at *Casa de la Mujer* in the folkloric dance course and the beauty course (respectively) and later went on to teach these same classes.

This centre, that aims to deal specifically with gender justice issues, provides a good site for research such as mine that is concerned with the role of women's education in altering gender inequality. Researching the role of women-led organizations in the provision of education may provide insight into ways to create changes in the social relations between genders. By analyzing the impacts of the programs offered by *Casa de la Mujer* on women's empowerment, my research may be beneficial to its organizers and participants, and to other women-led organizations in Nicaragua and Latin America that wish to provide educational services that empower low-income women.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

The hierarchical organization of social life produces different standpoints from which knowledge is produced. Feminist standpoint theory argues that knowledge and power are intrinsically linked and this enables and limits what people know about themselves and the world. Harding argues that oppressed or marginalized groups in the hierarchy of social life can yield extensive insight into society based on their daily experiences within it (Harding, 2004). Therefore, using Feminist standpoint theory in my research on the women clients of *Casa de la Mujer* allows for understanding gender structures in Nicaragua based on the perceptions of those oppressed within them. Feminist standpoint theory is instrumental to analyze if and how adult literacy programs run by women-led organizations (such as *Casa de la Mujer*) engage in knowledge production, develop strategies to challenge gendered social relations, and encourage transformative action (Stromquist, 2008). Listening to the experiences of local women in San Juan del Sur tells an important story that can be used to assess the impacts of government policies and attitudes towards women by describing their repercussions felt on the ground. For instance, the accounts of domestic violence portray a message about the lack of attention to women's rights reflected in Nicaragua's laws that is not represented in official statistics.

As a feminist student of international relations, one of my primary goals is a commitment to "experiential and reflexive knowledge building" with the aspiration that my research project will contribute to the betterment of women's lives (Tickner, 2006: 28). Aiming to better the lives of the people being researched is a key principle of feminist standpoint theory (Tickner, 2008) and this is the goal of my research. Therefore, constant reflexivity is essential. I cannot assume that I understand the gendered experiences of those in this program. To gain this knowledge, my interview questions address the women's personal standpoint regarding their own life and that of other local women.

Through the data collection and analysis process I reflected on how my positionality as a white, Canadian, educated, middle class, female impacted the women's responses to my interview questions. I acknowledge that I have enjoyed distinct advantages that some of my interview participants may not have such as never having been the victim of sexual or physical abuse. My white skin and class, evident in my advanced level of education and the very fact that I could afford to go to Nicaragua for a research trip, created an unequal balance of power between the interview participants and myself. Furthermore, I acknowledge that as a powerful person, the act of going to Nicaragua to conduct the research for my thesis at *Casa de la Mujer* indicated my endorsement of adult education and the work of those involved in the women's centre. It is possible that because of this, the interview participants might have over-emphasized the positive elements of their participation with *Casa de la Mujer* and it is possible that they would not have told me negative things about it. However, many of the participants were forthcoming with recommendations and shortcomings of *Casa de la Mujer*.

I chose *Casa de la Mujer*, a women's resource centre that aims to empower women, in the San Juan del Sur community as the site of my research based on my interest in women-led adult education centres. I thought this would be an ideal site to test empowerment theory in action. On my first trip to San Juan del Sur in 2009, I was impressed with the work of *Casa de la Mujer* to draw attention to and address women's issues. At that time I learned about the existence of *Casa de la Mujer* by seeing their hand-written posters advertising vocational classes for women and maternal health care with gynecologic check-ups and ultrasounds. This immediately stood out to me, as I had not often seen many signs like this when I traveled in neighboring Central American countries. After deciding that *Casa de la Mujer* would be a good site to conduct research, I sent a letter to *Casa de la Mujer* describing my interest in education for women and my desire to conduct field research at their centre. In my introductory letter I also offered my services as a volunteer in their courses and explained my

experience in teaching English as a Second Language. I heard back from Mayra Calderón, the director and founder of *Casa de la Mujer*, that I would be welcome to conduct my research at the centre and that she would assist me in recruiting participants for my interviews. I was also asked to teach an English class and so I began collecting learning resources and preparing curriculum for the course.

I conducted my fieldwork on two research trips from May 10 – July 5, 2011 and from February 21 – March 13, 2012 in San Juan del Sur and Rivas, Nicaragua. My research methods consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. When I first arrived in San Juan del Sur, I went to *Casa de la Mujer* to meet Mayra and introduce myself. In this first meeting, Mayra and I talked regarding the past and current activities at *Casa de la Mujer* and what my role would be there. We established that I would provide a class in English for two hours, three times a week, and that I was welcome to partake in any and all activities going on at *Casa de la Mujer*.

### **Participant Observation**

I used the methods of observation and ethnographic data collection in order to get a sense of daily life and particularly gender relations in San Juan del Sur. One of the ways that I was able to do this was because of my friendship with Flor who is twenty-five and has three children aged two, five and eight. She has lived in San Juan del Sur all her life and she was my Spanish teacher on my first trip through Nicaragua in 2009. We became personal friends and kept in touch closely since that trip. Flor was a key informant for my research. She brought my introductory letter to *Casa de la Mujer* and made the initial introduction between Mayra and myself. I was welcomed into Flor's home and spent much of my time away from *Casa de la Mujer* at her mother's 3-bedroom home where Flor lived with her three kids, five of her adult siblings and all of their children and partners. Flor's immediate family is very large and her mother is one of eleven children, all with their own families who live in San Juan del Sur. By spending time at Flor's home I became friends with many of her siblings and cousins who

invited me out and introduced me to their friends in the San Juan del Sur community.

Teaching a class at *Casa de la Mujer* allowed me an entry point into observing and participating in daily life there. Beginning in my first week, I started teaching English classes free of charge as a requested service offered to *Casa de la Mujer*. My students were local women, men and children in San Juan del Sur and the surrounding barrios. In this touristic area, English is a useful skill for work in tourism. Besides teaching a needed skill, my classes allowed me to get to know the community. To try and follow the tenets of popular education, at the end of each class, I asked the mixed group of students (women, children, men) what they wanted to learn for the next class. I shaped the classes around what they thought would be useful or interesting to know. I met the children of the women that came as well as the mothers of the children who attended the classes. In this way, I was introduced to many people in the community. This helped me gain the trust of those in the community and allowed me access to interview participants. I also went with Flor's sibling, Keyla to the *Casa de la Mujer* in Rivas where she was taking an Accounting and Archiving course. The *Casa de la Mujer* in Rivas is larger and offers more vocational courses than the sister centre in San Juan del Sur. In Rivas, I interviewed the director and resident lawyer and sat in on classes. On my second research trip, I helped organize the festivities for International Women's Day. Being apart of this process further immersed me into the women's network that has been created by *Casa de la Mujer* and showed me its organizational capabilities and the budget restrictions they face.

Even on days when I was not teaching a class at *Casa de la Mujer* in San Juan del Sur, I visited and became integrated in day-to-day life at the centre. I spent time there as a site of access where I met participants, developed relationships and recruited them for interviews. I observed and participated in the daily interactions at the *Casa de la Mujer* and the courses that were being offered

while I was there, such as seamstressing and Avon sales. I participated in the events at the centre such as International Women's Day and workshops about nutrition and diabetes-prevention and in the community, such as street inaugurations and Mother's Day celebrations. I also connected with community members outside of the women's centre when they invited me into their homes for coffee and a chat. I spent time with many of them in the central park and got introduced to people's friends and family when I saw them in the street. During this time, I conducted non-formal interviews about *Casa de la Mujer* with men and women in San Juan del Sur.

I was alerted to the immense impact that *Casa de la Mujer* has had on women in the San Juan del Sur community during the many days that I spent with Mayra walking through San Juan del Sur and the outlying *barrios* meeting women and conducting interviews. The interview participants and the men and women that we stopped to talk with during our outings told me many anecdotal stories of how women's lives had been changed because of the help they or someone they knew had received from *Casa de la Mujer*. We chatted with women and men informally about *Casa de la Mujer*, its inception and programming. From these encounters it was clear the immense respect that Mayra commanded as she walked through town being greeted by everyone. Going out into the community with Mayra was also important to be introduced to the low-income areas outside of the city centre where I could interact with women in their neighborhoods and gain an understanding of their daily realities.

On both research trips I stayed in the homes of local families and through this experience I had a glimpse of local life in San Juan del Sur. The connections I made through my host families and the local friends I had made on previous trips to San Juan del Sur allowed me the opportunity to experience events and gatherings in households and in the community. I was also able to observe how gender relations played out by living in the local community.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

In total, I conducted interviews in Spanish with 27 women and one man in the San Juan del Sur area. Some interviews took place at *Casa de la Mujer* and many took place in participant's homes. Most of the interviews were voice recorded and I videotaped three interviews after I was given permission to record by the interview participants. At the *Casa de la Mujer* in Rivas, I conducted unrecorded interviews with the director and with a lawyer who provides legal services. The interviews lasted between 20 and 75 minutes. The longer interviews tended to be with the past and present teachers and women founders of *Casa de la Mujer*. The women that I interviewed were between the ages of 19-76 and the man was in his late fifties.

For the interviews that took place in people's houses, I was invited to the homes of women that were past and present beneficiaries and facilitators at *Casa de la Mujer*. I would mostly go on my own but sometimes Mayra accompanied me. Most of the time Mayra would leave while I conducted the interview, however she was present for five of the interviews. I was initially worried that her presence would impact the interviews and that the women would not feel comfortable to be critical of their experience at *Casa de la Mujer*. However, when I came to the part of the interview guide when I asked about recommendations to change or improve its services and programming, if the women hesitated in answering the questions, Mayra would offer a few suggestions to make the women feel more comfortable. This prompted them to either agree with her recommendations or add to them by making suggestions of their own. Of course it is possible that they felt pressured by her presence to answer questions about the impact of *Casa de la Mujer* in a favorable way.

Other interviews took place at the centre. These interviews were usually arranged to occur before or after one of my English classes. To gain access to more participants, I relied on snowball sampling and referrals from other participants or friends or relatives that they thought would be helpful for my

research. At the end of some interviews, women would say to me, “my daughter is here, why don’t you interview her?” or “my sister also took a course in Beauty, why don’t you interview her”, etc (various personal communications between participants and researcher). In the beginning of the interviews I told the participants about myself and explained the purpose of my research.

### Coding

In order to analyze the data, I translated the interviews into English. I then hand-coded the interviews to pick out themes related to whether the *Casa de la Mujer* and the educational content of the programs have encouraged agency and potentially impacted empowerment. When evaluating the transformative impacts of the program, I intended to look at stated causes of personal change and discussions of the potentially changing relationships of power between men and women. I coded data by categorizing topics based on key themes such as change, power, opportunity, agency, choice, self-confidence, barriers and challenges. I coded barriers to access to the programs by grouping topics based on themes that emerged from the interview data such as lack of male approval, familial obligations, and money or time restraints. One theme that emerged from the data that I had not considered was the notion of value. This was expressed in terms of women learning about their own self-value.

It is important to note that there are unique and diverse barriers that individual women face which impact their decision to participate in services provided by women’s organizations. These impediments can include time constraints due to family obligations, and lack of affordable transportation. Women may also be discouraged by the fact that due to a constrained economy those that attend programs do not necessarily obtain higher paying-jobs. This can have a demoralizing effect (Fink, 1992). In my interviews, I tried to identify specific factors that inhibit access to the services provided by *Casa de la Mujer*. During the data collection and the data coding phases of my research, I explored if and how the impacts of the educational content alter women’s perspectives and

actions. I used the methodological guidance of feminist standpoint theory by listening and learning from the responses and experiences of the participants to understand their perspectives of gender relations in their community rather than assume that I knew the answers to my own questions.

I acknowledge that my social position as an educated Westerner doing research in a less developed country, clearly granted me a position of power over my research participants. However, many women used their interviews as a platform to have their voices heard abroad and indicated that they saw me as an international ally for women's rights. My contribution to *Casa de la Mujer* in conducting research at the centre, teaching a class as well as planning and organizing the 2012 International Women's Day festivities was acknowledged publicly at the celebration. At this event I had the honor of being invited to sit at the head table with women leaders in the San Juan del Sur community. When calling me up to the front, Yelba, the Mistress of Ceremony referred to me as, "A sister in the global fight for women's rights". This made me feel that my contributions were valued. As well, Mayra told me that she had wanted to do a general survey of women's experiences and the success and failures of *Casa de la Mujer* for many years but has not been able to for lack of time and resources. She indicated on many occasions that my research was valuable precisely because I was an outsider conducting an evaluation and analysis of their work at empowering women. I am not trying to overstate my importance at the centre or understate the unequal power relations between the interview participants and myself. Ultimately, the interview participants from *Casa de la Mujer* provided me with information about women's everyday concerns and gender inequality from their perspectives as marginalized members of their society. Their standpoints are the foundation upon which my analysis is built.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

This chapter interprets the interviews and observations that I made during my field research in Nicaragua. In analyzing the interviews, I noted instances of women describing changes in their ability to make choices, access to resources, and self-image, in relation to their participation with *Casa de la Mujer*. Kabeer (1999) sees empowerment as a process of personal change in which those previously denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire this ability. This occurs through the inter-related concepts of agency, resources and outcomes (Kabeer, 1999). My research sought to apply this theory in practice with a case study of *Casa de la Mujer*. I found that incorporating Stromquist's four-dimension conceptualization of cognitive, economic, political and personal empowerment, coupled with Kabeer's definition allowed me to assess the extent to which *Casa de la Mujer* facilitates a process of empowerment and transforms unequal gender relations.

### Resources

The ability to exercise choice and make strategic decisions about one's life involves the related themes of resources, outcomes and agency. According to Kabeer, resources in this sense "are defined broadly to include not only access, but also future claims, to both human and social resources" (Kabeer, 1999: 1). There are two types of resources that I have categorized as being available at *Casa de la Mujer*. The first are educational resources and the second are networks of support.

### Education

There are four types of educational resources offered at *Casa de la Mujer*: vocational training, sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence awareness, and women's rights. During my field trips to *Casa de la Mujer* the vocational training courses that were being offered were in cosmetology and seamstressing. At times when they have more funding, they also offer courses in typing, computers, handicrafts, piñata-making, and Avon sales. Besides

attending the informational workshops that they offer, the general reason that women come to *Casa de la Mujer* is in search of income-generating opportunities. Women who take the seamstressing course can work from their homes and earn money tailoring and making clothes. For this class, women are taught the fundamentals and basic styles of clothes making. They have access to cloth and old sewing machines on which to practice newly learned patterns and make clothes. In one of the seamstressing classes that I attended, the women who were all between the ages of about 16 to 35 were learning how to measure different parts of the body for different styles of skirts. In this class they were also taught the pattern for a basic shirt. In response to the teacher's question about why they decided to come to the first class, the women identified looking for a way to earn money and that they are also looking for opportunities to gain some financial independence.

For the cosmetology course, the curriculum varies slightly depending on the material resources available such as hair dye, scissors, mirrors, nail polish and make-up. Women in the cosmetology course are taught how to apply make-up, style and cut hair and do manicures and pedicures. Carmen, one of the founding members who helped construct *Casa de la Mujer* clarifies what the idea behind creating *Casa de la Mujer* was and why she feels it is worthwhile to attend the centre:

Because inside of *Casa de la Mujer*, we give several courses so that women can get ahead and have an opportunity to have their own money to help with the economic situation in their house. Unfortunately in Nicaragua the women have been very abused by men. So, there are abandoned women, alone with children and they are enduring life with many difficulties. So we opened opportunities so that a woman can have a source of income for her house to resolve economic problems for her children, for their education and for herself, for her family. The courses we teach for cosmetology, and hair styling, many girls have graduated from these programs. Stylists who now have beauty salons in San Juan del Sur. We have San Juan Salon and Spa that was established by a girl that studied in *Casa de la Mujer*. My daughter works at this as well, Erika, she studied

cosmetology in *Casa de la Mujer*' (Carmen, *Barrio Gaspar*, June 15, 2011).

The vocational courses are aimed specifically at women who are looking for a way to earn money to allow them the opportunity to use their newly learned skills to make an income. *Casa de la Mujer* was created exactly for this purpose and to allow women to gain some financial independence. As Carmen mentions, particularly single mothers or women who have been abused might benefit from this type of course where they can use the skills to generate income to support their families.

Although these courses are quite popular, the most widely known course offered by *Casa de la Mujer* is not based on development of income-generation skills. Rather the most well known aspect of *Casa de la Mujer*'s programming throughout San Juan del Sur is their sexual and reproductive course. They are held at *Casa de la Mujer* about two times a year and are offered to any woman, man or adolescent who wishes to attend. Proof that this information is drastically sought after is the overwhelming attendance by people throughout the community. When they offer a course that pertains to sexuality or reproduction Alexandra described to me that the house is full to the point that people sit on the floor, bring their own chairs and even stand outside and listen at the windows to try and access the information. Mayra explained to me that because this information is not available anywhere else people are eager to learn about contraception and how to prevent sexually transmitted infections (field notes, July, 2, 2011). Delfa, 36, was born in Matagalpa and moved to San Juan del Sur in 1994. She lives with her five-year old son in *Barrio Nuevo* about a 20-minute walk from San Juan del Sur. Delfa was one of the volunteers that was helping abused women file reports at the Women's and Children's Police Station during my first research trip. When I was at home in Canada between my first and second trip, Delfa phoned to invite me with much pride to the graduation ceremony for the legal course that she was taking at *Casa de la Mujer* in Rivas so that she would be able to offer legal advice to the women in

San Juan del Sur. Below she describes her first meeting with *Casa de la Mujer* and the content of education about family planning that women receive there:

The first experience that I had with *Casa de la Mujer*, my first encounter, was at a departmental forum in the city of Rivas. This was in 2008. Topics tackled at this meeting were the value and rights of women, the exploitation of children, and how to assert women's rights to men. We learned that it's not true that only men have rights, or the right to do more than us nor that men have the right to put themselves before us. No, we as women have the right to equality, and we have rights too. Also, in the *Casa de la Mujer* in San Juan del Sur, we have classes to address issues like abuse against wives and children in the home (domestic violence) and other important workshops such as family planning, and parenting classes where we learn that we as parents have to respect our children and their rights so that our children can be respectful members of society and so we can set good examples for our children. And this teaching is important because these topics bring us to a higher level of understanding of society. At *Casa de la Mujer*, one can learn how to plan and prepare when to have families, and which methods of birth control are available for women who have little resources or are single mothers. All of these workshops are taught in *Casa de la Mujer*, this is what women learn. How to plan when we are ready to have children and what methods can be used to avoid bringing children into the world especially for women who are in a situation where an unplanned child would be starving and have to endure a life of suffering (Delfa, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 22, 2011).

Delfa refers to a new, different and higher level of understanding because she like most people did not previously have information regarding the importance of protecting against unplanned pregnancy through family planning. This is coupled with an understanding that as unplanned children come into the world it can perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Family planning is not taught in school and most people do not talk to their children about sexual and reproductive health. *Casa de la Mujer* is the only place that information about where to purchase contraceptives is available. This information is crucial in the context of Nicaragua, given that in 2007, the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre conducted a report that determined Nicaragua as having the highest

adolescent birth rate in Latin America. Karla Nicaragua works for the Quincho Barrilete Association, which was formed in 1991 to protect street children and in 2008 shifted its focus to offer education and care for children who have been sexually or physically abused in the home. According to Nicaragua, “The lack of scientific, accurate sex education in school and in the family, sexual harassment and abuse, peer pressure among adolescents, poverty and overcrowding, along with a permissive justice system, are all factors that influence the high teen pregnancy rate” (as quoted in Adán Silva, 2012). The way that the justice system is ‘permissive’ pertains to the fact that abortions are criminalized even in cases of rape and danger to the life of a mother. This is in contradiction to the high instances of undocumented and uncharged cases of rape leading to pregnancy in minors (Adán Silva, 2012). The courses at *Casa de la Mujer* that teach methods for preventing pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections cannot ensure that these methods are used but at least they are spreading the information. Delfa explained to me that before she came to *Casa de la Mujer* she was not taught about family planning and that her family was unfamiliar with family planning methods. After Delfa learned this information from *Casa de la Mujer* she passed it on to them. She tells me:

They (her family) are a bit old fashioned. Before, they didn’t know about family planning. But because of my participation at *Casa de la Mujer* I have explained it to them. I talked to my brother and I told him that he has to plan to not have many children, so that they can give a good education to the children they do have. And I told my brothers how they should be treating their wives properly because it is not just with beatings that women are mistreated but they can also be abused verbally. So I told my brothers that they have to treat their wives better and tell their wives that they appreciate their value. And I told them that they should not be unfaithful to their wives because when a man is unfaithful he can catch sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and pass them on to his wife. So I tell them that if they are going to have extra-marital relations they must protect themselves (Delfa, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 22, 2011).

What does not come through in the written text is the tone of pride that Delfa used to describe passing on her new knowledge to her family members that she is considering to be 'out of date'. This quotation indicates that once women have acquired knowledge from *Casa de la Mujer* they may be compelled to share it with men and women family members in an effort to impact gender relations. Precisely because many 'old fashioned' people do not talk to their families about sexual and reproductive health, young people seek to find this knowledge at *Casa de la Mujer*. Once a year, through a collaborative effort with local high school teachers, *Casa de la Mujer* invites high school students to attend informational workshops about sexual and reproductive health and rights and how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections. Whenever I told young people that I was introduced to through friends in the San Juan del Sur community that I was doing research at *Casa de la Mujer*, most people told me that they had taken a workshop about sexual and reproductive health and rights at *Casa de la Mujer*. Many young people that I met had been to workshops about how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS specifically. Mayra explains this to me in our interview:

We give workshops to the youth about health, sexual and reproductive health and about sexually transmitted diseases. We have distributed and given condoms to them and taught them how to use them. Someone from Rivas came to do this... We also give workshops through the high school, there are some teachers there that are friends of *Casa de la Mujer*, they lend us their students, with a lot of difficulty, but they lend us their students for a short time so they can come and receive information about HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, workshops about reproductive rights, sexuality, and discrimination. We give the workshops, sometimes with a lot of difficulty because not everyone in the government is in agreement with some things that we teach but we continue fighting to support the women directly (Mayra Calderón, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

In order to ensure that youth have access to information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, *Casa de la Mujer* must bring in students from the high school because this information is not available in the curriculum taught

there. Fernando is the physical education teacher from the local San Juan del Sur high school who encouraged his students to help with the construction of *Casa de la Mujer*. In my interview with Fernando he told me that he also works with *Casa de la Mujer* to plan Sports Days or Game Days for high school students in which information about sexual and reproductive health and rights is built into the programming for the day. They do this for instance by giving students information about contraceptives and how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and then quiz students in between rounds of volleyball and other sports (Fernando, *Zona Central*, March 11, 2012).

Domestic Violence Awareness is another course that *Casa de la Mujer* provides. It is mostly offered for women; however, male family members such as fathers, husband and boyfriends are encouraged to participate. These workshops are typically taught by local women who have taken the course themselves and sometimes by volunteers from international women's rights organizations. The participants are taught about the causes of domestic violence and violence against women in general. There are four main themes that make up the curriculum of the domestic violence awareness workshop. The first is explaining the cycle of domestic violence. Next is the explanation of the socially constructed dominance of men leading to male violence. After this, the participants are taught about women's rights and about Law 230, which is in place to protect women and children from being the victims of male aggression. Finally they are taught what steps a woman can take to leave an abusive situation if she is mistreated at home. Workshop participants are taught about the purpose of the *Comisaría de la Mujer y la Niñez*, the Women's and Children's Police Stations where one can go to report domestic abuse. Importantly, the women are encouraged to analyze the socially structured elements of gender inequality and the cyclical reproduction of violence. Women are taught to recognize that a life free of violence is their right. These messages are also represented visually throughout *Casa de la Mujer* with posters that participants make during these workshops. The act of making

posters is meant to give the participants a chance to express their new knowledge or make demands about what they feel needs to change for gender justice or equality to occur. A common demand that is expressed during domestic violence workshops is presented on the pink sign in the picture below: “Ni un minuto más de la violencia, justicia para las mujeres - Not a minute more of violence, justice for women”. This poster is displayed prominently in the front entrance of the *Casa de la Mujer*.



The handout that is used to explain the cyclical element of domestic violence and abusive actions is scanned in below. Workshop participants are taught to identify the steps that domestic violence typically takes to recognize if these elements are occurring in their lives.



This handout explains the three phases of the cycle of violence: 1) The Accumulation of Tension Phase in which women are ridiculed for what they do or say. They are yelled at and threatened with the excuse that they need to be corrected for doing things incorrectly; 2) The Violent Explosion Phase, which occurs regardless of the victim's attempts to avoid angering or upsetting the aggressor. This is the moment of physical abuse; 3) The Honeymoon Phase occurs after the abuse has occurred. During the Honeymoon period the aggressor asks for forgiveness and promises to never be abusive again. The victim believes the relationship has changed and goes back to trusting the aggressor. At the bottom of the page, the message urges women not to let themselves be attacked or controlled by a man and to say 'No to violence!'

Another cyclical element of gender-based violence that workshop participants are encouraged to recognize and analyze is the socially constructed dominance of men leading to male violence. Mayra, the Director of the Casa de la Mujer, describes this concept:

In our workshops about domestic violence, we talk with the women about domestic violence and how to defend themselves because domestic violence is not something that is her own, it is not born with the woman, it is something that is a custom that comes from if a father hits the mother, this is something that the boy (son) sees and then he wants to do it to his wife/partner...

so this is something that comes through the generations. The husbands have heard these talks and they are more clear about this situation, that it is a situation that they say that they themselves sometimes don't have the fault of because society teaches them *machismo*<sup>3</sup> and beating and everything... They understand that they have the possibilities, this violence has to change (Mayra Calderón, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

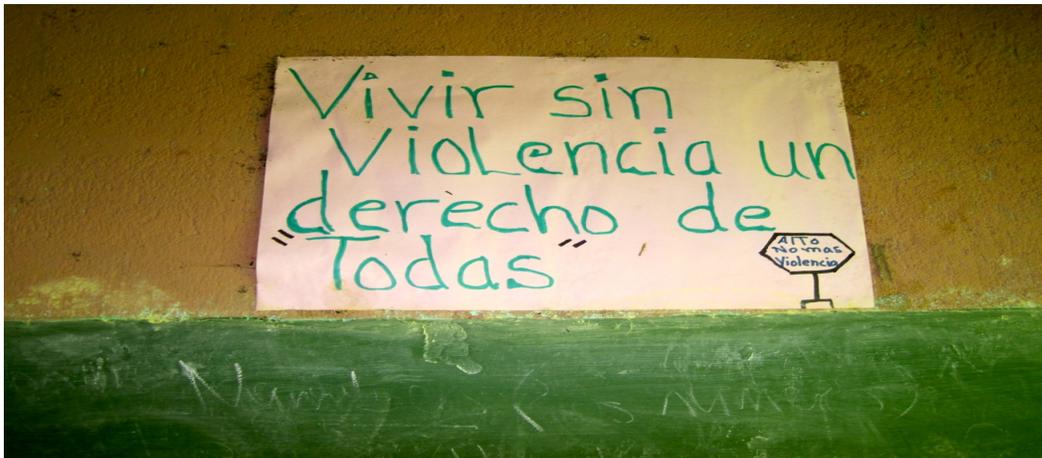
This quotation indicates that these workshops teach participants that there are greater societal forces at play that lead to the abuse of women by men. Above Mayra mentions that men too are becoming aware of this systemic violence and are recognizing that they have a role in correcting this problem and ending the cycle. This quotation also indicates that *Casa de la Mujer* has been able to impact the thinking and presumably the actions of at least some men. Through this newfound understanding of the socially reproduced cycle of violence, men can accept the possibility that the pattern can change and it can stop by not passing on sexist attitudes to their children. Participants are taught that not just men are sexist, but women can be too. Importantly, participants are encouraged to realize that in the socialization of gender roles, women can pass on *machista* or sexist attitudes to their children. As mentioned in the literature review section, an important element of women-led educational services is that women can begin to see the larger societal forces at play that lead to their subordinate position at home and in the public sphere. By learning that violence is cyclical, women can begin to blame something other than themselves for the violence that they may face. Learning that other women in the community are dealing with the same types of issues can break abused women's feelings of isolation.

After discussing the causes of domestic violence, the participants are taught about women's rights and how Law 230 protects them. Written above the main blackboard and on hand-written posters around the *Casa de la Mujer* is:

---

<sup>3</sup> *Machismo* refers to a particular cultural manifestation of patriarchy in which masculinity is associated with, "drinking, fearlessness, bravado behavior and sexual potency" (Sanabria, 2007: 420).

“Vivir sin violencia un derecho de todas - To live without violence, a right for all (women)”.



A woman participant created this sign during a workshop for Domestic Violence Awareness in which participants were taught about Law 230 and that living without violence is a human right. What is significant about this poster is that the word 'all' (“*todas*”) has been put in the feminized form instead of the correct masculine form “*todos*”. This changes the nuance of the sentence and appropriates the concept of rights as belonging to women.

Lastly, participants of the Domestic Violence Awareness workshops are taught about the Women’s and Children’s Police Stations where they can go to report abusive men. Beyond this content that is taught in class and, in order to put these words into action, Mayra, Delfa, and Alexandra, the assistant director, personally encourage women to leave abusive partners and offer their assistance to help them find a new place to live and/or accompany them to the Women’s and Children’s Police Station where women can file reports against abusive husbands. In the case of Marta, feeling supported by *Casa de la Mujer* allowed her to separate from her abusive husband. Marta participated in a sewing collective at *Casa de la Mujer* and told me that after she went with Mayra to the Women’s and Children’s Police Station to file a case of domestic violence, her husband stopped abusing her.

...My husband told me that I had to be here (in the home) to take care of the children and to always be here in this house. For about the past two years, I have had problems with my husband and now we are separated because of a lot of abuse...fighting, screaming, sexual offences and everything. So we separated. But after, he tried to attack me, so I went to look for Mayra for support. Doña Mayra took me to the police to put in a complaint. After that she represented me and took me to the Women's Police Station in Rivas. But this process did not continue. I left it because he didn't continue to bother me. The relationship between us [her and Mayra], and between me and the other *compañeras* has remained. And you can see that she is like someone in my family... In the same way that she accompanied me, she has accompanied many women who were abused by their husbands. In this way she always steps forward to represent women. As we say, she is with us in the best moments and in the worst (Marta, *Barrio Nuevo*, July 1, 2011).

Women in San Juan del Sur know that they can come to *Casa de la Mujer* to get support for their problems especially if they are having conflicts with a male partner or family member. This is evident in the previous quote of Marta a young woman who went to *Casa de la Mujer* for help and received the support to take the required steps to free herself from an abusive husband. She felt that having representation allowed her to go the police station and report her husband.

Another workshop that is offered at *Casa de la Mujer* pertains to women's rights. The information taught in this workshop is mostly built into the curriculum in some form in the other courses as well. When explaining the content of *Casa de la Mujer's* courses including the workshops about women's rights, Mayra explained to me that, "the methodology of the workshops is always the same. It is a methodology in the defense of the rights of women, in defense of their political rights, in defense of their economic rights, and their social rights" (Mayra Calderón, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011). As previously discussed in the literature review section, discourse about women's rights is not taught in school curriculum in Nicaragua. Therefore *Casa de la Mujer* is the one place in San Juan del Sur where women can go to learn about their rights. This in fact is

a motivating factor for some women to attend this centre. Carla is a young timid woman who lives near the highway leading into San Juan del Sur. As we approached her house, Mayra told me that she had been abused but had recently left her abusive partner. When I asked Carla why she decided to come to *Casa de la Mujer* she told me it was “Because we benefit, all the women, because we learn how to defend our rights” (Carla, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011). As mentioned, Delfa first became interested in *Casa de la Mujer* after attending a meeting pertaining to women’s rights at the centre in Rivas. She is now a volunteer of *Casa de la Mujer* in San Juan del Sur. When I asked Delfa what her life was like before she started coming to *Casa de la Mujer*, she expressed the value of learning about women’s rights:

The truth is that I did not have experience or consciousness and the truth is that the first time that I participated with the *Casa de la Mujer* I liked it. I liked it a lot because there I learned how to value myself as a woman and how to assert my rights as a woman before society. I learned to walk with my head up and not have my head lowered (Delfa, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 22, 2011).

The notion of walking with her head up could signify that Delfa is more self-assured and confident because of learning to value herself and assert her rights. Rosa also speaks of a sense of satisfaction because of what she learned at *Casa de la Mujer*. She participated as a community educator for rural health and literacy during the Literacy Crusades and was a community organizer with AMNLAE. When I asked Rosa if her life had changed since she started coming to *Casa de la Mujer*, she told me:

Yes (it has changed) and I feel very satisfied because I learned about my rights...I learned what our duties are and how to protect our rights...I learned that the same rights that a man has, a woman has these same rights. This is what I was taught in the *Casa de la Mujer* that there is not a difference in rights between the sexes (Rosa, *Zona Central*, June 27, 2011).

Rosa expresses satisfaction because of knowing that men and women have the same rights. She emphasizes the importance of *Casa de la Mujer* teaching a woman to value herself. Later in the interview that we had in the living room of

Rosa's house she explained that she feels it was worthwhile to participate in *Casa de la Mujer*, "to teach more women their rights... how to value what we are as women. Because being a woman is not something inferior, we have the right to do more than this. We have the right to do more than sew, cook, clean, iron, and prepare (Rosa, *Zona Central*, June 27, 2011). Rosa is challenging the traditional model of the gendered division of labour by suggesting that women are able to do more than just cook and provide for their families. She rejects a subordinate status of women and sees their capability of being able to do more than their prescribed roles as women taking care of the home. She is also acknowledging the unequal distribution of power where women are expected to perform all the domestic tasks. Both Delfa and Rosa are expressing that attending *Casa de la Mujer* has helped them feel more satisfied, self-assured and confident to assert their rights to equality with men.

To analyze the extent to which a process of women's empowerment is facilitated through the educational resources provided by *Casa de la Mujer* it is useful to consider Molyneux's notion of practical and strategic gender needs. Strategic gender needs relate to domestic violence, legal rights and control of women's bodies and are deeply rooted in gender inequality in the areas of power, division of labour and control over resources. Strategic gender needs are identified by an analysis of women's relative subordinate position to men. Addressing their strategic gender needs can help women achieve increased gender equality by challenging women's subordinate status. Practical gender needs, on the other hand, are the needs identified by women based on their roles that are socially accepted in their society. Practical gender needs do not challenge gender constructs even though they arise from women's subordinate status and unequal division of labour between women and men. Practical gender needs are practical in the sense that they address immediate survival needs, as they are perceived in a specific context such as a lack of adequate living conditions (Moser, 1993).

In the case of *Casa de la Mujer*, the vocational courses that they offer can be thought of as addressing practical gender needs because they provide women with the skills to be productive and earn an income that can be used to support their families, as well as being performed in the home alongside their reproductive tasks. According to Moser, as the need has increased for women in the developing world to engage in productive activity on top of reproductive tasks in the home, women are increasingly seeking skills training programs that can be combined flexibly with reproductive work (Moser, 1993). Like the seamstressing class taught at *Casa de la Mujer*, Moser suggests dress-making is a common type of skills-training course that is taught to women throughout the world based on the rationale that this is a skill that they should know so they can use it in their home to earn an income. Similar to the beauty course taught in *Casa de la Mujer*, because dress-making is an activity that women traditionally perform, it does not challenge women's subordination or the division of labour between women and men in a strategic sense (Moser, 1993). While the vocational training courses at *Casa de la Mujer* provide women with skills that they can use for economic gain, the practical content of the skills-training courses do not explicitly challenge traditional gender roles. Instead of offering vocational training courses such as carpentry or plumbing that would challenge the traditional jobs of women, *Casa de la Mujer* offers courses that fit within the domain of what women are expected to typically do. The vocational courses in hairdressing, manicuring, dressmaking, and handicrafts work with rather than contest women's reproductive and domestic role. Therefore, with an emphasis on the most direct path to income-generation, *Casa de la Mujer* focuses on providing women with opportunities that fit within prescribed Nicaraguan gender roles. Abril was teaching the seamstress class at the time that I was in Nicaragua on my first research trip. She is in her early fifties and has four children. Abril, explained that the vocational courses were often an entry point to reaching the women:

But because we have a society of men that are *machista* (sexist) that prefer that women and the children are suffering

with hunger, and that they do not go out of the house. So it is better for them to learn seamstressing and be in their houses. And they do the work there (the work comes there). No one has to go and look for the woman, she is in the house, attending the home, helping economically and keeping an eye on her children, and she is in her home (Abril, *Casa de la Mujer*, July 1, 2011).

Abril is explaining that instead of challenging sexist partners that force them to be in the home, using the income-generation skills taught at *Casa de la Mujer* women can perform domestic and household chores while performing productive work. In this way, they are not upsetting their husbands by leaving the home and they can also be present to take care of children. Although this example clearly does not demonstrate an instance of an empowered woman, it at least explains that by taking an income-generation skills development course at *Casa de la Mujer*, women can make some money of their own to support children who may be suffering from hunger. Although the vocational courses at *Casa de la Mujer* do not directly challenge gender inequality or the notion of women's roles, they can provide an entry point for deeper change for the women that are participating in the job training courses. Moser suggests that since men, civil society and the state at large benefit from the subordination of women there are far-reaching constraints in fulfilling strategic gender needs. Consequently, practical gender needs can be utilized as an "entry point for more fundamental change" (Moser, 1993: 48).

Furthermore, in the process of addressing basic and practical needs by taking job-training courses, women can increase their knowledge base and skills and are able to build their confidence (which will be discussed as personal empowerment below) (Monkman et al, 2008). Although *Casa de la Mujer* has not directly changed curriculum offered in the public school system, it has offered an alternative to the sexist and gender discriminatory ideals espoused in schools, if not in the practical content of the vocational training courses, at the very least in the other workshops that they offer. A maxim that is built into the curriculum of all the courses offered at *Casa de la Mujer* is "My life has value,

my body has no price". This concept of self-value is not something that women are taught in the mainstream school system. By teaching about self-worth, women's rights, domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health, *Casa de la Mujer* is providing information that is not available anywhere else in San Juan del Sur. Through these workshops offered by *Casa de la Mujer* participants learn to re-think cultural norms about gender roles. By dealing with women's need for employment in the short-term, they are providing them with financial opportunities. Once they are already involved with *Casa de la Mujer* in some way, it becomes easier to get women to attend other workshops and open up to each other about their experiences at home and in the community. From the workshops that *Casa de la Mujer* offers, women can learn new ways to talk to their children and this could indicate potential for long-term change. Women at *Casa de la Mujer* are required to think about gender inequality on a critical level and this education affects their relationships as it is carried with them into the home and into the community.

At *Casa de la Mujer*, the workshops about women's rights and value, sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence awareness and HIV/AIDS prevention are examples of what is referred to in the gender and development literature as gender training courses. These types of courses focus on enabling participants to identify the ideological and political elements of gender inequality and to look at problems from this perspective. Gender training aims for a process of 'conscientization' in which participants are enabled to realize that women's low status and poverty does not stem from a deficiency of individual effort or from an insufficient amount of literacy or schooling. Rather, conscientization occurs when women can identify that their problems stem from gender discrimination in the social system, which limits their access to opportunities that are given to men. Through conscientization, gender-training courses bring light to men and women's unequal status and offer participants the analytical tools to become dissatisfied with this current social system (Longwe, 2010). Cognitive empowerment requires a greater understanding of

the macro and micro levels of society that lead to women's subordination. This process of greater conscientization is facilitated in the gender-training courses offered at *Casa de la Mujer*. In addition to holding men accountable for women's subordination, *Casa de la Mujer* challenges women to think about their own potential role in the reproduction of gender inequality. They are taught that women's subordinate position at the household, community and institutional levels are held in place through gender norms that inform men and women's roles and responsibilities. An observation that I made about the families that I stayed with in San Juan del Sur is that girls and young women are expected to help with laundry, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger children in the house. If they don't willingly perform these tasks they are chastised and called lazy by their mothers. Therefore, by having differing expectations for household responsibilities for their daughters and sons, mothers are active in socializing children to hold sexist views in regard to the unequal gendered division of labour within the home. Abril, the seamstressing teacher explained to me that men are not expected to help with domestic work and that this is because of growing up in a country with a '*machista*' or sexist gender system.

You know that in this society, in Nicaragua, that let's say out of a hundred men, maybe *maybe* twenty men help in their house with domestic labour. Because they have grown up in a *machista* society (Abril, *Casa de la Mujer*, July 1, 2011).

Keyla is 19-years-old and lives with her son, and five adult siblings and all of their children in her mother's small home in San Juan del Sur. She is taking an Accounting and Archiving course at the *Casa de la Mujer* in Rivas. She echoed the sentiment expressed by Abril. Keyla explained to me that in Nicaragua it is not just men that are *machista* but women as well:

In Nicaragua machismo exists in a big way. And sometimes its not just men that are at fault for this. Sometimes, women are at fault too. Because I still hear [from other women] 'because you are a woman you can't do this or that activity. Women have to take care of things in the house and take care of the kids' and there are a lot of people that have a *machista* way of thinking and I'm telling you it's not just the men that have this attitude. But

that's not how it should be. If a man can do something a woman can too (Keyla, *Barrio Frente Sur*, March 12, 2012).

In this quotation Keyla is blaming women for upholding and passing on *machista* attitudes. Both Keyla and Abril are describing common beliefs about gender roles and how they can be reproduced in Nicaraguan society. Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge the role that *Casa de la Mujer* has had in challenging these sexist popular social beliefs. Recognizing that women and not just men are *machista* requires an in-depth analysis of gender socialization and has led to a re-thinking of gender ideology. Another example of this is expressed in a quotation from an interview with Yelba, a woman in her mid-fifties who was been active in the group of women that founded *Casa de la Mujer* and still volunteers there helping to organize events such as International Women's Day celebrations. Before *Casa de la Mujer* was constructed, women used to hold their meetings in Yelba's home. She says: "We have machista men in Nicaragua, Nicaragua is very machista. But women are too, we have learned (at *Casa de la Mujer*). Women are machista as well..." (Yelba, *Barrio Pedro Joaquín Chamorro*, June 27, 2012).

In Stromquist's four-dimension conceptualization of empowerment, cognitive empowerment is the element related to education. Stromquist refers to cognitive and emancipatory knowledge as a form of empowerment defined to be "women's understanding of their conditions of subordination and the causes of such conditions at both micro and macro levels of society. It involves acquiring new knowledge to create a different understanding of gender relations as well as destroying old beliefs that structure powerful gender ideologies" (Stromquist, 1995: 14). The data that I have presented thus far provides evidence to suggest that *Casa de la Mujer* does facilitate a process of cognitive empowerment for women that use its services because of how the content of the courses encourages them to think critically about the causes of women's subordination and gender inequality.

### Social Networks

About a quarter of the women interviewed talked about the benefit of *Casa de la Mujer* as being a place where they could meet with other women as a way to break the monotony and step out of the routine of their daily lives. In much of the rest of their time, women are serving family members such as husbands, elderly parents, children or grandchildren. Women rarely have time for themselves. I heard over and over again that the domestic and reproductive tasks that women are expected to do in order to fulfill their feminized gender role are dull and repetitive. There was an expressed value in breaking the monotony of life as a caregiver through participation in the courses and interaction with other women at *Casa de la Mujer*. This is in fact one of the goals of *Casa de la Mujer*. Mayra explains the emotional benefits of knowledge-exchange when, “one goes out of the daily routine of their house. They can interchange opinions and emotions, so it helps one emotionally” (Mayra Calderón, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011). The way it can help one emotionally is by providing women with a source of encouragement. This is expressed in an interview with Abigail who lives in *Barrio la Planta*, the most poverty-stricken neighborhood of San Juan del Sur. Abigail, who is in her forties, recounts: “Before I participated in the Casa, I was a person that just went from home to work and from work to home. But then Mayra came, and she is a very important woman in *Casa de la Mujer* and everybody knows her, and she came and said you should to participate in the Casa in cosmetics and everything. So I felt encouraged” (Abigail, *Barrio la Planta*, July 27, 2011). By providing women with an alternative to the tedium of their lives, *Casa de la Mujer* may allow personal changes to occur. When I asked Carmen if her life had changed since she started coming to the *Casa de la Mujer* she said:

Okay, before my life before was more monotonous, we didn't have a lot of activities for women. But I saw the necessity for women's organizing so I have changed in this regard because when one sees the needs of women, if one can help and provide support then they should so that they can help each other grow (Carmen, *Barrio Gaspar*, June 15, 2011).

Breaking women's routine and getting them out of the house also has the function of breaking their isolation. It is in this environment that women can begin to acknowledge their sense of self-worth. Alexandra, the assistant director of *Casa de la Mujer*, organizes their sports teams and recruits women to play. She explained to me that this is a way for women to jointly forget their problems and have something to collectively work together in a team (Alexandra, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 10, 2011). Another way that *Casa de la Mujer* encourages women to come together is to solve problems as a group. This was expressed to me in an interview with Yelba who held women's meetings in her house for the group who eventually became one of the founders of *Casa de la Mujer* before its construction. She now helps organize events at the centre. She told me:

It [*Casa de la Mujer*] is a force because we have learned that it is not about who comes first, rather it's more important to come together to solve problems and move forward. We have also learned that women are just as capable as men to solve their own problems. We have learned how to leave the home behind, move away and get some space without barriers to achieve different projects. So we have learned how to become independent (Yelba, *Barrio Pedro Joaquín Chamorro*, June 27, 2011).

In this statement we see the significance of the women discussing their problems and working together towards finding solutions. Yelba mentions that taking courses at *Casa de la Mujer* allows women a chance to get out of their houses. This provides women with the opportunity to temporarily get away from their household obligations and work on their own personal and collective objectives. This suggests that realizing that they are capable of relying on each other rather than male partners to address complications in life could lead to women's independence. This sentiment is also reflected in the words of Sarah who was the oldest of all of my interview respondents. Sarah's house was on the same dirt road as *Casa de la Mujer* in the *Rio Escondido* neighborhood. At the time of our interview she was in her seventies. After the Contra war, Sarah along with Mayra and other women organized to cook for families in her

community. She told me that, "... *Casa de la Mujer* has always helped women. Always supported women with their problems. And I like this, right. Because women with traumas, they feel marginalized, abused by their husband. In *Casa de la Mujer* there are solutions and quite a lot of help and support" (Sarah, *Rio Escondido*, June 25, 2011).

When women are abused they feel isolated and scared. In *Casa de la Mujer* they feel supported because they can share their experiences about their lives and problems at home. The social networks give women a sense of moral support that can make women change their perspectives about their lives. Having someone to give them encouragement and "lift them up" helps women deal with the issues of their lives. This also helps them realize that they are not alone in the struggles of daily life. When I asked Emilia, a woman who has taught a class in handicrafts for many years at *Casa de la Mujer*, if she could tell me the ways in which her life might have changed since she started participating with the centre, she told me, "Mostly because I have gotten to know many new people who need help and support and I feel good about myself for being able to provide them with support. I feel good that they can rely on me and trust me" (Emilia, *Zona Central*, March 3, 2012).

### Outcomes

According to Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment, achievements are the outcomes of agency. In assessing how women's achievements based on their participation in *Casa de la Mujer* can relate to empowerment there are three main themes that emerged from my data analysis: economic, political and personal outcomes. These themes also encompass the other three elements that make up Stromquist's four-dimension notion of empowerment. The first element is cognitive empowerment, which I have just discussed in relation to educational resources provided by *Casa de la Mujer*.

As I mentioned previously, the general reason that women take vocational classes offered at *Casa de la Mujer* is in search of income-generating

opportunities. As expressed by Carmen in the educational resources section, *Casa de la Mujer* was created to provide opportunities for women in San Juan del Sur who are looking for a way to earn money and gain some financial independence. During my first research trip I lived with Carmen and her husband, grandchildren and adult children, including Erika. I witnessed how Erika was able to have steady work by giving manicures and pedicures for neighborhood women that came looking for her at her parent's house. Carmen and Erika consider using the courses offered by *Casa de la Mujer* as a way to respond to their situation of economic crisis. As Carmen indicated in her interview, the point of the vocational courses is to teach women a skill that they can use to earn an income independent of what intimate male partners or family members give them. Erika, Carmen's daughter, is a 31 year old, single mother of two. She lives in her parents' house with her children and adult siblings who also have children. In my interview with Erika, she explained to me how she used the educational resource of a skills development course from *Casa de la Mujer* to earn money by giving manicures and pedicures. She told me that despite already having a university degree, before the birth of her second son in 2008 she decided to go to *Casa de la Mujer* in search of work opportunities. In response to the question of how and why she decided to go to *Casa de la Mujer*, Erika told me:

Because I had finished university and I couldn't find work and I thought it would be a good opportunity to have another profession. And is it still serving me. Sometimes I paint nails, do manicures and pedicures; sometimes I dye hair or straighten hair, all things to do with beauty...before my life was more complicated. Now I have the opportunity to have extra money. It [the cosmetology course] is still serving me very well. And I believe it will continue serving me in the future (Erika, *Barrio Gaspar*, March 3, 2012).

This statement shows the direct connection between the skills learned at *Casa de la Mujer* and the ability to capitalize on the knowledge with economic benefit. Even with a university education, Erika could not find a job in the formal sector. Seeking a work opportunity, she decided to go to *Casa de la Mujer* and this

decision has allowed her to generate an income to support herself and her children. This decision has also meant that she does not have to rely on a man for financial support. In this case, in order to support her children Erika does not have to stay with their father who abuses alcohol and mistreats her. Erika told me that it is worthwhile to participate in the courses offered by *Casa de la Mujer* because, “It is an opportunity that we have to *salir adelante* (get ahead) and it is very economical” (Erika, *Barrio Gaspar*, March 3, 2012). She said ‘very economical’ with a smirk since the classes are offered free of charge. *Casa de la Mujer* can be seen as offering the hope of financial gain and this motivates women to take the courses.

Like Erika, some of the women that come to *Casa de la Mujer* are single mothers. Isabella is a woman in her fifties who had previously been a combatant in the FSLN uprising and later was involved through AMNLAE in the Literacy Crusades. Her daughter, Victoria, is in her twenties and, just like Erika, is a single mother with two children. Isabella tells me that, “at *Casa de la Mujer*, my daughter (Victoria) took Beauty courses. And now for Christmas, when there are weddings or birthdays, they come to the house looking for her. So we have benefitted a lot” (Isabella, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011). When I asked Isabella if her life or her daughter’s life had changed at all since she they began going to *Casa de la Mujer*, Isabella told me:

I went there to learn Beauty, after I came home and I made a little salon... and it has helped a lot, economically and because I have an increased consciousness. It [*Casa de la Mujer*] has helped experientially, economically and by increasing my knowledge. They gave us knowledge and prepared us with skills... They [the women in the *Casa de la Mujer*] have helped; they have helped a lot (Isabella, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011).

Isabella’s ‘increased consciousness’ attests to the previous point about the vocational courses being an entry point for more fundamental change. A positive outcome of *Casa de la Mujer* in this case can be evaluated by the fact that using the skills taught to them, women like Erika, Isabella and Victoria have been able to earn an income leading to economic achievements. Although this

has allowed some women to start businesses outside of the home (such as the example of the San Juan Salon and Spa mentioned in Carmen's interview), the majority of work that women receive based on the skills that they learn at the *Casa de la Mujer* is in the informal sector where they do not have the stability or benefits of work in the formal sector. Jobs in seamstressing and hairdressing allow women to work from home where they can simultaneously engage in productive, domestic and reproductive tasks. The vocational courses that *Casa de la Mujer* offers work with traditional gender roles to meet women's immediate need to earn an income. They also address the reality of life in Nicaragua in which there are not many jobs for women in the formal sector. The story of Erika is a good example of this. She has a university education but because she has not been able to find professional work in her field she decided to learn skills related to cosmetics and beauty. In this way *Casa de la Mujer* is trying to respond to the employment needs of women in the community because, as Erika indicated, women do not have other employment opportunities.

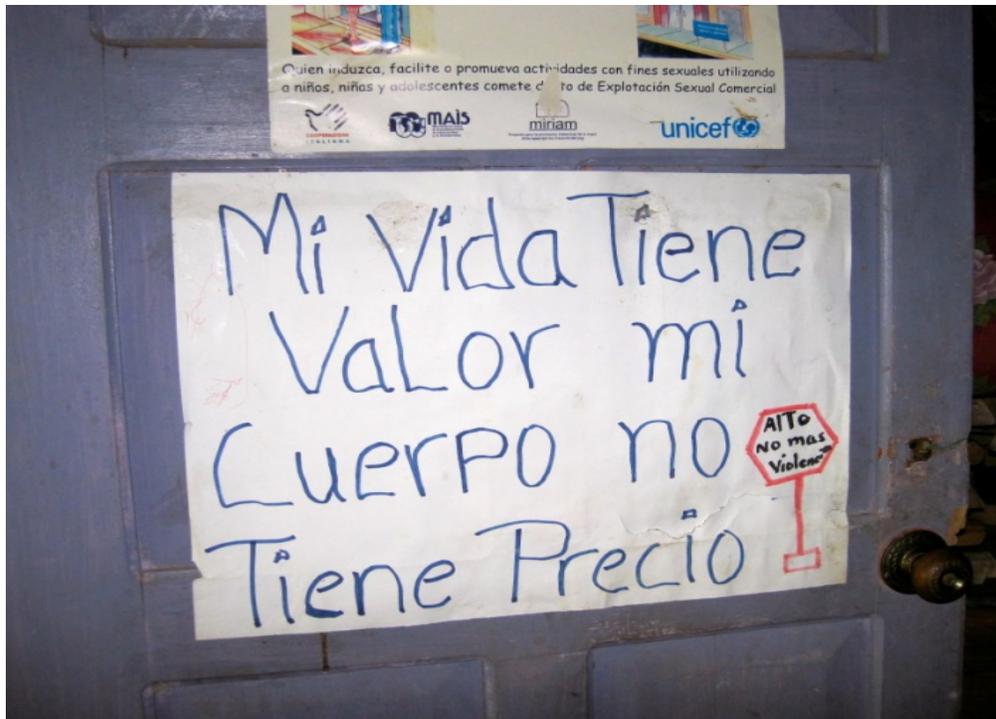
Stromquist's 'economic empowerment' or the ability of women to earn and control financial resources is often required to gain control over other features of one's life (Monkman et al, 2008). Therefore, having access to and control over money may be seen as a measure of empowerment if it enables women to make strategic life choices. Although the vocational courses offered by *Casa de la Mujer* are intended for performing 'women's work' in the informal sector, providing women with access to financial resources may facilitate a process of economic empowerment, which might lead to empowerment in other areas of their lives. Furthermore, the components of the programming of *Casa de la Mujer*, such as the income-generating training have to be considered in combination with other aspects of its gender-training curriculum such as the domestic violence awareness workshops and the women's rights and self-value discourse taught in all courses.

As described in Stromquist's four-dimension conceptualization of empowerment, 'political empowerment' is the "ability to organize and mobilize for change" (Stromquist, 1995: 8). In this sense, the process of political empowerment must be prompted by collective action and collective awareness and goes beyond individual awareness. Stromquist argues that the aim of achieving social transformation, in gender equality for instance, is fundamentally linked to the concept of collective action. When I initially analyzed my interview data in these terms, I assumed that *Casa de la Mujer* did not meet this requirement for political empowerment because they were not encouraging the women to organize campaigns, lobby against sexist government policy or publicly protest gender injustices. However, by considering Rowlands' definition of collective action as a situation in which "individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone" (1997: 28), my opinion changed. Through their events such as the annual Women's Day celebration and their gender training courses for topics such as women's rights and domestic violence awareness, participants are encouraged to collectively identify dominant societal forces that lead to the reproduction of women's subordination. The poster-making activity that is part of the domestic violence awareness workshop is a way in which women can individually and collectively generate demands for gender justice. Furthermore the education that the staff and volunteers at *Casa de la Mujer* provide for high school students is a way in which they are community activists working for change. These examples demonstrate the women acting collectively to improve their conditions related to power and status. I came to realize that collective action is not just about protesting in the streets. Rather, as Stromquist outlines, political empowerment is also about fostering a collective awareness that surpasses individual levels of awareness. This suggests that *Casa de la Mujer* can foster a process of political empowerment. By using the resources of education and the social networks of support that women develop through their participation at *Casa de la Mujer*, they are jointly acting to deconstruct and improve their individual and collective problems. The data that I have presented indicate that the collective action can

lead to social change. Not necessarily change on a macro level given the small scope of this underfunded grassroots organization. However, change is occurring on a micro level with women taking the critical consciousness that they have collectively fostered at *Casa de la Mujer* into their homes and sharing it with male relatives, intimate partners and both male and female children.

The interview data also provides evidence to indicate that participation with *Casa de la Mujer* leads to achievements on a personal or psychological level. In this way the centre facilitates a process of personal or psychological empowerment as outlined in Stromquist's four-dimensional conceptualization of empowerment. According to Stromquist's theory, 'personal empowerment' is based on a process that leads to one feeling an improved self-worth. In this aspect, *Casa de la Mujer* and the programs that it offers facilitate a process of personal empowerment for women. When I asked the beneficiary women how their lives had changed since being involved with *Casa de la Mujer* more than half responded that they felt an improved self-confidence. In some cases they mentioned that before they felt that their lives were monotonous and lacked value. After taking courses at *Casa de la Mujer*, women mentioned that they came to recognize that their lives did in fact have value and they gained a sense of self-worth. As mentioned a theme that emerged in about a quarter of interview responses was a feeling that *Casa de la Mujer* allowed women to come together to break the tediousness of the tasks involved in their daily lives.

A maxim that guides the methodology of *Casa de la Mujer* is "My life has value, my body has no price". The notion of self-value is something that women are not usually taught in mainstream curriculum. As shown in the photo below, this adage is posted on the main door of *Casa de la Mujer*. This concept is integrated into all courses and workshops taught at the centre.



During the 2012 International Women's Day festivities, Yelba, one of the founding members of the *Casa de la Mujer* gave a speech about asserting women's rights including the right over their bodies and the right to a life free of violence. At the end of her speech she had us all collectively call out "My life has value, my body has no price" and repeat it loudly three times. This idea of personal value was a strong message for the women who may have never felt valued in their lives. *Casa de la Mujer* also allows women to realize their value in terms of their ability to learn new skills and capacities. When I asked Abril, the seamstress teacher why it is worthwhile to participate in the programs that *Casa de la Mujer* offers, she told me: "It has changed me because I have learned in the *Casa de la Mujer* that a woman can value herself, and we don't need a man" (Abril, *Casa de la Mujer*, July 1, 2012). Sarah, the woman in her seventies, also mentioned the idea that women have inherent value whether or not men recognize it when she told me why she thinks it is worthwhile to participate in *Casa de la Mujer*:

Because one can progress personally and because they can give knowledge to each other for things, like new consciousness, knowledge and skills. Principally, they

acknowledge that women should value themselves, because if a woman doesn't value herself no one will. Sometimes the husband doesn't work but the woman works in the house doing all of the chores, cooking, ironing, and cleaning. But this work the husband does not value, so the women have to know what they are worth (Sarah, *Rio Escondido*, June 25, 2011).

As Liam Kane (2001) a scholar in education and social change in Latin America points out, the empowering impacts of popular education initiatives are difficult to evaluate. This is due to the fact that empowerment is a unique process for each individual. Therefore, he argues that indicators of empowerment, "must be flexible and wide-ranging, and are likely to change, possibly quite radically, over time" (Kane, 2001: 176). For some women going to the courses offered by *Casa de la Mujer* may be easy and fairly impediment free. On the other hand, the very act of attending a centre like *Casa de la Mujer* is quite brave or risky for other women. Therefore, their attendance might be an indication of their empowerment at first. However, over time, as the woman feels more comfortable to go to the popular education centre, this might not be an adequate indicator (Kane, 2001). For instance this idea is illustrated in this response from Isabella when I asked what her life was like before she started going to *Casa de la Mujer*:

Before it was, look, I was very timid. If someone said good day to me, it made me embarrassed/ feel shame. But with my new skills/training and my new knowledge from *Casa de la Mujer*, I was no longer timid. I can express myself better (Isabella, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011).

Therefore as the process of personal change is continually evolving so is the degree of empowerment. At first the fact that this very shy women even went to *Casa de la Mujer* might be an indication of empowerment. With her new skills and capacities, her attendance alone is not sufficient in measuring her continued ability to exercise strategic choice. Significantly, improved self-expression was a major achievement and an important indicator in her process of change. As Kabeer indicates, empowerment is embedded in people's sense

of self worth in terms of how they view themselves. Therefore, learning about self-value in some cases leads to a process of personal empowerment.

### Agency

I have discussed resources and outcomes as elements related to Kabeer's three-tiered conceptualization of empowerment. The third essential element is agency, meaning the ability of the individual to exercise choice in strategic life decisions. This means making strategic life decisions in cases where one was previously not able to make such decisions. It appears that this is the most difficult to achieve because of the impediments that one faces. In trying to become an agent or exercise agency, an individual is up against external forces such as relations of power between the genders. As mentioned, in Nicaragua mothers have a key role passing on dominant gender ideology, which includes sexist attitudes about the division of labour and women's subordination to their children. Therefore in assessing if *Casa de la Mujer's* programming can impact gender relations it is important to look at the way the women interact with their children. Since mothers socialize their children it is quite significant when the mother takes an active role in challenging traditional gender roles with her children. I discussed this with Abril, the seamstress teacher, who explained that she took a different parenting approach with her youngest child based on the teachings of *Casa de la Mujer*. When I asked her: Do you feel that your life at home has changed at all since your family became involved in *Casa de la Mujer*? She told me:

Yes, of course. Because for example I come here for the workshops and I talk with my family... This is a change because I talk more directly to her (17-year-old daughter), I don't have shame that I had at an earlier time [with her older children]. My mother never talked to me, for example, when I was twelve years old and I got my first period, my mother never told me anything. I had horrible fear when my first period came; I thought 'what has happened to me?' But on the contrary here [at Casa de la Mujer], I learned how to be more open, to talk openly with my daughter and my husband. I learned this here. Now, I am here to teach the little or a lot that I know and learn a lot more from others. Because this helps me be more open with

my family, and explain things with sure footing (Abril, *Casa de la Mujer*, July 1, 2011).

This indicates that she consciously changed the relationships with her children and lessons that she taught them. This quotation also demonstrates Abril's challenging of gender roles that she was taught by her mother. In this quotation we see that *Casa de la Mujer's* programs in fact can have an impact on the way that people are raising their children. This provides hope that this girl will feel more comfortable to talk openly to her own children. Another important element of Abril's quotation is that she is acknowledging that she decided to bring up her daughter in a more open way than she had been raised. Later in the interview Abril told me that this daughter is the youngest of her children, the others have already grown up and moved out of her home. Rather than raise this last child in the same way as the other ones, Abril decides to overcome the shame that she had at an earlier time. This indicates that the program has not only forced her to re-evaluate her opinion of gender but also forced her to re-evaluate her confidence in approaching her daughter about potentially uncomfortable issues. So although we have seen that the vocational training programs do not inherently challenge gender roles, through the support that women feel from the others in the program and through the discourse of fighting for women's rights, protecting their bodies, and valuing their lives, women in the *Casa de la Mujer* have not only learned the lessons themselves but have brought them home to teach their children.

When assessing agency it is also important to note that although I presented examples of women such as Erika and Victoria, who have economic achievements and Marta who made the decision to leave her abusive partner because of the services provided by *Casa de la Mujer*, there are obstacles that many women face that impede their ability to exercise agency. These impediments are largely caused by gender inequality at the home, community and institutional level. Despite being taught about their personal capabilities, women's rights, or domestic violence, when women come out of the courses

taught in *Casa de la Mujer* they are still stepping out into a largely sexist world. Of course taking courses about women's rights does not automatically change power relations between genders and having resources to skills that allow women to earn an income does also not automatically allow women to make strategic decisions about their lives. In most cases when women finish class at *Casa de la Mujer* or get home from meetings at the centre they are still expected to cook, clean and maintain the house. Rosa, a woman in her fifties, used to participate with AMNLAE and taught about community health in the Literacy Crusades. She was one of the original founders of *Casa de la Mujer* and taught courses there about women's rights and equality between the genders. When I asked her what barriers women face in accessing the services offered by *Casa de la Mujer* she told me:

It hurts me a lot when there is a young woman, around the age of thirty, that doesn't have permission to go to the health centre or to give her opinion or say what she wants to eat. And you know that we have all of these rights. This is why we have to lift up these women. Help one another...and some women say to me when you organize a seminar and when we meet I feel a lot of energy and everything, but when we get home to the house it is different. We feel low (Rosa, *Zona Central*, June 27, 2011).

So although the courses and workshops at *Casa de la Mujer* offer educational resources there are other forces at play that limit women's ability to make strategic decisions regarding their lives or turn resources into empowerment. Given that *Casa de la Mujer* can be seen as an entry point into women's empowerment by initially addressing their basic income-generation needs it is imperative to examine how non-participating women are impeded from accessing their services. From the interview responses and through what I observed in *Casa de la Mujer* and in the community, I identified three main themes for barriers to women's empowerment opportunities provided by *Casa de la Mujer*: lack of government support, controlling male intimate partners and family members, and women being too occupied with work or household obligations to have time to attend the courses offered at *Casa de la Mujer*.

When discussing barriers to women's access to *Casa de la Mujer* in general but especially in situations of domestic violence, the assistant director of *Casa de la Mujer*, Alexandra, told me that:

I think that is the fear, the fear that she has of her husband, because when we are talking about if she is abused and mistreated, she cannot go and file a formal police report because if she goes to put it in, and her husband goes to jail, after when her husband gets out and is free he may go back to abuse her. So some women say 'why would I go and put a complaint in against my husband if when he gets out I will be in trouble? He will come back to abuse me and I will be in the same position.' So it is the fear that they have. The barrier in my opinion is that they are afraid to come to *Casa de la Mujer* and complain when they are abused (Alexandra, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 10, 2011).

This is a valid observation given the inefficiency of the justice system that many women have experienced when trying to put in complaints against abusive husbands or male family members. This quote speaks to the fact that gender based violence is prevalent on a systemic level. After the interview, Alexandra told me that when men are arrested they are usually only held for a week to ten days and then they are let free. The difficulty of challenging domestic violence speaks to the extent of gender inequality in Nicaragua and that there is not adequate government policy and police intervention to protect women from domestic violence.

The FLSN administration has not been the only government to underfund police interventions for domestic violence, yet their lack of support at the municipal and national level present barriers to *Casa de la Mujer* in accessing women and maintaining and improving their courses. The lack of government support or outright neglect presumably has to do with the lack of focus on partisan political goals in *Casa de la Mujer*. Despite the fact that many of the women that founded *Casa de la Mujer* support the Sandinista party, these women refuse to close *Casa de la Mujer's* doors to women in need based on opposing political affiliations. Teaching that pluralism is good and that it is critical for women to

participate for whatever party they wish is expressed in the following interview excerpt:

*Casa de la Mujer* offers workshops about political participation, we teach how to defend our rights and how it is important for women to participate for whatever party, as part of their committee because women have lots of intelligence, and a lot of value. And they have as much right as men to participate politically. And, this is what we teach the women (*Casa de la Mujer* organizer, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

This commitment to pluralism has potentially equated to less governmental funding for *Casa de la Mujer*. In conversations with the founders and organizers they would tell me that the centre has been punished because they refuse to hang the FSLN red and black flag on the building. However, they strongly felt that remaining non-partisan allowed *Casa de la Mujer* to be more accessible to the vulnerable women to whom they are targeting their services and is especially important given that the centre wants to be accessible to young women who, because of prohibited access to abortion, may not support the Sandinista party.

Before [when the non-Sandinista governments were in power] we had more rights. At least they would lend us a vehicle, at least lent to the institution so that we could get to the countryside. Now, we are punished even though we are Sandinista because... AMNLAE was in the *Frente Sandinista* but now we are autonomous and now we are working more alone than before...we are autonomous now because when the Sandinistas lost we saw another reality here that it is better to work together for all women and not have pressure to be with a party. So history made us realize that now we are a more amplified movement. I, as the Sandinista that I am, feel it is better not to obligate another woman to be Sandinista. I feel better like this (*Casa de la Mujer* organizer, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

As indicated above, the organizers of *Casa de la Mujer* enjoyed more benefits before the Sandinista party came back to power in 2007. This is reminiscent of the problems the women's movement experienced during the first Sandinista administration in the 1980's. At that time, it has been argued that FSLN priorities overshadowed the women's movement's ability to advance women's

rights (Kampwirth, 2004). In the 1990's the emergence of the autonomous women's movement indicated that some women that began organizing with AMNLAE for the Sandinista cause eventually felt that their issues were not represented in the party agenda. *Casa de la Mujer* is experiencing a lack of attention from the FLSN government despite their earlier ties through AMNLAE. *Casa de la Mujer* was constructed during the PLC government of Alemán and, as expressed in the interview excerpt cited above, the centre enjoyed more benefits such as the use of a car during his administration. An example of how *Casa de la Mujer* experiences a lack of attention from the local Sandinista mayor occurred just before their 2012 International Women's Day event. The *perifoneo* is a loudspeaker mounted on a vehicle that drives through the *barrios* (neighbourhoods) to broadcast community news, parties, deaths, events, and vending of vegetables, fruits and other household items. It is quite expensive to rent a *perifoneo*, because a vehicle, driver and equipment to record a repeated message are all required. The incumbent mayoral candidate, a woman working at the local Sandinista mayor's office, promised to provide the service of a *perifoneo* so that *Casa de la Mujer* could announce their 2012 International Women's Day celebration. There was increasing tension as Women's Day approached because up to the day before, the mayoral candidate had made no arrangements for publicity and she was not available for meetings. On the morning of March 8th, Mayra, Alexandra, local volunteers and I went to *Casa de la Mujer* very early to clean and prepare the house for all of the women that were meant to be arriving later in the afternoon. Mayra was beside herself with worry when by 1:00 PM the *perifoneo* advertising the Women's Day festivities at *Casa de la Mujer* that had been promised by the government employee had still not been announced. In her mind, all the money and time that we had spent organizing the event and going to Rivas to buy food and supplies would be in vain. Later in the day, the *perifoneo* did go out, however it went around to announce a gathering held by the Sandinistas in the central park and made no mention of *Casa de la Mujer* or the activities taking place there. Mayra said of the situation in which she had been promised something that the Mayor's

representative failed to follow through on: “*This* is machismo”. This explains the idea that although machismo may be taught and practiced in the home and in the community, it is upheld in government institutions that continue to symbolically and literally subvert women’s interests. The lack of support from the local Sandinista mayor was offensive because many of the founders are active supporters of the Sandinista party and have been since the Revolution, even during the years between 1990 and 2006 when the FSLN was not in power. A founding member describes the limitations for offering services because of a lack of federal funding since the FSLN came to power:

And now we have limitations because really we are not the right hand of this party anymore, here we not hanging any party’s flag or distributing propaganda because each person here can work with whatever party they like. Me, yes I am Sandinista, this is my party but I don’t interfere with others who are not (Founding member, *Casa de la Mujer*, June 21, 2011).

Although I visited the Mayor’s office during my first field trip, I did not interview any of the municipal employees. However, it seemed clear to me when I was in San Juan del Sur that the reason for the lack of government support was due in part to *Casa de la Mujer’s* commitment to political pluralism. Opposing political views are often a point of disagreement between different organizers in personal discussions; however, they agree on the importance of their non-partisan work in helping women in San Juan del Sur through the services at *Casa de la Mujer*. I suspect that another reason the mayor’s office does not support *Casa de la Mujer* is because their educational content is subversive in the way that it provides information about sexual and reproductive health that is not taught in public schools. This was indicated in the interview excerpt above (on page 47) describing the difficulty that *Casa de la Mujer* has in accessing high school students to participate in the sexual and reproductive health workshops because those in government do not agree with what they teach. So a major barrier that *Casa de la Mujer* deals with in trying to access women and offer courses is the lack of support from the San Juan del Sur mayor’s office and the FLSN government in general.

Another barrier to women's empowerment that I identified based on the opinions of the women that I interviewed are intimate male partners and family members. This was highlighted by at least six of the interview participants who indicated that intimate male partners and family members are the primary reason that some women cannot access the services of *Casa de la Mujer*. It should be noted that this information was given second-hand based on a question I asked regarding what barriers women faced in trying to access *Casa de la Mujer*. The responses are based on the perspectives of interview participants who are all past or present beneficiaries and teachers at *Casa de la Mujer*. However, because they are women who come from the same situation of local gender inequality, these women's responses are key in understanding the impediments other women in their community face to accessing *Casa de la Mujer*. Fear of male partners was evident in two types of responses, one characterized by women being inhibited by fear of their husbands' reaction to her attendance and the other response involved the men actively prohibiting women from going.

As mentioned there are not sufficient police interventions or government policies to protect women from domestic violence. This makes it very difficult to challenge domestic violence and this increases the general fear that women have toward men. Although I have already outlined that *Casa de la Mujer* has assisted women in the San Juan del Sur community to leave abusive husbands and put in formal complaints against them, for some women their situation of violence is severe and the full support of the police system is needed to stop it. The lack of support and outright refusal to act of some police may cause a sufficient enough fear to stop women from going to *Casa de la Mujer*, partaking in their courses or seeking support for abusive situations. Fear of men's disapproval of their attending the courses also prevented some women from going. It was clear that in some cases it was not even where the women were going but the fact that they were leaving the home that caused problems with

their husbands. Isabella who worked at community development and adult education initiatives through AMNLAE and *Casa de la Mujer* explained:

There are women that yes, have a lot of fear to go (to *Casa de la Mujer*). Because they say that their husbands think that if they go, perhaps they are doing other things or going somewhere else. So because of this there many are women that don't go (Isabella, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011).

This quotation suggests that jealous husbands restrict women's mobility. In this quote we see that women's fear of men's distrust is a potential barrier preventing them from going to *Casa de la Mujer*. Fear of husband's disapproval is a powerful barrier. So why do men prohibit women from accessing *Casa de la Mujer*? Male control over women is one of the aspects of machismo that leads to women's subordination. As Stromquist observes: "rigid authoritarian spouse control" coupled with domestic violence are conditions that some women face that limit their physical mobility and access of informal education programs (1995). Controlling women's access to financial resources is one way that men exert power over women and further restrict their physical movement outside of the home. As we have heard from Rosa, some men prefer to have 'their' women close by and in the home where they are easier to watch. Part of *machismo* is extreme jealousy and by restricting women's mobility, men can exert control over their intimate partners or female family members.

Sarah is the woman in her seventies that had worked on community reconstruction projects with Mayra after the Revolutionary War and when she was younger helped organize events such as International Women's Day celebrations. We met in Sarah's living room and she expressed her belief that, "it is true that there are husbands that are really tough and demanding, they don't like if their wife leaves (goes out), and this is a problem because they don't allow her to participate. They don't let her participate in what she wants to do" (Sarah, *Rio Escondido*, June 25, 2011). Sarah sees men to be the primary barrier to women's access to *Casa de la Mujer*. She refers to men actively prohibiting women from going there, preferring for them to be in the home.

Exerting control over women's decisions and mobility are ways to restrict their agency. In other interviews, it became clear to me that a man exerted this type of control over an intimate partner or female family member due to his desire to control the woman's ability to educate herself because of jealousy that she was learning new skills or suspicion that she was seeing another man. The idea of men actively preventing women from going to *Casa de la Mujer* was discussed by Carmen, a woman that I mentioned earlier who helped with the building of *Casa de la Mujer* and boarded Dutch volunteers during its construction. When I asked her about barriers that prohibit women from going to the centre she told me:

I think that the only barrier that can exist is when they have husbands or boyfriends that are still *machistas* and don't want to give them permission to visit *Casa de la Mujer* because they know that the beneficiary's benefit is that she is going to have more independence. But we must not confuse liberty with licentiousness. They go to have more liberty, to learn how to be independent. To learn how to do something so that [the woman] can live by what she does, so she doesn't have to depend on just what her husband gives her (Carmen, *Barrio Gaspar*, June 15, 2011).

For some women in San Juan del Sur, men's jealousy may be enough to prevent them from being able to take advantage of free self-improvement courses. Carmen perceives the courses to give women a level of freedom that some men find threatening. Importantly, she distinguishes between *libertad* (liberty/freedom) and *libertinaje* (promiscuity/licentiousness). Women being free to do what they want and go where they want threatens some men who confuse women's independence with promiscuity. Women seek courses hoping to be more economically independent and this often ends up increasing their level of autonomy. Men who oppose their intimate partner or female family member going to *Casa de la Mujer* often do so because they fear the results of the women gaining more freedom and economic independence. In this sense, they may fear that freedom from male dominance may result from a woman gaining means to produce her income. As mentioned, Erika had gone to university and after not finding a job decided to take a Beauty course at *Casa de la Mujer*. She

provided me with her opinion as to what barriers women face in accessing the services of *Casa de la Mujer*:

More than anything, I think it is the men in their family. Because here (in Nicaragua) there are still many men that are *machista*. And they say to the women 'no this course will not help you' and they don't give the women the opportunity to have a profession (Erika, *Barrio Gaspar*, March 3, 2012).

Erika describes men downplaying the benefit of taking a course at *Casa de la Mujer*. By denying women in their family the opportunity to earn an income, men are also denying them the independence that can arise from women making their own money. By negating the importance of taking a course that could help a woman earn an income, they are restricting the women's personal growth and perpetuating the cycle of *machismo*. This can potentially occur out of a feeling that once a woman has a job they would not need to rely on their husbands' resources. Some men try to maintain control over women by restricting their access to education, and self-improvement or capacity-development programs. Isabella noted that, "...there have been some women that have wanted to learn how to read, but their husbands have opposed this... saying they (the women) don't have time to learn how to read because of their responsibility to complete domestic tasks" (Isabella, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011). Silvia first came to *Casa de la Mujer* to take courses in Cosmetology so that she could earn money cutting hair and doing nails. She told me that men presented a barrier when she tried to find other women to take the courses such as English and cosmetology that *Casa de la Mujer* offered:

We would look for women (to attend classes/workshops) but sometimes they were married or had a boyfriend that was *machista*, and you know, sometimes the men wouldn't like it if the women went out in the street and went to learn something (Silvia, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 27, 2011)

Fear of their husbands is one reason why some interview respondents felt that women in San Juan del Sur were prohibited from accessing *Casa de la Mujer's* available services. However, it is important to note that not all men restrict access to *Casa de la Mujer* for their wives, girlfriends or female family

members. Some men openly support women's participation and have even attended workshops for domestic violence awareness or helped with events at *Casa de la Mujer* in some way such as donating time to paint the building. The second most common response that respondents had to what barriers prohibited women from accessing the services of *Casa de la Mujer* was that they are too occupied with other obligations. Besides fear of male disapproval or restriction of women's attendance, women are impeded by a lack of personal time to attend *Casa de la Mujer*. There were two main reasons that emerged from the interview responses about how women were impeded from attending *Casa de la Mujer* based on time restrictions; women are either too occupied with household responsibilities or with other work to have time to go.

As I have discussed, women are responsible for the vast majority of childcare, household and familial obligations and responsibilities. They are expected to care for children while also maintaining the house by cooking and cleaning. In San Juan del Sur and in the rest of Nicaragua, most people cannot afford washing machines. That means that every item of clothing and every sheet, diaper and towel must be washed by hand. Women with more than one child can spend up to four hours every day doing the washing. This is just one of the many activities that women must perform in the home. In reflecting on the barriers to access, Victoria explained to me that sometimes women are too occupied with other obligations and this prevents them from being able to attend *Casa de la Mujer*: "sometimes they say that they don't come because they don't have anyone to watch their kids, sometimes they don't have time (they are too busy), sometimes they are helping their children with homework (Victoria, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011). Women must spend energy and time responding to family needs in order to fulfill their prescribed gender role (Stromquist, 1995). Being solely responsible for childcare and household responsibilities limits women's ability to seek ways to improve their skills, network with other women, and gain employment. I noticed this first hand in the attendance levels of the English course that I taught at *Casa de la Mujer*. The primary reason that the

women students were absent was because they prioritized family responsibilities such as having to care for a sick child or family member, over coming to class.

As previously mentioned, although the ideal gender role is that of the mother at home, the current economic situation in Nicaragua has prompted women to increasingly join the workforce to help support their families. This limits their time even further as they are still responsible for the same amount of household tasks that they were before they were employed. This creates a further obstacle for them to find the time to attend *Casa de la Mujer*. This is largely because women have limited time for themselves for self-improvement projects/initiatives. The following quotation illustrates that although men might prevent women from going to *Casa de la Mujer*, this is not the only impeding factor. When asked what barriers she felt prohibited women from accessing the programs offered by *Casa de la Mujer* Isabella told me:

...It is the husband that opposes it, sometimes. Yes sometimes it is because of the husband. But sometimes women have a job and they have a lot of children and they have to work a lot. So, it is because of the economic situation here more than anything. Because she depends on her work to live... (Isabella, *Barrio Nuevo*, June 25, 2011).

So although some interview participants identify men as the primary barrier, it is also because of women's time restrictions caused by household obligations and the financial need to work that are an impediment to accessing *Casa de la Mujer*. Nicaragua's 'economic situation' that Isabella refers to is one in which poverty is widespread. Therefore, the facilitation of a process of empowerment through the services of *Casa de la Mujer* is restricted by women's reality in San Juan del Sur where their ability to exercise agency and make strategic decisions about their lives is impeded by their subordinate position to men in relations of power and in the gendered division of labour. Some women face impediments to exercising agency because of women's subordination and unequal gender status in the home and community and society at large. However, the data

presented in the section outlining economic, political and personal outcomes indicate that *Casa de la Mujer* has been able to foster a process of empowerment for some women that come to the centre.

As mentioned (on page 25-26), in the gender and development literature, the nature of power between men and women is considered to be relational. Accordingly, Rowland argues that relational empowerment is an important aspect of women's empowerment. Rowland describes relational empowerment as, "developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it" (Rowlands, 1997: 114). In assessing changes in personal agency, it is important to acknowledge the larger societal forces at play that may limit one from making strategic decisions especially in gendered relations of power. However, in the structure versus agency debate as it relates to my case study of *Casa de la Mujer*, I argue that educational and social network resources and their subsequent outcomes have a role in changing one's ability to make strategic decisions and this positively impacts the extent to which transformations occur in gendered power relations. The educational resources that *Casa de la Mujer* offers allow women opportunities for economic gain and increased feelings of self-esteem. The gender-training courses and workshops also encourage women to become critical of social structures such as patriarchy. At *Casa de la Mujer*, women also form social networks of support that can provide the backbone to individual and collective transformations of unequal power relations. These are great achievements that allow some women the ability to make strategic life choices where they have previously been denied this ability.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous section I utilized my interview data and field observations to analyze the extent to which *Casa de la Mujer* may foster a process of empowerment and transform unequal gender relations. In this section I will make concluding remarks in regards to my central research questions. First I will address the question assessing the extent to which *Casa de la Mujer* facilitates a process of empowerment. Next I will examine the extent to which it can foster a process of gender transformation. Following this, I will discuss ways in which women are impeded from accessing the programs offered by *Casa de la Mujer*. I will then address the limitations of this research and suggest some directions for further inquiry into this topic. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of my research.

### Research Questions Addressed

I have presented data to indicate that through the resources of educational and social networks women that attend *Casa de la Mujer* are able to achieve economic, political, and personal outcomes. There are two types of educational resources that are offered at the centre. Vocational training courses allow women to use skills to generate an income. This often leads to a process of economic empowerment. The other type of education is gender-training courses that encourage participants to analyze social relations and the causes of gender inequality. My data indicates that this leads to a process of cognitive empowerment because women come to acquire an increased understanding of society's micro and macro factors that cause women's subordination. The social networks that are fostered at *Casa de la Mujer* provide women with the opportunity to break the monotony or isolation that they may feel in their lives. The social networks also provide emotional support and confidence that problems can be solved among the women themselves. Feeling encouraged and morally supported can help women deal with problems in their lives. The social networks have caused women to work together to identify gender injustice

and work towards collectively challenging it. This facilitates a process of political empowerment. A process of personal or psychological empowerment in which women gain an increased feeling of self-worth and self-esteem is facilitated through the educational and social network resources offered at *Casa de la Mujer*. My data indicates that this has led to women becoming agents of change in their own lives. This in part has to do with acquiring the skills and knowledge to earn an income. Personal change has also initiated a transformation of power relations with male intimate partners and family members.

The vocational training courses do not directly challenge gender inequality because they are geared at jobs that are traditionally thought of as women's work and are in the informal sector. Therefore they do not radically reorganize the job ghetto in San Juan del Sur. However, as I have shown, the other elements of their programming, such as the gender-training courses, directly challenge gender injustice and the ideological and structural foundations of patriarchy. My research indicates that job training can be an entry point for engagement with critical feminist pedagogy that contests gender inequality and women's subordination. Thus the job training courses are an entry point for deeper social change. This occurs by changing the way that women perceive themselves and come to understand their own inherent value. This impacts the relationships that they have with men.

Importantly, *Casa de la Mujer* has impacted gendered social relations by addressing men, both indirectly and directly. Indirectly men have learned from women participants who have taken home and passed on the lessons that they have learned at *Casa de la Mujer* to children of both genders as well as male partners and family members. This is evident in the example of Delfa who learned about the importance of family planning and protecting against sexually transmitted infections and passed this information onto her brothers. Another example is the story of Abril who learned about the importance of teaching

children about sexual and reproductive health and went home and talked to her daughter openly about sexuality and menstruation.

*Casa de la Mujer* has directly addressed men with the workshops that they offer in sexual and reproductive health and domestic violence awareness. They address adult men by inviting partners and male family members to participate in workshops. They address adolescent boys by inviting them to participate in the sexual and reproductive health workshops. The impact that this had had on adolescents in the community was evident to me when nearly all of the young people that I met told me that they had come to *Casa de la Mujer* to participate in these workshops. The many men and boys that stopped and greeted Mayra with great respect as we walked through the outlying barrios of San Juan del Sur also suggests *Casa de la Mujer's* positive impact on men in the community.

In the gender and development literature it is argued that boys and men must be involved in projects with goals of women's empowerment. In this literature it is believed that when men and boys are not involved, women's empowerment projects are limited in their effectiveness and benefit. Power between men and women is relational; therefore this literature argues that in order to transform inequalities between the genders both men and women need to be involved.

When debating whether or not popular education programs generally aimed at women should include men or be offered to women only, Kane discusses CANTERA which is a popular education centre in Managua, Nicaragua that organizes separate workshops for women and men and then joins both groups to listen to each other and discuss each other's perspectives. Other scholars such as Rowlands (1997) believe that women-only groups can be more effective in increasing women's self-confidence. Kane also acknowledges that it is difficult for educators to respect women's knowledge while also challenging them to "think about how things could be different: if women already have a low sense of

self-esteem it does no good to jump in with both feet, rubbishing the traditional roles which may be their only source of pride” (Kane, 2001: 122).

In a conversation with Mayra I asked her if she thought it would be good to include men in more of the vocational classes that *Casa de la Mujer* offered. She told me that courses were deliberately given to address women’s needs. Therefore, although some scholars may see it as an impediment to women’s empowerment, offering courses that specifically benefit women is also decisive based on the reality of women in San Juan del Sur and attempting to meet their daily survival needs. However, it should be noted that because *Casa de la Mujer* has reached out to and deliberately included men and young boys throughout the years, their programming does embody the gender and development approach.

Since my data has indicated that there are many positive outcomes for women that attend *Casa de la Mujer*, I sought to investigate factors that inhibit women from accessing programming that the centre offers. Specific barriers to participation in women-led popular education programs are a topic that I found to be missing in much of the literature regarding women’s empowerment in this type of setting. The founders and organizers of *Casa de la Mujer* identified the local mayor’s office, and the FSLN government generally, as barriers to their provision and improvement of courses for women in San Juan del Sur. The two presumed reasons for this are that *Casa de la Mujer* does not explicitly support the Sandinista party and that they provide information about sexuality and reproduction that is purposely left out of the government curriculum taught in mainstream schools.

Although I have indicated that the FSLN government is a barrier to *Casa de la Mujer*, I do not intend to suggest that this has negatively impacted the political empowerment of women. *Casa de la Mujer* does not encourage women to lobby against the FSLN despite their blatant disrespect for women’s rights and issues

in San Juan del Sur. However, political empowerment as it has been applied to my research highlights the women clients of *Casa de la Mujer* collectively acting to improve their situation of subordination. This is evident in the social networks that they form to encourage each other and provide moral support to solve problems collectively. It is also evident in the community work of the staff and volunteers of *Casa de la Mujer* in which they educate high school students about women's rights and sexual and reproductive health. Collective mobilization also occurs at the annual Women's Day celebrations in which *Casa de la Mujer* fills with community members who come together to analyze the causes of women's subordination and recognize what changes are required for gender justice to occur.

It is noteworthy that although *Casa de la Mujer* does engage men in their attempts at empowering women, male intimate partners and family members were identified by the founders, organizers and women clients of the centre as the primary barrier that women face to accessing the services offered. This barrier was evident in male partners discouraging women's participation, downplaying the benefits, or outright forbidding women from going to *Casa de la Mujer*. Another barrier that was identified by interview participants is the lack of time that women have to attend classes due to their household responsibilities. Traditionally women have an obligation to perform domestic and reproductive tasks and as an increasing number of women join the workforce, productive tasks are another impediment to their involvement in courses offered by *Casa de la Mujer*. As indicated in the analysis section, the data presented in relation to barriers that women experience in accessing *Casa de la Mujer* was gathered based on second-hand accounts. This calls attention to one of the two methodological limitations of my research that will be discussed below.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The foremost limitation of my research is that since I did not conduct any formal interviews with women who did not use the services of *Casa de la Mujer*, there is no control group with which to compare the responses from the women organizers and clients of *Casa de la Mujer*. Since all of my interview respondents had taught or attended a class at this centre, I could not contrast their thoughts, opinions and perspectives with other women in the community. Furthermore, although I informally discussed the work of *Casa de la Mujer* with many men, young and old, in San Juan del Sur, another limitation of my research is that I did not conduct formal interviews with more than one man. Although I did make arrangements to interview other men who had been active in *Casa de la Mujer* in years past, none of these planned interviews came to fruition. Conducting more formal interviews with men would have given me insight into their perspectives on the impacts of *Casa de la Mujer* and gender inequality in San Juan del Sur.

Both of these limitations present opportunities for future research at *Casa de la Mujer*. Interviewing women that have not participated in the centre would test some of the assumptions about the empowering impact of *Casa de la Mujer* that I may have made in this research. I have argued that *Casa de la Mujer* does embody a gender and development approach because of the way that their outreach efforts have engaged men over the years. However, interviewing additional men would provide a more in-depth analysis of the extent to which *Casa de la Mujer* exemplifies the gender and development approach.

### **Implications of Research**

I would now like to return to my earlier discussion of popular education. As indicated, popular education provides teaching that is alternative to that taught in the formal education sector. Popular education focuses on community-based learning that is aimed at raising critical consciousness. Popular education also intends to increase people's ability to question existing ideologies. The founders of *Casa de la Mujer* such as Mayra, Carmen, Yelba and Sarah, used the

teaching skills that they learned during their involvement as community educators in the Literacy Crusades to implement the same model of critical learning for self-awareness and consciousness raising at *Casa de la Mujer* that was inherent to the ideology of the crusades. Even though these women trace their organizational roots back to their involvement with the Sandinistas during and after the Revolutionary War, they refuse to close their doors or exclude women from *Casa de la Mujer* that are not Sandinista supporters. This has resulted in receiving less funding from the government. However, they believe that is more important to have complete control of the ideology and methodology of their curriculum than to have FSLN funding.

As mentioned in the theory section, women-led popular education programs are particularly interesting because they offer programs outside of government institutions. This creates an environment in which women can recognize the structural and ideological foundations of patriarchy and examine their situation of subordination relative to men. In Nicaragua, despite advances to the women's movement over the past thirty years, the situation for gender inequality is particularly severe. Although they have not been the only administration to perpetuate women's subordination with a lack of attention to women's issues, the FSLN has an appalling history when it comes to women and gender equality. This is illustrated in their sexist school curriculum that fails to address sexual education despite high numbers of teenage pregnancies and their lack of attention to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (as is evidenced by their decision to ban therapeutic abortions). It is significant that *Casa de la Mujer* provides educational and social support resources outside of formal government institutions, which have proved to be sexist. My research indicates that political or collective empowerment can occur despite a lack of government support being identified by the organizers of *Casa de la Mujer* as a barrier to accessing women. This research highlights that while it is important to consider their interactions with political institutions, women's political empowerment can occur without directly challenging the government. It could be argued that if the

government offered the types of gender training that *Casa de la Mujer* provides and if more laws were in place that protected women, organizations such as *Casa de la Mujer* may not be needed at all. However, as the current reality of gender inequality indicates, *Casa de la Mujer* is most definitely needed as a place where women can gain a greater consciousness of the micro and macro forces that lead to gender inequality. From this understanding, my data indicates that they may be able to engage in a process of personal and collective change. Furthermore, the data that I have presented suggests that the ‘conscientization’ that women experience in the gender training courses at *Casa de la Mujer* may lead to a process of gender transformation in which a positive and equalizing change occurs in the power relations between genders.

My research provides a case study to support the concepts of empowerment as theorized by Kabeer and Stromquist. In the theory section, I outlined a notion that was shared by both scholars pertaining to empowerment being based on how people see themselves and in their sense of self-value. The data that I have presented suggest that this is in fact an important indicator of women’s empowerment. As I mentioned the majority of interview participants reported that they had experienced an increase in self-worth and self-esteem as a result of their participation in *Casa de la Mujer*. The addition that I would like to propose to Kabeer and Stromquist’s theories is the notion that empowerment is not solely about how people see themselves but also how they see themselves within and in relation to the social world around them. As mentioned in the data analysis section, according to Kane (2010), in women-led popular education programs, empowerment is an ever-evolving process. As women become increasingly involved with organizations such as *Casa de la Mujer*, their attendance which may have been an important indicator at first, is no longer adequate to assess the extent to which they are continually empowered by their participation. I suggest that as women become increasingly aware of their own inherent self-worth, their understanding of how they are restricted by but also positively contribute to the social world around them will also grow. This should

be a continual process that is fuelled by continued education in skills development and gender training and social networks of support.

Despite various barriers that women face, my data indicates that through resources and achievements women participants of *Casa de la Mujer* are able to act as agents to make strategic life decisions. *Casa de la Mujer* is offering courses that address basic gender needs and this provides an entry point for more profound personal life changes to occur. Recall the story that I told of Mayra being sick with worry that because the event had not been publicized, our work to get sponsors, organize programming, travel to Rivas to get food and supplies would be in vain because no women would come to the 2012 International Women's Day celebration at *Casa de la Mujer*. While the publicity promised by the mayor's office never materialized, Mayra's worries were unfounded. On March 8, 2012, by 2:00 PM *Casa de la Mujer* was full of people, mostly women with the exception of a few men and a great deal of children who filled all the seats, sat on the floor and stood at the back, in the front vestibule, in the kitchen and even outside the centre to listen to the speeches and participate in the events. We discussed, cheered, danced and took a moment to remember all the women who have died at the hands of men. The massive turn-out and outpour of enthusiasm at this event indicates that even without proper publicity, women in San Juan del Sur know that *Casa de la Mujer* is a place that they can go to collectively mobilize, celebrate their value and assert their equal rights as women.

## Works Cited

- Adán Silva, José. 2012. "Pregnant Nicaraguan Girls Forced to Become Mothers." International Press Service News Agency. Retrieved from: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/08/pregnant-nicaraguan-girls-forced-to-become-mothers/>
- . 2011. "Gender Revolution in Schools Not Reflected at Work." International Press Service News Agency. Retrieved from: <http://ipsnews.net/newsTVE.asp?idnews=54342>
- . 2009a. "Nicaragua: Literacy Goal Met – Further Education Planned." International Press Service News Agency. Retrieved from: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/08/nicaragua-literacy-goal-met-ndash-further-education-planned/>
- . 2009b. "Gender-based Violence, the Hidden Face of Insecurity." International Press Service News Agency. Retrieved from: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/11/central-america-gender-based-violence-the-hidden-face-of-insecurity/>
- . 2007. "Down, Down with Adult Illiteracy." International Press Service News Agency. Retrieved from: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38663>
- Alvarez, Sonia E. 1998. "Latin American Feminisms "Go Global": Trends of the 1990s and Challenges for the New Millennium." In *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Culture: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Arnove, Robert F., Franz, Stephen and Alberto Torres, Carlos. 2007. "Education in Latin America: Dependency, Underdevelopment and Inequality." Pp. 277-294 in *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Babb, Florence. 2001. *After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Babb, Florence and Aynn Setright. 2010. "Gender Justice and Political Inclusion: Sandinistas, Feminists and the Current Divide." LASA Congress: Toronto, Canada.
- Bradshaw, Sarah. 2002. "Gendered Poverties and Power Relations: Looking Inside Communities and Households." Managua, Nicaragua: *Fundación Puntos de Encuentro*.

- Brandt, Deborah. 1989. "Naming the Moment: Political Analysis for Action - A Manual for Community Groups." The Moment Project Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice.
- , 1991. *To Change this House: Popular Education Under the Sandinistas*. Toronto, Ontario: The Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action.
- Bujard, Otker and Ulrich Wirper. 2009. *La Revolución es un Libro y un Hombre Libre: Afiches políticos de Nicaragua Libre 1979-1990 y del Movimiento de la Solidaridad Internacional*. Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica de la Universidad Centroamericana IHNCA-UCA.
- Casa de la Mujer Webpage. 2008. "Casa de la Mujer Mayra Calderon: A WOMEN'S ENRICHMENT CENTER." Retrieved from: <http://casadelamujer.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/casamujer-color-brochure2.pdf>
- Chant, Sylvia. 2008. "The 'Feminisation of Poverty' and the 'Feminisation' of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision?" *Journal of Development Studies* 44: 165-197.
- Daniel, Patricia. 2000. "Mujer! Women, The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade and Beyond." *Equal Opportunities International* 19: 17- 24.
- Delgado, Violeta. 2003. "The Experiences and Achievements of the Women's Network against Violence." Managua, Nicaragua. Envio Digital (261).
- Esplen, Emily. 2006. "Engaging Men in Gender Equality: Positive Strategies and Approaches." Brighton: BRIDGE Institute of Development Studies.
- Fink, Marcy. 1992. "Women and Popular Education in Latin America." Pp. 171-194 in *Women and Education in Latin America: Knowledge, Power and Change*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Gershberg, Alec Ian and Ben Meade. 2003. "Parental Contributions, School-level Finances, and Decentralization: An Analysis of Nicaraguan Autonomous School Budgets". New York, NY: Community Development Research Center, Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy New School University.
- Harding, Sandra. 2004. "How Standpoint Methodology Informs Philosophy of Science." Pp. 62- 80 in *Approaches to Qualitative Research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Informe de País*. Mayo 6 del 2008. *Gobierno de Nicaragua, Ministerio de Educación: Dirección General de Alfabetización y Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos*. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UII/confintea/pdf/National\\_Reports/Latin%20America%20-%20Caribbean/Nicaragua.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UII/confintea/pdf/National_Reports/Latin%20America%20-%20Caribbean/Nicaragua.pdf)
- Isbester, Katherine. 2001. *Still Fighting: The Nicaraguan Women's Movement 1977-2000*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Jacobs, Karla. 2009. "Education, health care, water: three reasons the country voted for the FSLN last November." *Tortilla con Sal*. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.tortillaconsal.com/education\\_health\\_water.html](http://www.tortillaconsal.com/education_health_water.html)
- Jara H., Oscar. 2010. "Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America." *Community Development Journal* 45(3): 287- 296.
- Kabeer, Naila. 1999. "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change* 30: 435-464.
- . 2005. "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment." *Gender and Development* 13(1): 13-24.
- Kampwirth, Karen. 2002. *Women & Guerilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . 2004. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Research in International Studies.
- . 2006. "Resisting the Feminist Threat: Antifeminist Politics in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua." *Journal of the National Women's Studies Association* 18(2): 73-100.
- . 2008. "Abortion, Antifeminism, and the Return of Daniel Ortega: In Nicaragua, Leftist Politics?" *Latin American Perspectives* 168(35): 122-136.
- . 2010. "Gender Politics in Nicaragua: Feminism, Antifeminism and the Return of Daniel Ortega." Pp. 111-126 in *Women's Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship*. Rutgers University Press.
- . 2010. "Populism and the Feminist Challenge in Nicaragua: The Return of Daniel Ortega." Pp. 162-179 in *Gender and Populism in Latin America: Passionate Politics*. University Park: Penn State.

- Kane, Liam. 2001. *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America*. London, UK: Latin America Bureau.
- , 2010. "Community Development: learning from popular education in Latin America." *Community Development Journal* 45(3): 276-286.
- King, Elizabeth M., Berk Özler, and Laura B. Rawlings. 1999. "Nicaragua's School Autonomy Reform: Fact or Fiction?" Working Paper Series on Impact Evaluation of Education Reforms, Paper No. 19. Development Research Group: The World Bank.
- La Boletina. 2000. "*Comisarías de la Mujer en peligro de extinción.*" *Puntos de Encuentro*. Managua, Nicaragua: Edición 41.
- Lancaster, Roger N. 1992. *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Longwe, Sara Hlupekile. 2010. "Education for Women's Empowerment or Schooling for Women's Subordination?" *Gender and Development*. 6(2):19-26.
- Magellan Geographix. 1997. "Map of Nicaragua." Retrieved from: <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/47/459.html>
- Molyneux, Maxine. 2001. *Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin America and Beyond*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Monkman, Karen, Rebecca Miles, and Peter B. Easton. 2008. "The Dance of Agency and Structure in an Empowerment Educational Program in Mali and Sudan. Pp. 88-106 In *The Structure and Agency of Women's Education*. Albany, New York: State University of New York.
- Moser, Caroline. 1993. *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Nationmaster.com. "Education stats: Canada vs Nicaragua" Source: United Nations Human Development Programme. Retrieved from: <http://www.nationmaster.com/compare/Canada/Nicaragua/Education>
- Reeves, Hazel and Sally Baden. 2000. "Gender and Development: Concepts and Definitions." Brighton: BRIDGE Institute of Development Studies.
- Rogers, Tim. 2012a. "Can the Sandinistas Fix Education?" *The Nicaragua Dispatch*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nicaraguadispatch.com/news/2012/01/can-the-sandinistas-fix-education/1939>

- 2012b. "In Nicaragua: Impoverished Teachers, Poor Schools." The Nicaragua Dispatch. Retrieved from: <http://www.nicaraguadispatch.com/news/2012/03/poor-teachers-poor-schools/3024>
- 2010. "Sandinistas Slash Social Spending in 2010." Tico Times. Retrieved from: [http://www.ticotimes.net/Current-Edition/News-Briefs/Sandinistas-Slash-Social-Spending-in-2011-Budget\\_Tuesday-November-09-2010](http://www.ticotimes.net/Current-Edition/News-Briefs/Sandinistas-Slash-Social-Spending-in-2011-Budget_Tuesday-November-09-2010)
- Rowlands, Jo. 1997. *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*. Dublin, Ireland: Oxfam Print Unit.
- Sanabria, Harry. 2007. *The Anthropology of Latin America and the Caribbean*. Boston, Massachusetts: Pearson Education Inc.
- Stromquist, Nelly P. 2008. "Adult Learning and the Politics of Change: Feminist Organization and Educational Action in Latin America." Pp. 211- 224 in *Gender Education and Equality in a Global Context: Conceptual frameworks and policy perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- 2007. "Women's education in the twenty-first century: Balance and prospects." Pp. 151- 174 in *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- 2000. "Learning for the Construction of a Feminist Agenda within Organizations in Civil Society." Pp. 73- 102 in *Distant Alliances: Promoting Education for Girls and Women in Latin America*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- 1995. "The Theoretical and Practical Bases for Empowerment." Pp. 6-13 in *Women, Education and Empowerment: Pathways towards Autonomy*. Hamburg, Germany: Seminar Report UNESCO Institute for Education.
- 1992. "Women and Literacy in Latin America." Pp. 1-19 in *Women and Education in Latin America: Knowledge, Power and Change*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Tully, Sheila R. 2007. "Scarcity and Surplus: Shifting regimes of childhood in Nicaragua." *Childhood* 14(3): 355-374.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2009. "World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education." Paris, France. Retrieved from: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading->

the-international-agenda/gender-and-education/resources/the-world-atlas-of-gender-equality-in-education/

Vogl, Adolfo Acevedo. 2011. "Percepciones de los Nicaragüenses Sobre la Calidad del Sistema Educativo." Fundacion Masaya Contra la Pobreza de Niacaragua. Retrieved from:  
<http://masayacontralapobreza.wordpress.com/category/educacion-en-nicaragua/>

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in my study about women's participation in *Casa de la Mujer*. As I was saying when I spoke to you earlier, I am interested in hearing about how your participation in *Casa de la Mujer* has impacted your relationships and life opportunities.

I am a Master's student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Guelph and I am the main researcher for this project. Everything that you say in this interview is completely confidential. No one will have access to the information but me.

I would like to read you the form from the university's Research Ethics Board so that you know that your privacy and confidentiality are protected as a participant in this research. (**read form**) In addition to taking notes, I would like to tape record our talk so that I don't miss anything that you are saying. Anytime that you wish, I will turn off the tape recorder and you can remain unrecorded. Is this alright with you?

Let me begin by asking you to tell me a bit about yourself. For instance, where were you born? Where do you live now?

Now, can you please describe when you first starting coming to *Casa de la Mujer*?

How did you decide to begin coming here?

Can you describe what your life was like before coming to the *Casa de la Mujer*?

Can you think of some ways that it has changed since then?

I am wondering how the members in your family feel about *Casa de la Mujer*?

Do you think that they have feelings that are similar or different to yours?

Do you feel that your life at home has changed at all since your family became involved in *Casa de la Mujer*?

For instance have your relationships and the types of decisions that you make within your home changed?

In your opinion, what is the best part of participating in *Casa de la Mujer*?

What would you change about participating in *Casa de la Mujer*?

What barriers do you think that women face in accessing the services provided by *Casa de la Mujer*?

Do you have any suggestions for the improvement of this program?

Thank you very much \_\_\_\_\_. I appreciate the time that you took out of your busy schedule to meet with me today. If you would like to talk about this further at any time please let me know and I will be happy to talk with you. I will be sending the results of my research in the form a short document in Spanish to *Casa de la Mujer* next summer. However, if you have questions about the research before this time, please don't hesitate to contact me, or the University of Guelph's Research Ethics Coordinator.