

Gender, Sexuality, and Politics: Rethinking the Relationship Between Feminism and Sandinismo in Nicaragua

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This paper revisits the historical relationship between Sandinismo and Feminism in Nicaragua, to explain the increasing antagonism between them. Drawing on the personal accounts of women's rights, sexual rights, and reproductive rights activists who participated in the Sandinista Revolution and movement, I show that the current conflict—far from being a radical break with the past—can be traced to antagonisms that have long existed within the Sandinista movement. The Sandinista leadership actively mobilized an anti-feminist discourse that marginalized sexual and reproductive rights from the revolutionary struggle. By constructing feminism as antagonistic to the revolution and forcing a split in loyalties, this discourse produced complex processes of (self)disciplining and (self)silencing. The article seeks to highlight the complexity of these processes and the internal dilemmas they produced. It questions not only the primacy of the economic or material sphere over issues of gender and sexuality, but also the very division of these into different spheres of experience and politics.

Introduction

For the political left, the Sandinista revolution in 1979 was once a worldwide symbol for social change, justice, and democracy (Molyneux 1985). Unlike other socialist regimes, the Sandinistas promoted a combined planned, state-led, and private-based economy, with free elections and parliamentary democracy. They adopted one of the most progressive constitutions in the world (Walker 1997; Williams 1994). The revolution became not only a symbol of democracy but also of gender equality (Molyneux 1985, 1988). The Sandinista guerrilla organization had more women fighters than any other guerrilla movement in Latin America at that time, and once in power, the Sandinistas involved women in the tasks of the revolution, opening important

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public spaces—of education, employment, and political participation—to women (Chinchilla 1994; Kampwirth 1998; Luciak 1998). Legal reforms included the gender parity in family law, recognition of de facto unions, as well as unilateral and no-fault divorce. Although abortion law was not liberalized, access to therapeutic abortion was expanded, by broadening the legal interpretation (Kampwirth 1998; McNaughton et al. 2004; Molyneux 1985). Even though the Sandinistas were not supportive of sexual diversity, they did not systematically persecute persons on the basis of their sexual orientation as other socialist regimes in Cuba or the Soviet Union did (Randall 1993). There were many reasons to believe that this revolution and political project would lead to enduring positive changes in terms of both social and gender justice.

Today, more than 30 years after the revolution, this expectation has changed considerably. The Sandinistas regained power in 2006. While preserving a rhetoric of “revolution,” anti-imperialism and of defense of the poor, they have supported the free trade agreement, allied with the political right as well as the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and openly pursued anti-feminist politics (Gago 2007; Kampwirth 2008; Rodgers 2008). The most dramatic expression of their increasingly open hostility toward feminism was the elimination of therapeutic abortion in Nicaragua and the subsequent persecution of feminist leaders (Heumann 2013; Kampwirth 2008).

To make sense out of these puzzling developments, I revisited the historical relationship between *Sandinismo* and *Feminismo*, through the personal accounts of women’s rights, sexual rights, and reproductive rights activists who participated in Sandinista Revolution and movement. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty-seven women’s rights and sexual rights activists, and analysis of archival materials from more than a decade, I show how women’s rights and sexual rights activists (who may or may not have identified as feminists) tried to push forward a feminist agenda, which included women’s equality in the family, abortion rights, and sexual rights; and how they were censored and silenced by the Sandinista leadership through a series of disciplining mechanisms that eventually led to a pervasive self-censorship of feminists.

Hence, I argue that the Sandinista gender and sexual politics were not simply “insufficiently” feminist, driven by pragmatic and practical interests, constrained by the war, or the conservative cultural context (Deighton et al 1983; Kampwirth 1998; Lancaster 1992; Molyneux 1988), but *actively anti-feminist*. One powerful strategy, which enabled the Sandinistas to marginalize feminists and feminism, was a discourse that constructed feminism and sexual rights and diversity not only as disconnected from and subordinated to, but as antagonistic to the revolutionary project. The censoring of feminism through a discourse that framed it as incompatible with being a “true” revolutionary, triggered complex processes of (self)censorship, (self)disciplining, and silencing among the women and feminists concerned with these issues. My second argument is, therefore, that rather than seeing feminists as passive victims, we need to acknowledge how they became part of those silencing processes as

they struggled with loyalty to two increasingly opposing sets of agendas and identities. My point is not to blame the victim but to show the power of the revolutionary discourses that were based on the affirmation of a primary and exclusive, revolutionary identity (Ferree and Roth 1998), a hierarchy of rights (Miller 2000), and a disregard of personal politics as opposed to “State” politics.¹

The analysis builds upon previous critiques by scholars and Nicaraguan feminist activists, of the gender and sexual politics of left wing movements especially in terms of the hierarchy established between the economy and sexuality (Randall 1992). At the same time, it seeks to go beyond them, by pointing toward the underlying assumptions that make it seem reasonable to weigh these against each other, namely the very separation of the material and the cultural into distinct spheres of experience, power, and politics (Butler 1997). By doing that I hope to change the lens through which we assess the gender and sexual politics of the political left.

This research is part of a larger research project that sought to explain the struggle around gender and sexuality in post-revolutionary Nicaragua which involved interviews with both feminist and “pro-life” activists, archival analysis from over a decade, and participant observation. This article draws primarily on the interviews with women’s rights, sexual rights, and reproductive rights activists.² Living in Nicaragua throughout the decade of the 1990s and working with women’s organizations gave me years of exposure to the dynamics and contradictions of the women’s movement and politics in Nicaragua. This personal experience that I lived as that of an insider–outsider has also informed this work in important ways and surely has defined my perspective and my quest for understanding the internal contradictions of the movement, and the coexistence of radical politics, of questioning of power relations on the one hand, and the reproduction of silences, power disparities, and exclusions on the other.

I will look at the interrelated processes of (self) censorship and self(silencing) through which women were disciplined into this “revolutionary discourse” and the ways in which they affected the relationship between Sandinista movement and feminists within its ranks chronologically and situate them in the changing socio political contexts of the last three decades.

Feminism and the Sandinista Revolution: Understanding Ambivalences and Antagonisms

There is an extensive literature on the relationship between Sandinismo and feminism in Nicaragua, which has contributed in important ways to our understanding of the complex and contradictory effects of the Sandinista regime on women’s rights and on the development of feminism (Bayard de Volo 2012; Chinchilla 1990, 1992, 1994; Disney 2008; Isbester 2001; Jacquette 1994; Kampwirth 1993, 1996, 1998, 2004; Molyneux 1985, 1986; Randall

1992, 1994). In the mid-1980s, Molyneux introduced the distinction between practical and strategic gender interests to make sense out of the contradictory Sandinista gender politics and specifically their resistance to abortion. The practical vs. strategic, or feminine vs. feminist, distinction became a dominant frame to understand the gender politics of the political left (Disney 2008; Ray and Korteweg 1999). In the 1990s and beyond, authors such as Kampwirth (1998, 2004) and Disney (2008) continued to engage with the question of the contradictory legacy of revolution for feminism: on the one hand, providing crucial opportunities for women's mobilization and organization; on the other hand, resisting feminist demands. Both also showed how feminism grew after gaining autonomy from the Sandinista party.

I share the concerns of these authors in trying to come to terms with the failure of the Sandinista revolution to develop a feminist agenda. In order to do that I propose to look at this failure as an active accomplishment rather than a "shortcoming" that resulted from the convergence of a number of constraints, such as the civil war, the economic embargo, and the conservative cultural context. I argue that the Sandinista leadership played an active role in mobilizing an anti-feminist discourse that systematically marginalized sexual and reproductive rights from the revolutionary struggle. At the same time, feminists also played an active role in sustaining the silences imposed by Sandinismo by engaging in practices of self-disciplining and self-censorship. It is these practices that sustained their alliance for so long in the first place. Feminist issues were consequently not simply tabled and "postponed" but actively pushed out of the revolutionary project, by constructing feminism as incompatible with a revolutionary identity.

In my arguments I build on Ferree and Mueller's (2004) critique of (i) the association of feminism with new social movements as opposed to "old" class-based movements, (ii) narrow definitions that help to uphold the idea of feminism as limited to a white middle class minority, and (iii) the distinction between pragmatic and strategic gender interests or feminine vs. feminist goals, as something that presupposes an external "judge" and is built upon the assumption of a progressive line of consciousness building (Ferree and Mueller 2004, 576–87; Ray and Korteweg 1999). This relates to Butler's critique of the distinction and hierarchy between material and cultural forms of oppression (Butler 1997), which has also been taken up in the field of development studies to question the absence of sexuality from discussions around poverty (Cornwall and Jolly 2006). I refer to feminism as the identification with the goal of challenging and changing gender constructions and inequalities (adapted from Ferree and Mueller 2004, 577), often in combination with addressing other inequalities. In this paper I focus on the intersection of gender and sexuality and on highlighting those aspects of feminism that have often been depicted as a distinctive feature of "western white middle class" feminism. Those have also been issues that were most marginalized by the Sandinista regime: First and foremost sexual rights and abortion rights, but

also violence against women. A note needs to be added here about the label of feminism. A number of women I spoke with claimed a feminist identity, while others refused the explicit “label” of feminism, even when they supported: Women’s equal rights in all domains of the society, struggle against violence against women, sexual rights and rights to the body. To avoid attaching the labels that were rejected by the interviewees, I will use in the paper both “feminist” and “women” as a reference. It is however important to note that women often started to identify with feminist ideals long before they accepted the label. As [Sternbach, Navarro and Alvarez \(1992\)](#) have shown, this is associated with a very problematic misconception about Latin American women, and specifically poor women, as rejecting feminist goals, when in fact the rejection of the label has to be seen as an effect of censorship and manipulation of the meaning of feminism in left wing movements ([Sternbach et al. 1992](#), 403).

My arguments are also built on the work of authors that have shown that feminist ideas from first- and second-wave feminism, as well as ideas of sexual liberation, were present in the Nicaragua of the 1960s and 1970s and had a significant influence on the Sandinista movement and politics ([Barbosa 2004, 2006](#); [González-Rivera 1998, 2011](#); [Randall 1994](#)). Historian [Victoria González-Rivera’s \(1998, 2011\)](#) study of the history of first-wave feminism since the early twentieth century and its relationship to the Somoza regime, challenged several very pervasive myths by showing that the Sandinistas were not the first ones to open up political opportunities for women, and to appeal to women as a constituency through a rhetoric of women’s rights, and that feminism was neither new nor foreign to Nicaragua. This is relevant because these myths played a role in casting the Sandinistas as a “vanguard” for women’s rights. [Francisco Barbosa’s work \(2004\)](#) on the influence of a global youth culture on the Sandinista movement also disrupts the prevailing notion of the Sandinista promulgation of a new gender order. He showed how the gender and sexual norms of this youth culture clashed with those of the “old” generation of Sandinistas, and how young Sandinistas were disciplined into the model of “revolutionary masculinity” characterized by “militarism, martyrdom, and selflessness for the revolution” ([Barbosa 2004](#), 8), to the extent that after the revolution the “drug use and sexual experimentation of the early 1970s was erased from the movement’s official history” ([Barbosa 2004](#), 9). What is important about these findings is that they show not only the presence and influence of radical ideas around sexuality among Sandinista men and women before the revolution, but also an active process of disciplining, silencing, and subsequent erasure from the collective memory of the revolution.

Testimonies of Nicaraguan women’s rights and sexual rights activists support these accounts.³ They suggest that from the beginning of the revolution there was a group of women in the Sandinista movement who were familiar with (and inspired by) ideas of women’s liberation and sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s, and who considered the revolution and feminism as part of one and the same project of social change ([Murguialday and Vasquez 1994](#)).⁴

[I]n my adolescence I come across feminism, feminism brings me to Marxism, and Marxism brings me to my political militancy (Personal Interview, August 12, 2005).

Women who identified with feminism from the 1970s and early 1980s and were familiar with feminist literature, would come to play the role of what [Baud and Rutten \(2004, 1–18\)](#) have called “popular intellectuals.” They provided the interpretative frames that made it possible to define and articulate grievances and demands in relation to sexism and heterosexism and therefore played an important role in the development of a feminist consciousness ([Heumann 2010](#)).

Next to a relatively small group of women who identified with the label of feminism, there were more women who were not necessarily familiar with feminist literature, and would not see themselves as feminists, yet identified with ideas of women’s liberation, including those that have often been considered to be absent in Latin American feminisms (especially at that moment of time), namely sexual rights and abortion rights ([Heumann 2007](#); [Sternbach et al. 1992](#)). The account of a (former) Sandinista militant who defines herself as a “latecomer” to feminism, exemplifies the type of radical thinking around women’s sexual rights that existed in 1970s Nicaragua, and their link to women’s vision of the revolution:

[T]hese were my readings in the 70s, and now that we have this revolution, that we are going to construct the New Woman, we will have a new sexual morality, and the whole proposal so revolutionary, that if you can’t have everything with one partner, with somebody you will have the intellectual communication, with somebody else you will have the sexual, with somebody else you will have the militancy. . . . For me it seemed, and continues to be, the *non plus ultra*, almost impossible to put in practice, at least for me, yet this was my model. It fell apart, everything broke: with private property, authoritarianism. All the taboos taking over that we had identified as bourgeois and petit bourgeois (Personal Interview, 04-Aug-05).

This makes the question about silencing and self-silencing even more pertinent: with the presence of such radical ideas in the early years of the revolution, how was it possible that these ideals of gender and sexual rights became marginalized? In the following two sections I look at processes of censorship and self-censorship in the context of feminist organizing and collective claim making and in the context of women’s personal lives.

Feminism and Anti-feminism: Activism Within the Sandinista Movement

In this section, I look at the development of women’s and feminist organizations and initiatives in relation to the dynamics of censorship and

self-censorship during the 1980s. I show how feminist demands were resisted by the Sandinista leadership and how that resistance generated processes of self-censorship of feminists and women's rights activists, eclipsing full sexual and reproductive rights from the agenda of the women's movement.

The Sandinista discourse of equality and social justice and their rhetorical commitment to women's emancipation, appealed to women in the Sandinista movement and nurtured their belief that the revolution would bring about changes in gender relations. The first women's organization linked to the Sandinista movement, Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional/Women's Association to confront the National Dilemma (AMPRONAC) emerged in 1977 to support the revolutionary struggle, but in practice was already very concerned with gender politics (e.g., Interviews with Milú Vargas and Daisy Zamora in [Randall 1994](#) and [Disney 2008](#)). Shortly after the revolution in 1979, AMPRONAC became Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE), the Sandinista mass organization for women. AMNLAE became the first official platform to promote women's rights under the Sandinista regime. AMNLAE played an important role in forging the first series of law reforms that the Sandinistas promoted between 1979 and 1982, most notably the Family reforms that established gender equality as well as mutual responsibilities in the family, and the Nurturing Law, which among other things established men's maintenance obligations for their children, including those born outside of marriage. These law reforms challenged gender relations in the private sphere, and account for much of the enthusiasm and optimism that prevailed in relation to the Sandinista gender and sexual politics. But these law proposals encountered strong resistance from the Sandinista leadership and were hotly debated in the Council of State:

This debate [about the family law], a first debate that was terrible, because it was the first one that takes place in the eighties about the role of women in the family, the role of responsible paternity (...) it was a really fierce debate. I remember that at that time Milú Vargas, who was the [legal] advisor [of the Council of State], was admonished by the president who told her that *the laws had to be 'for everybody' and not only for the feminists of the time*. It was a nice debate because for many of us it opened the opportunity to see how – independent of the fact that there was a revolution – conservative values wouldn't change from one day to the other. But this we only understood many years later (Personal interview, August 31, 2005, emphasis mine).

The remark shows how the Sandinistas justified their resistance to feminist demands by dismissing them as minority issues that detracted from the interests of “everybody” as embodied in “the Revolution.” It also shows the surprise at, and the sobering effect of, the Sandinista leadership's resistance to women's rights upon loyal members of the rank and file. Even though both the Family Law and the Nurturing Law were ultimately approved by the Council of State,

the Nurturing Law was never signed into law by the head of state, Daniel Ortega, and thus never became effective (Chinchilla 1990; Craske 1999, 139–61; Kampwirth 1998; Molyneux 1985, 1988).

AMNLAE's history is marked by the tensions between the Sandinista leadership who tried to keep control over its agenda and use it primarily to mobilize women for the tasks of the revolution and women within (and outside) AMNLAE who demanded a greater prioritization of women's rights and a more comprehensive agenda that included issues like sexuality, abortion rights, and violence against women (Chinchilla 1990; Montenegro 1997; Whisnant 1995, 418). It is important to note that the very existence of AMNLAE as a women's-only space was contested, because it created the suspicion of "separatism". It did not fit with the rest of the structure of the Sandinista mass organizations that were gender "mixed" spaces and organized according to "sectors" of the population (youth, rural workers, and professionals etc.). Women with more radical ideas were marginalized from AMNLAE and labeled "feminists" a term that was used as synonymous with being "out of line in terms of the priorities of popular women at this stage of the revolution" (Murguialday 1988, 61). Feminists were sidelined by questioning their commitment and loyalty to the revolution and by associating them with lesbianism—an even more stigmatized identity:

The first National Executive they dissolve it because they accuse her [the head of AMNLAE] of being a lesbian, so they kick her out – Also women who came with feminist ideas and were advancing these kinds of things – and they send her to the structure of the [Sandinista Liberation] Front where they would be better controlled. (...) After that another *compañera* gets there and the same happens. She ends up establishing a lesbian relationship with another *compañera*, and they kick her out again (...) Well after that there was a big fear and an equation of feminism, and of the work with women, with lesbianism, and there was a lot of zeal and suspicion towards (...) AMNLAE, that they were (...) really promoting lesbianism, and the *compañeras* [from AMNLAE] had to go against that stigma in order to be able to advance other things (Personal Interview, 04-Aug-04).

This quote shows how the Sandinistas strategically deployed the stigma of lesbianism to marginalize and discredit feminists and how this created a problematic dynamic of exclusion and (self)silencing in which women's rights activists sought to avoid this by distancing themselves from these stigmatized identities, as well as from the claims or demands associated with them.

The party control over AMNLAE increased significantly over time, especially in light of the political polarization and the armed conflict with counter-revolutionary forces that started in 1982 (Chinchilla 1990). The context of war lent credence to the notion that "the revolution" had to be prioritized over women's issues through a tremendous sense of urgency and "naturalness".

This is also nicely shown in the early pamphlet produced by the Solidarity Committee in London, *Sweet Ramparts* (1983, 2): “The new government is committed to women’s equality (...). If the revolution is defeated (...) the opportunity for women’s liberation is lost too. So the top priority is the very survival and consolidation of the revolution itself.” There is no room in this framing to even talk about the contradictions and hostilities within the Sandinista movement towards claims around gender and sexuality; claiming women’s rights in a context in which the revolution as a whole was at stake could only be seen as straightforwardly anti-revolutionary. This, together with the fierce reactions to their demands that feminists had already experienced before the onset of the contra war, made women’s rights activist very careful in broaching the issues that encountered resistance within the party (Murguialday 1988, 60–63).

As the space within AMNLAE became increasingly compromised and feminist leaders left or were pushed out of the organization, they tried to find and create other spaces to continue the struggle for women’s rights. One of the strategies was the creation of women’s secretariats in the Sandinista labor unions, like the CONAPRO (the National Confederation of Professionals), and the ATC (the Association of Rural Workers) in 1983 (personal interviews, August 3, 2005, August 12, 2005, November 24, 2005; Randall 1994). These became strategic spaces not least because by being so centrally embedded within the official structures of the Sandinista state-party and working together with men, they enabled feminists to avoid or counter accusations of separatism and of being disconnected from the revolutionary project. In the second half of the 1980s, these women’s secretariats became a generalized phenomenon and new, more autonomous initiatives started to emerge: radio programs, TV programs, alternative theater groups, and the first women’s collectives. According to Murguialday and Vasquez (1994), the level of harmony or conflict in the relationship with the Sandinista leadership was a direct consequence of the level of subordination and dependency that women were willing to accept.

It was out of these feminist circles that the first initiative to form a gay and lesbian movement emerged in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s (Babb 2003; Randall 1993). It is part of my analysis because it was an expression of feminist agency and specifically of the attempts of feminists to integrate the issue of sexual rights into the revolutionary project. The experience also offers an apt example of the Sandinista resistance to feminist and sexual rights claims by constructing them as anti-revolutionary, as well as the dynamics of self-censorship and self-silencing among the activists. The gay and lesbian movement was composed predominantly of Sandinista gays and lesbians who saw their struggle as part of the revolution (Rita Arauz in Randall 1994). The group started out in 1985, inspired by the visit of a gay and lesbian solidarity brigade from San Francisco, and held private, almost clandestine, meetings. As the group grew, the Sandinistas became suspicious and in 1986 State Security

intervened in the group's activities. The leaders were detained, interrogated, admonished, and released the same day with the order not to meet again and to remain silent about what had happened (Randall 1993). This took place through intimidation but also by appealing to their Sandinista identity:

[T]hey said we were imperialists. Lenín Cerna [Minister of Interior] and Jacinto Juárez, of the State Security; they took us to the Chipote [high security prison] and told us that we couldn't form this movement; that the revolution was not for 'fagotries' (Personal Interview, July 24, 2004, male sexual rights activist).

[T]hey managed to dissolve the group, because the majority of the people who participated were Sandinistas. So the argument of the State Security was that if they organized this movement it was acting against the revolution, that it was giving tools to the counterrevolution and indeed the movement didn't continue. And there were also repressions. There were several *compañeros* who were captured and held in prison (Personal Interview August 20, 2005, female feminist and sexual rights activist).

The activists not only ceased their activities but also agreed to remain silent about their repressive experience with the state security for many years:

When it happened, we agreed that we wouldn't make it public. We were revolutionaries and we believed that if news of this repression got out, especially outside the country, it would be very harmful to the Sandinista cause. We knew we were at war and we made a political decision to keep a lid on it for a while (Rita Arauz, in Randall 1993, 273).

While activists were evidently intimidated by State Security, the quote shows that activists were also engaging in self-censorship out of their sense of commitment to the revolutionary project and loyalty to the Sandinista State. In 1987, Dora Maria Tellez as Minister of Health offered a new political opening for gays and lesbians, when she invited them to become part of the HIV prevention brigades. This created an "officially sanctioned" space for them to meet and work together within the frame of sexual health, and led to the foundation of CEP-SIDA—an HIV Prevention Organization (Personal Interviews July 22, 2004, July 24, 2004, July 7, 2005, August 20, 2005; Bolt 1996; Randall 1993). In 1989, a small group of Sandinista gays and lesbians had their first public "coming out" by filing in front of the "comandantes" during the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the revolution (Babb 2003).

Another important venue for the development of feminist consciousness and activism was the Latin American Feminist Meeting in Mexico in 1987 (Kampwirth 2004; Sternbach et al. 1992).⁵ While previously regional or international meetings had been strictly controlled by the Sandinista party, the organizers of the meeting made it possible for independent feminists

(i.e., those who were not from AMNLAE) to travel and participate, bypassing the control of the party through personally-issued, and non-transferrable invitations and plane tickets (Personal Interview, August 4, 2005). The *Encuentro* left a deep impression on Nicaraguan activists, because it enabled them to validate their personal experiences and was critical in their process of declaring oneself feminists or coming out as lesbians without shame and without feeling that they were betraying the revolution (personal interviews August 4, 2005; September 24, 2005). What played a role here as well was the fact that the Feminist Meeting coincided with the First Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Feminist Meeting, enabling women to participate in both and giving the topic of sexual orientation a strong presence within the feminist encounter (Riquelme 2004; personal interview September 24, 2005). Inspired by the meeting in Mexico in 1987, a group of women formed the PIE, (Partido de la Izquierada Erótica), the Party of the Erotic Left, with an explicit commitment to feminism and a readiness to become more belligerent and demanding of the Sandinista party and Sandinista state in terms of women's rights, and the democratization of AMNLAE. The PIE was an informal group of well-known feminists who occupied key positions linked to the Sandinista regime, working in the Sandinista newspaper *Barricada*, in parliament, and the Sandinista labor unions (personal interview, August 12, 2005; Gioconda Belli in Randall 1994). They did not act publicly as a group, but rather held private meetings in which they agreed on the work that each of them would promote in the spaces they worked.⁶

As feminist activism and organizational spaces proliferated, the contradictions with the Sandinista leadership increased towards the end of the 1980s. In view of the 1990 elections the PIE made a brief attempt to establish itself as a political party to ensure the inclusion of women's rights on the electoral agenda, and then run in the election in alliance with the Sandinista Front (personal interview August 12, 2005; Gioconda Belli in Randall 1994). However, this proposal was rejected by the party leadership and the PIE decided to drop it in order to avoid confrontation with the FSLN. At the same time feminists continued in their efforts to negotiate with the Sandinista women's organization AMNLAE, to include in its agenda feminist demands in relation to abortion rights, sexuality, and gender-based violence, and to bring about the democratization of the organization. Yet precisely when AMNLAE was making steps to open up to a more democratic process, the Nicaraguan elections were rescheduled from November 1990 to February 1990, and the National Directorate of the FSLN re-established control over AMNLAE by assigning a new coordinator, a move that would be characterized as a "coup d'état" (Criquillion 1992; *Revista Gente* 1990). One of the participants recounts a "long" meeting with the Sandinista leadership in which they discussed the democratization of AMNLAE and the inclusion of abortion on the movement's agenda:

In this meeting we were basically asked not to talk about the topic [of abortion]. Because it wasn't of interest, it wasn't a necessity, we were

in a year in which the counterrevolution was doing damage, the North American government was badly affecting the country, and an agenda that included the topic of abortion put the [Sandinista National Liberation] Front in an uncomfortable position, in relation to the allies that they could have within the country (Personal Interview March 12, 2003).

Once again, women were asked to prioritize the interests of “the revolution” and to unite forces to ensure electoral success, with the promise that their demands would be taken up after the elections. But that moment never came, because the Sandinistas lost the elections and state power and they ultimately were not willing to cede control over AMNLAE (personal interview August 12, 2005; Gioconda Belli in [Criquillion 1992](#); [Randall 1994](#)).

The above shows that both a feminist movement and a gay and lesbian movement were already emerging in the decade of the 1980s, making use of the opportunities available within the Sandinista regime, and at the same time repeatedly coming up against the limits posed by it. The groups that escaped or challenged the censorship of the Sandinista leadership played a crucial role in pushing women’s issues and sexual rights on the agenda of the Sandinista party and state, and in opening spaces where things could be spoken of without fear of sanction. Their development also made the contradictions within the Sandinista regime increasingly obvious. It was out of these networks that a variety of lesbian, gay, and feminist initiatives would emerge after regime transition in 1990, giving birth to the autonomous women’s movement in 1992. It is clear from the above, thus that the birth of the autonomous women’s is the outcome of a longstanding feminist struggle that took place since the early years of the revolution. It is also clear that the Sandinista government has been systematically anti-feminist and homophobic, continuously constructing feminist and gay and lesbian activism—in discourse and in practice—as marginal or anti-revolutionary and that this split in loyalties put women’s rights activist in the position of having to choose between feminism and revolution.

Silencing and Self-silencing: Sexuality, and Conflicting Identities and Loyalties

In this section, I will show how the struggles over women’s rights within the revolutionary project were complicated by personal experiences of sexual control, discrimination, and harassment. The discourse that constructs Sandinismo and feminism as antagonistic and mutually exclusive did not only serve to silence political discussions around feminist issues, but also to discipline and silence individual women’s attempts to tackle the double standards, sexual harassment, and homophobia they lived within the party.

Lesbian women in the Sandinista movement felt particularly discriminated against. While lesbianism was rarely addressed openly in the party, lesbians

were the object of gossip, follow-ups by state security, forced geographical separation of couples, transfer to more marginal, less prestigious, or more dangerous areas or tasks, and referrals for psychiatric treatment (personal interviews August 8, 2005, August 20, 2005, September 24, 2005, September 30, 2005, November 24, 2005; Bolt 1996). Many lesbian Sandinistas faced profound contradictions between their sexual orientation and their Sandinista identity. It took some women years to accept themselves as lesbians and even longer to openly confront the party leadership with their sexual orientation:

That was how the saying went, like everybody was free to practice their sexuality as they pleased. (...) But in practice there was repression, there was discrimination. (...) I don't like to comment on it because I don't want to place myself as a victim. (...) Because I didn't have the guts to stand up to it, either. And I think that it has to do with the fact that at that time my reason for being, for existing, was to be a militant of the [Sandinista Liberation] Front. For me to be expelled from the Front would have been like death. So I didn't have enough guts to stand up and maintain a stance and a position. I started to have a much clearer vision, more conscious, to be more decisive when I decided in '86 to leave (...) the professional structures of the Front. This is when I started to awaken also as a person, as a human being, that I would be a revolutionary wherever I am, and if they expel me, I would not stop being a revolutionary. But many years had to pass and a whole process of consciousness-raising in order for me to be able to have this vision (Personal Interview August 20, 2005).

This example shows how central the identity as Sandinista was for some women, and how difficult it was to question the monopoly on "truth" that the Sandinistas exercised in defining who and what a "good," "real," or "legitimate" revolutionary was. The fact that the Sandinista leadership constructed feminists and lesbians as a threat to the revolution made it difficult to be a revolutionary and a feminist or a lesbian at the same time. As a consequence some Sandinista women spent a long time struggling with these personal experiences, since validating them entailed alienation from the Sandinista party and risking being expelled from the militancy.⁷

It is important to note here that the "problem" of sexuality did not come into Sandinista movement only through the issue of sexual orientation. As the following excerpts show, sexual violence against women, double standards for male and female sexual behaviors and issues of reproduction were also among those that many women and feminists had to struggle with. Instances of sexual harassment and abuse within the party were not properly dealt with by the Sandinista leadership and produced disenchantment among female militants:

When I was already a functionary of the Front, another thing that marked me and my advances [towards feminism] was when a

functionary of the Front of the House of Government tried to rape me (. . .). They don't believe me, [my superior] believes that I was drunk. It bothered me deeply but of course [at that time] one didn't have a grasp on the phenomenon of violence in order to understand the revictimization and everything that we understand today (Personal Interview November 24, 2005).

Heterosexual women also suffered from the double standards of sexual behavior established for them and their male *compañeros* (personal interview August 4, 2004, November 24, 2005; Belli 2001):

I was a leading militant, I had a position, I had a car, I had a rank (. . .) but I had a hard time finding a partner (. . .) because I mean my *compañeros* treated me as an equal in everything related to political life but I wondered: Why doesn't anyone marry me? Why do they only like the dull ones, and they attend to them and treat them well, and not me? (. . .) What happened was that if you slept with somebody you were "loose"—you wouldn't enter the sphere of "good women." Maybe you were a "sister in arms" because you were in their group. They wouldn't call you "slut" or "whore." Or they would say it only behind your back (. . .) I slept with anyone that I wanted (. . .) and it was an exercise of power for me (. . .) like an exercise of self-affirmation (. . .) and I wouldn't feel regret or anything (. . .) but there was a double morality that for me at least was confusing and was a reason for a personal crisis. (. . .) If my *compañeros* of the militancy, of the [Sandinista] Front (. . .) practiced their sexuality freely, why didn't it work out the same way when I did it? (. . .) They told me terrible things; they practically called me a prostitute and said that all the women in the Front were prostitutes (Personal Interview August 04, 2004).

The quotes show how these personal experiences produced deep grievances and internal conflicts. It was often a difficult process to recognize these situations as expressions of discrimination in the first place and harder still to reframe them as reflections of structural gender and sexuality politics and as something that was both important and legitimate to challenge. Gioconda Belli in her autobiographical book, *El país bajo mi piel* (2001), tells how she was asked to end a relationship with a U.S. journalist because she had confidential information and was thus prone to divulging State secrets. She actually followed the orders and ended her relationship, narrating how sad she was about it, and how mad she was—not at the *comandante* who made the demand on her, but rather at the U.S. aggression that made this sacrifice necessary. She felt this way until a friend of hers made her realize how absurd this was, when all the male Sandinista leaders had as many foreign girlfriends and partners as they liked and nobody was ever suspicious.

These examples show that women's sexual choices were conceived as potentially harmful and dangerous to the revolution, because they were alleged to directly affect the image of the revolution, damage ideals of revolutionary "purity" and make it vulnerable to the enemy. Women's sexuality was consistently defined and dealt with differently than male sexuality, be it in terms of its availability to the male Sandinista leadership, its moral qualifications or the restrictions of its expressions within the movement. In all those examples, the demands for sexual rights were framed in opposition to the goals of the revolution.

Some social movement scholars have captured this problem through the concept of "competing identities" (McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Passy 2003). Yet what is clear here is, that these identities were not at all "objectively" in opposition to or in conflict with one another. On the contrary, for a number of women in the Sandinista movement, women's rights, sexual rights, and revolution went perfectly hand in hand, and were part of the same project of social justice (see also Hobson 2012, specifically on gays and lesbians and their imagery of the revolution). It was the Sandinista leadership that constructed feminism and homosexuality as incompatible with being a revolutionary—and depicted it as foreign, middle class, representing only a minority, and therefore a threat to national interests, to the interests of the revolution and to the "unity" of men and women in the Sandinista movement. Women's reluctance to "come out" within the Sandinista movement as lesbians or assert themselves as feminists was informed by the internalization of this discourse of the imminent priority of the defense of the revolution, a feeling of deep commitment to the revolutionary project and the belief that the Sandinista leadership was essentially in favor of women's and sexual rights and was indeed only waiting for the right moment to start addressing their issues. As they increasingly recognized that this discourse was continuously excluding them, and also were confronted with discrimination and hostility, their self-censorship was also based on fears of exclusion and rejection by their "significant others"—their revolutionary *compañeros* in struggle. Consequently, the alliance between Sandinistas and the women's movement was sustained to a great extent by the self-censorship of feminists.

The Open Hostility of the Sandinista Leadership Towards Feminism in Post-revolutionary Nicaragua

The 1990 regime transition that marked the end of the Sandinista regime allowed women's and sexual rights activists to distance themselves from Sandinismo, and to reinterpret feminism as revolutionary, leading to the emergence of the autonomous women's movement. Sandinista leaders responded to this by "accusing" feminists of being "man haters," "lesbians," and of threatening the unity of the party:

I remember that particularly Radio Ya [a Sandinista radio station] made a terrible campaign against us, that we all were ‘sluts’, that we were all “lesbians” (. . .) We occupied the radio, denounced that this was discrimination (Personal Interview August 03, 2005).⁸

But the rupture was not immediate; many feminists still saw this conflict as an internal struggle. They still had a strong sense of belonging, and saw themselves as part of the Sandinista movement. When in 1998 Daniel Ortega faced public accusation of childhood sexual abuse from his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez, leaders of the autonomous women’s movement took a stance against the Sandinista leader (Narváez 1998; Randall 2000; Sanchez 1998). This moment was an important turning point that deeply unsettled the relationship between the autonomous movement and the Sandinistas. Narvaez and her supporters were accused of having joined the “enemy” and trying to divide and destroy the Sandinista party. Ortega evaded prosecution, first by invoking parliamentary immunity, and later by having the case dismissed on procedural grounds (Baltodano 2006; Fonseca 1999; López Vigil 2000).

The final break between feminists and Sandinistas occurred in the aftermath of the abortion law reform that took place in the heat of the 2006 electoral campaign, in which the Sandinista deputies supported the imposition of a total abortion ban. While first declared just as a tactic to win the elections, the abortion ban was ratified in 2007 once Sandinistas were in power (Kampwirth 2008; López Vigil 2007). In fact according to interviews conducted with leaders of the “pro-life” movement, the Sandinistas had already promised to support the abortion ban in 2000, when the first debate around the abortion legislation took place, also in the midst of an electoral campaign. Back then, the deputies decided to table the law reform so it would not be instrumentalized for electoral ends. That the Sandinista support for the abortion ban was not simply a pragmatic and spontaneous response to the “pro-life” campaign is also suggested by the fact that after the ratification of the abortion ban, the Sandinistas engaged in persecuting women’s organizations and feminist leaders who protested against the abortion ban, by pressing legal charges and conducting smear campaigns for money laundering and for “promoting” abortion (Rico 2008). In 2008 also the Sandinista women’s organization AMNLAE was attacked by the FSLN, after AMNLAE’s national representative and Sandinista deputy Dora Zeledón had condemned the penalization of therapeutic abortion. The FSLN forced the renunciation of Zeledón, appropriated properties of the organization and created the parallel “Sandinista Women’s Movement” (Potosme 2008a, b).

Conclusions

This paper posits the hostility of the Sandinista leadership towards feminism, by re-examining their historical relationship. The historical tensions and

hostility of the Sandinista leadership towards feminism show that there is much more continuity in the current anti-feminist politics of the Sandinista leadership than is commonly acknowledged and that the alliance between Sandinistas and feminists had been based and sustained to a high degree by the self-censorship, and self-silencing of feminists and women activists.

The processes of silencing and self-silencing centered especially around sexual and reproductive rights. The marginalization of sexual and reproductive rights in the Sandinista movement and government and the stigmatization of feminism was not the product of a self-evident prioritization of revolutionary agenda against the feminist agenda. Rather, the very separation of these issues into different spheres, and the idea of sexuality as private, personal and particular to a “minority” only, and of the revolution as public, political and relevant for “everybody,” have to be seen as effects of a power discourse that served to advance a specific agenda in the name of “the revolution” and to de-legitimize the voices that were questioning the underlying paternalism and heteronormativity of that agenda. Feminists in the Sandinista movement saw the revolution and feminism as compatible, and struggled to expand feminist spaces and demands. But feminist demands from the very beginning met the resistance of the Sandinista leadership, that constructed women’s demands as “specific” and partial vis-à-vis the “general” interests of the revolution.

Sandinismo not only acted as an impediment to feminist mobilization through the control of the agenda of the women’s movement. It also operated on the very intimate, personal level: many women had internalized the discourses propagated by the dominant leadership that women’s interests were “particular” interests and as such had to be subordinated to “national” interests. In addition, the fear of being questioned about their revolutionary morality, or despised or rejected by their *compañeros* was strong. This led to a pervasive self-censorship by feminists that took many years to overcome. The increasing hostility of the Sandinista leadership towards feminists has therefore to be understood in light of the fact that feminists started to openly confront the social conservatism, heteronormativity and anti-feminism of the Sandinista leadership.

The relation between Sandinismo and feminism was therefore neither linear nor unidirectional. Feminists in the 1980s struggled to create spaces within the Sandinista state where they could organize and voice their ideas, influenced Sandinismo to make it more receptive to feminist demands, and thereby left their mark on the Sandinista politics of gender and sexuality. Recognizing feminist agency as co-constitutive of the revolutionary process means acknowledging the role feminists played, both in forging its achievements and in sustaining its silences around gender and sexuality.

What is the broader significance of these findings? This reinterpretation of the history of the relationship between Sandinismo and feminism offers a different explanation of the gender and sexual politics during the 1980s as well as today, challenging the narrative of radical change in the current Sandinista politics. It also brings together several threads laid out by previous researchers and

activists in problematizing the marginalization of feminism and sexuality from the revolutionary agenda. At the same time it seeks to go beyond previous critiques by questioning the very assumptions that makes it possible for us to consider the economy and sexuality as distinct and separate spheres of experience and of politics. Finally, it seeks to open a conversation about the contradictions, dilemmas and dynamics of (self) censorship and (self)silencing within feminist movements, and the ways they relate to complex questions of identity, exclusion and (desire for) belonging. By recasting the anti-feminism and social conservatism in the discourses of the political left as something that is actively accomplished through an artificial division of people's experiences into separate, hierarchically ordered spheres, that are subsequently naturalized (Butler 1997), and looking at the emotional power of the appeal to "revolutionary loyalty" and commitment, I offer a different frame to make sense out of the relationship between women's rights, sexuality and the political left. This perspective may also allow for re-readings of the gender record in other socialist and post socialist contexts, such as the contradictory politics and outcomes of the so-called "new" Latin American left (Friedman 2007; Gago 2007). For instance, we could go beyond an analysis that takes the divide between redistributive measures, political participation and gender policies, as its starting point and asks how the "shortcomings" of these regimes from a feminist and sexual rights perspective may be compensated by the "achievements" in improving poor women's live through their redistributive and social policies (Friedman 2007; Kampwirth 2010). Instead we could ask how the discourse of the revolution has been used to render the exclusion of gender and sexuality issues as an acceptable (if not correct) prioritization of social justice issues that claim to be good for "everybody." And we would ask how that in fact plays out in people's lives: do they manage to separate their gendered, sexual, and reproductive bodies from their "eating" bodies, and their personal and public or political lives in the ways that this discourse suggests?

The point is not only the recognition of women and sexual minorities as a legitimate part of "everybody" in revolutionary discourse, but also to make us alert to the way similar discourses that privilege one identity and oppression over others or claim a certain monopoly on "truth" around social justice (may) marginalize and exclude (Heumann 2013)—whether it is in the name of "the revolution" or any other collective project of social transformation, including feminism itself.

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Notes

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1. In a companion article, I analyze how this legacy affected the women’s movement long after gaining organizational autonomy from the Sandinista party (Heumann 2013). In the present article the focus is on the historical relationship between feminism and Sandinismo and the processes that produced the hegemony and internalization of this discourse.

2. Due to the current context of high political polarization, the total criminalization of abortion and persecution of feminist leaders I decided to keep my respondents anonymous, but they include informants from the following organizations and networks: the Sandinista women’s organization AMNLAE, the Women’s Network Against Violence, the (now extinct) Women’s Health Network, the

(former) National Feminist Committee with the follow up spaces, Movimiento Autonomo de Mujeres (MAM) and the space that split from it and became Foro Maternidad, Sexualidad y Derechos, as well as Movimiento Feminista and local networks. They also included activists working at women's collectives, women's clinics and men and women working in organizations dedicated to the field of sexual health and rights.

3. This is not limited to the interviews that I conducted for this study, but actually a number of interviews that have been already published (e.g., [Randall 1994](#)), as well in a short history of the women's movement written by feminists in Nicaragua ([Murguialday and Vasquez 1994](#)).

4. Socialist feminists such as Alexandra Kollontai (1997 [1921]), who in the 1920 questioned the narrow class lens of Marxism and vindicated the centrality of gender and sexuality, were mentioned as an important source of inspiration. Other sources of inspiration that were mentioned were liberalism (and to a lesser extent anarchism), especially in fostering convictions around secularism, equality, and autonomy, the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s, particularly in relation to body politics and sexual rights, and also liberation theology which—together with socialist ideas—cultivated ideals around equality and social justice.

5. The role of the transnational feminist and gay and lesbian solidarity movement is not the object of this paper, but [Hobson \(2012\)](#) has shown similar processes of (self) silencing here in relation to the discourse that constructed homosexuality as “foreign” to Nicaragua: this led some gays and lesbians in the solidarity movement to choose to silence their sexual orientation and bracket it out of their “solidarity” work, as an expression of their commitment to the Sandinista revolution. At the same time it put Nicaraguan gays and lesbians in the position of having to deny their links to the international solidarity movement in order to claim an authentic Nicaraguan homosexuality. In this sense the regional feminist encounters were maybe easier to link up with in that it was still a “Latin American” space. In the case of the Victoria Mercado Brigade from San Francisco however the organizers refused to stay in the closet during their stay in Nicaragua, and threatened with leaving and taking the donations with them if they were not allowed to be “out.” In response the Sandinistas gave them permission to be “out” and this had unintended consequences for them in that it indeed inspired the subsequent formation of the gay and lesbian movement. (Interview with US LGBT Brigadista August 9, 2011). The movement itself then provoked the hostile response from the Sandinista State and re-silenced the issue of sexual orientation, further supporting the argument that I'm developing throughout this paper.

6. A major ally of the PIE within the Sandinista leadership was Carlos Núñez. Núñez, who passed away in 1991, shortly after regime transition, was the only one of the nine commanders of the National Directorate who was fully supportive of the demand for gender equality, sexual rights, and reproductive rights. His relationship to his spouse, Milú Vargas, played an important role in his development of consciousness of women's rights (Vargas in [Randall 1994](#)).

7. It is important to take into account that unlike other left wing parties, the FSLN itself was not a mass organization, in that the militancy was highly selective and restricted ([Luciak 1998](#)).

8. It is worth to mention that this kind of “smear campaign” was not only used against feminists or women’s rights activists but against anybody who opposed or questioned the position of the National Directorate. An example of this is when in 1994 and 1995 a critical faction within the party, under the leadership of former vice president Sergio Ramirez and former minister of health Dora Maria Tellez, split from the FSLN to found the Sandinista Renovation Movement. Female deputies from MRS were subjected to similar personal attacks in relation to their alleged sexuality (Envío Team 1995; Ramirez 1999). What I seek to highlight here however, is not simply how stigmatized identities are used to stigmatize and marginalize opponents, but the effects of it in terms of actually producing or reinforcing the stigma itself and the consequent encroachment on the possibilities of claiming rights and space in relation to these “stigmatized” issues.

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