

Empowerment in Revolutionary Contexts:  
Women's Experiences in Poland and Nicaragua

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### **Abstract**

How do women who become lifelong political activists understand their empowerment in the context of revolution? Through qualitative analyses of interviews from the Global Feminisms Project sites in Poland and Nicaragua, I identified various paths to empowerment in the context of revolutionary social change. I used the lenses of intergroup conflict, violence, and feminism to critically examine two movements aimed at social change, while highlighting the connections between empowerment theory and practice, as well as between feminism and social movement theory. Using grounded theory coding of the life narratives of women who participated in Poland's non-violent Solidarity movement and in Nicaragua's violent Sandinista movement, I found that common themes (education, belief in a cause, law, leadership, literature, political networks, disempowering experiences, and role models) emerged in women's accounts of their empowerment and in turn shaped their perspective on and commitment to social change. Some of these structures and experiences were described as sources of empowerment and some as results of empowerment. Most importantly, for each woman there were dynamic connections between them that defined pathways they followed as they changed the power relations in their own lives, and worked for broader changes in their communities and countries.

## Introduction

“We were utopic, we had big dreams, really, and we were dreamers. But we also liked to finish the work, and we worked hard to do so.”<sup>1</sup>  
– Bertha Inés Cabrales, Nicaragua

What makes people care about creating social change? What drives them, makes them feel inspired, pushes them to keep going? What makes Cabrales, former member of the Nicaraguan Sandinista Front and recognized land reform and reproductive health advocate, put in the work to achieve her big dreams? These questions are essential to feminist work and anyone considering the power of social movements in creating change.

Empowerment is a word that is often used, but rarely defined. Academics use this term across disciplines, yet its meaning varies widely from individual feelings of strength to engagement with activism to community solidarity to policy implications. Empowerment theory, even feminist empowerment theory, has failed to consider the wide range of women’s experiences that are empowering. While recognizing the value in “fuzzy” definitions of empowerment to encompass a wide range of experiences,<sup>2</sup> I define empowerment as feelings of belonging, participation, having a voice, and/or being a full member of a community, which leads to action or stronger feelings of membership. Graff, a leading Polish feminist scholar, describes these moments of awareness and surges to keeping fighting as times “when a lioness wakes up in me.”<sup>3</sup> In this study, I did not aim to quantify empowerment but rather looked for

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<sup>1</sup> Bertha Inés Cabrales, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grave, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Naila Kabeer, 1999, “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment,” *Development and Change* 30 (3): 436.

<sup>3</sup> Agnieszka Graff, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Slawomira Walczewska and Beata Kozak, translation by Kasia Kietlińska, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Wiśniowa, Poland, June 12, 2005.

women's explicit mentions of feelings of empowerment that involved the sense of self as engaging in a political way or shifting power relations. As empowerment manifests itself in different ways on individual and structural levels, this definition is not exhaustive.

I explore feminist conceptualizations of empowerment in the context of women's own accounts of their experiences of social revolution. Revolution is being considered in this work because revolutionary contexts put everything into question, including the right form of governance for a nation, the appropriate tools for creating change, and the conceptualization of gender and feminist activism itself. However, revolutionary movements can also put gender issues on the backburner, as demonstrated in the contexts explored in this research. Feminist empowerment theorists have not often considered contexts of revolution in their analyses. However, these contexts matter when thinking about women's lived experiences in times of social change.

I explore my research questions through grounded theory qualitative analysis of interviews from the Global Feminisms Project sites in Nicaragua and Poland. The Global Feminisms Project is an online archive of interviews with women from various countries, emphasizing feminist activism and scholarship. At a practical level, I was able to examine women's empowerment in revolutionary contexts because the Global Feminisms Project archive featured interviews with women activists in two of these contexts: Poland and Nicaragua. Because these two contexts were quite different, considering them both allowed me to consider how empowerment operated in different unfolding processes of revolution.

I study the life narratives of women involved in the Polish and Nicaraguan revolutions in the 1970s and 1980s in order to understand personal implications of societal changes, how empowerment occurs from a feminist perspective, and the links between feminist empowerment

theory and social movement practice. I argue that we can nuance feminist empowerment theory by considering oral histories and lived experiences, as well as by considering revolutionary contexts to challenge the binary of victimization and empowerment. I show that in both violent and non-violent revolutions, education, belief in a cause, law, leadership, literature, political networks, disempowering experiences, and role models all shape how individuals understand their empowerment and in turn their perspective on and commitment to social change. Some of these structures and experiences are sources of empowerment and some are results of empowerment; moreover, there are dynamic connections between them that show some different ways that women can conceptualize empowerment as shifting power relations in their own lives.

This work is inspired by my personal and intellectual interest in global feminisms, the stories that these women shared, and the questions that I have around the making of social change. When reading the Global Feminisms Project interviews in a course, as a young feminist I felt the passion and strength that these women activists from around the world exude. Their words encouraged me to pursue feminist research and I hope that by featuring their life stories in this work, others will be moved to notice the dynamics of empowerment in their own lives as well as the potential they have to work for feminist social change.

I begin by situating the Nicaraguan Sandinista and the Polish Solidarity revolutions in a broader context, and by highlighting the theoretical work that has been produced on empowerment and social movement theory. Next, I describe the grounded theory method that I adopted and present the research results. I explain the categories that I used during coding, explore trends that I observed during analysis, and conceptualize pathways to empowerment. My analysis attends to strengths and limitations of the study as well as areas that need to be explored in further studies. My hope is that by considering feminist empowerment theory in contexts of

revolution, this work reflects an intersectional space of feminist knowledge that effectively connects feminist theory and practice.

Figure 1. Female Sandinista fighters holding guns, 1979.



Source: Institute of Nicaraguan and Central American History.



Figure 2. Women campaigning for Solidarity in Krakow, holding posters with “Vote for Us; Solidarity,” May 1989.



Source: Polish Solidarity Campaign website.

## Intellectual Context

In this literature review, I draw upon several interdisciplinary theoretical areas to frame the question of how women are empowered in contexts of revolution. This thesis considers the ways women can be empowered in and through revolutions by using interviews with women activists in two different countries, the contexts of which must be considered in order to understand the narratives of the women featured in the Global Feminisms Project. The first context is Nicaragua, where I focus on the role of women in the violent FSLN guerilla warfare in the 1970s and their involvement in the Sandinista revolutionary government in the 1980s. The second context is Poland, where I explore the role of women in the largely non-violent Solidarity movement during the 1980s.

After providing backgrounds on these two contexts, I discuss theories and scholarship on gender and revolution to highlight the importance of studying revolutionary contexts. In particular, I explore theories of gender and violence and theories of socialism that focus on national context and political structure. I localize social change in social movement theory and explore the definition of empowerment across disciplines. I also highlight feminist scholarship in empowerment theory more generally.

### Nicaragua

The first context that provides a background to my analysis is that of the Sandinista National Liberation Front or *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) revolutionary group in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas (or FSLN) were a political party that overthrew the repressive Somoza regime in 1979 after a decade of guerilla warfare, establishing a democratic socialist government in its place. The revolutionary process was violent, with both men and

women engaging in guerilla warfare in rural areas. After the success of the revolution, the FSLN governed from 1979 to 1990, and it remains a leading party in Nicaragua today.

The role of women in the Sandinistas' warfare in the 1970s, as well as their prominent positions in government in the 1980s, has been documented extensively through academic scholarship, women's organizations, and government recognition. Drawing on newspaper and interview sources, academics such as Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, Karen Kampwirth, Shelly Grabe, Anjali Dutt, and Lorraine Bayard de Volo argue against the mainstream narrative of women as victims of war by documenting the important contributions of women to the Nicaraguan revolution, as members of the army, organizers, mothers, and supporters of the cause. According to Bayard de Volo, approximately 30% of armed insurrectionary forces were women.<sup>4</sup> Prominent organizations such as the Association of Nicaraguan Women, Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE), formerly known as the Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems (AMPRONAC),<sup>5</sup> continue to shed light on the women activists who shaped the revolution and continue to promote women's representation and rights.

Scholars and critics such as Maxine Molyneux, Margaret Randall, and Jennifer Disney also argue that the relationship between socialism and feminism was strained by the revolutionary process, and that the Nicaraguan revolution did not actually result in gender equality as leaders of the Sandinista democratic socialist government claimed it did. Indeed, many testimonials from women's organizations, as well as interviews featured in the Global Feminisms Project, explore how gender expectations governed women's involvement in warfare and limited the power that they had in government structures post-revolution, with no substantial

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<sup>4</sup> Lorraine Bayard de Volo, 2001, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Bayard de Volo, 2001, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs*.

re-definition of gender roles being considered in FSLN systems. Molyneux describes a feminist “revolution betrayed” thesis,<sup>6</sup> as women involved in the revolution fought both for freedom from dictatorship and for gender parity, which was in many ways forgotten in socialist reconstruction. These alternative narratives and contexts of political turmoil are essential to consider when considering the narratives of the women from the Nicaragua country site of the Global Feminisms Project. These contexts frame both why women became involved in the revolution and began to understand the disempowerment and empowerment in their own lives, and why women continued to work for women’s rights post-revolution.

### Poland

The Solidarity Movement is the second context that I explore through the Global Feminisms Project interviews. Solidarity was a Polish trade union that used largely non-violent civil resistance methods to promote workers’ rights during the 1980s. While Poland was at that time a part of the communist Soviet bloc, Solidarity represented a massive social movement that was profoundly anti-communist, anti-authoritarian, and anti-bureaucratic. Although it was repressed by martial law from 1981 to 1982, the largely nonviolent movement succeeded in assuring free elections in 1989 and remains an important trade union today.

Unlike the Nicaraguan context, women in Poland have less frequently been acknowledged as critical to the success of Solidarity. Dominant narratives feature Lech Walesa, the co-founder of Solidarity and elected president of Poland in 1989, as the main organizer of the trade union and social movement. Widely disseminated and important works by scholars such as

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<sup>6</sup> Maxine Molyneux, 1984, “Mobilisation without Emancipation? Women’s Interests, State and Revolution in Nicaragua,” *Critical Social Policy* 4 (10): 59.

Timothy Garton Ash provide accounts of the revolution that highlight this leadership and success story, yet don't feature the stories of the women that also shaped the revolution.

Belinda Brown's *The Private Revolution: Women in the Polish Underground Movement* and Shana Penn's *Solidarity's Secret: the Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* provide significant corrections to this narrative; they feature women's stories as writers, organizers, scholars, and activists, especially in private spheres and through the Catholic Church. Penn hails Solidarity women as "unsung forgotten heroines of the Polish underground."<sup>7</sup> She also reminds readers that it is a longstanding feature of Poland's national historical context for resistance to take place in the underground,<sup>8</sup> notably through publishing. Scholars such as Magdalena Zaborowska and Justine Pas reconstruct the idea of a "Polish woman" through narratives of activism, while Magdalena Grabowska puts Polish women into feminist discussions. Not only were women crucial to the success of Solidarity against communism but similarly to Nicaragua, once Solidarity governed, women were nearly unrepresented in formal structures, leaving a gap in their legacy. A feminist perspective is essential for thinking about women's hidden roles during and post revolution, as well as how empowerment theories may apply to women's lives and the structures that shape them.

#### Connecting Gender to Revolutionary Contexts

Lorraine Bayard de Volo describes completed revolutionary processes as an overthrowing of the hegemony.<sup>9</sup> My definition of revolution encompasses the rise of feelings of dissent, the process of resistance, the disintegration of a previous system, an interregnum, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Shana Penn, 2005, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Shana Penn, 2005, *Solidarity's Secret*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bayard de Volo, 2001, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs*, 5.

process of putting a new system into place. Revolutions can unfold differently, as illustrated by Nicaragua's violent uprising in contrast with Poland's non-violent resistance. Movements have different goals and organizational structures, but all aim to change who is in control and how they govern.

Changing structures, as is inevitably the goal of a revolution, can be both enabling and constraining for women who participate. Although not all women participate in social movements and become activists, the women who do often note feeling at once integrated with their cause as they work to improve their own situations as women and simultaneously placed on the sidelines as revolutionary agendas focus on issues other than those defined by women themselves. In any case these experiences challenge the common assumption that women are involved in revolutions only as passive victims or onlookers.

In particular, research on gender and militarism as well as on gender and violence has succeeded in challenging narratives of women as only victims of militarism and violence. Theorists such as Cynthia Enloe, Carol Cohn, and Laura Sjoberg have developed a framework for conducting gendered analyses of war, violence, and conflict. This research is focused on both theory and practice, although a great deal of research focuses on women in peacekeeping situations. The work on pre-conflict and conflict situations is extremely relevant for deconstructing victimization narratives as it acknowledges that women can be disempowered by these situations, but affirms that they can also be involved in political processes for or against wars as well as active members of military structures. Using these frameworks, this thesis aims to critically unpack both exclusive emphases on women's passive victimization by violence and romanticized accounts of women's participation in violence; instead I hope to show how victimhood and empowerment are not mutually exclusive. Many popular TV shows and

documentaries about war show women either as war casualties or as inspiring heroines with guns, with no clarity about the circumstances under which they end up in either role. It is important to consider that women can simultaneously be victims and be agents as this reflects the reality of women's lived experiences, particularly in the interviews featured on the Global Feminisms Project.

An important consideration for the Nicaraguan and Polish contexts is how in both cases revolutionary processes are intertwined with socialism. In Nicaragua, women fought for a socialist system that promoted unequivocal equality, including between men and women. There is a vast body of research by scholars such as Slaughter and Kern, Hartmann, Fisk, and Campbell on the gendered implications of Marxist theories as well as on the need for a gender revolution through a Marxist socialist lens. Although most of this research is highly theoretical with little practical implementation and few real life examples, it is important to consider how a socialism that assumes equality between the sexes can leave women without a way to theorize their difficulties. In Poland, women fought against a particular form of state communism promoted by the Soviet Union (one that emphasized nominal equality, relative equality in the workplace, and left gendered domestic roles untouched). They emphasized the importance of freeing individuality and difference to conceptualize feminism. There is little theoretical work on this process, although narratives from Polish and Nicaraguan women show that there are important connections among revolution, gender, and socialism that are further explored in this study.

On a larger scale, this discussion of Nicaragua's and Poland's revolutionary processes falls within the framework of social movement theory, which seeks to explain why social

mobilization occurs, what forms it takes, and what its consequences are.<sup>10</sup> Social movement theory is an extensively researched area primarily situated in sociological and social work contexts, but it has not traditionally been focused on women. In the past decade, more scholars have explored the relationship between gender and social mobilization, including Bice Maiguashca, Verta Taylor, and Armstrong & Bernstein. This scholarship focuses on the way women can contribute to the emergence of social movements but does not highlight the effects of the movement on the women themselves. Regardless, social movement theory is helpful for a feminist critical analysis in that it examines social change on a macro level through the evaluation of structural power systems and institutions.

Within social movement theory a distinct social movements impact theory emerged, which explores the impact of social movements on societies and the factors that led to these effects.<sup>11</sup> This area has been explored by William Gamson although it has not been studied empirically as much as other subsets of social movement theory. Social movement impact theorists have struggled to find a method for defining the success of a movement and for proving causality.<sup>12</sup> In exploring revolutions in Nicaragua and Poland, I do not focus on the “success” of these movements in political terms; rather, I use these contexts as framings for the women’s narratives that are analyzed. Social impact theory has been criticized by theorists such as Maiguashca for focusing exclusively on political factors while setting aside social, cultural, and societal changes. Scholars like Herrick have attempted to create a space for new social

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<sup>10</sup> Verta Taylor, 1999, “Gender and Social Movements: Gender Processes in Women’s Self-Help Movements,” *Gender and Society* 13 (1): 8–33.

<sup>11</sup> Bice Maiguashca, 2011, “Looking Beyond the Spectacle: Social Movement Theory, Feminist Anti-Globalization Activism and the Praxis of Principled Pragmatism,” *Globalizations* 8 (4): 535–49.

<sup>12</sup> James A. Geschwender, 1968, “Explorations in the Theory of Social Movements and Revolutions,” *Social Forces* 47 (2): 127–35.



movement theory that considers the impact of social change on multiple levels,<sup>13</sup> yet focuses extensively on how certain movements emerged as contexts for analysis. Although I do not aim to explore factors that led to specific revolutions or social movements, I do aim to study how revolutionary contexts enable women to think about themselves as change agents both in their own lives and at a social level. Social movement impact theory provides a way to think about social change on both individual and institutional levels.

Social movement theorists often cite empowerment as an outcome of societal change, both on individual and community levels. Although there has been extensive research across various disciplines on the definition of “empowerment,” this understanding has mostly been individualistic and lacking gender analysis. Drawing on Maton and Salem’s definition of empowerment as “a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs”<sup>14</sup> and a manifestation of people’s belief in their efficacy,<sup>15</sup> I argue that it is also important to view empowerment as a multi-level process that goes beyond the individual.<sup>16</sup> As Lather states, empowerment is “a process one undertakes for oneself [...] not something to be done ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone.”<sup>17</sup> I aim to understand senses of empowerment as expressed in personal narratives, including the desire to create social changes, and satisfaction in doing so. However, I cannot actually measure the success of those efforts, or changes in power relations themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> James Herrick, 1995, “Empowerment Practice and Social Change: The Place for New Social Movement Theory,” November.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth I. Maton and Deborah A. Salem, 1995, “Organizational Characteristics of Empowering Community Settings: A Multiple Case Study Approach,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23 (5): 634.

<sup>15</sup> Maton and Salem, 1995, “Organizational Characteristics of Empowering Community Settings,” 635.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Riger, 1993, “What’s Wrong with Empowerment?” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 21 (3): 279–92.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Cornwall and Cecilia Sardenberg, 2014, “Participatory Pathways: Researching Women’s Empowerment in Salvador, Brazil,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 45: 73.

By focusing on the lived experiences of women who became lifelong political activists, I nuance these understandings of empowerment by providing gendered lenses. Feminist theories of empowerment that combine theory and practice are limited, but authors such as Kabeer, Riger, and Cornwall & Sardenberg have published work that provides a feminist foundation for defining and operationalizing “empowerment” in an interdisciplinary way. Kabeer argues that the value of the word empowerment to feminists is in its “fuzziness,” and that in order to understand its potential, we must study resources, agency, and achievements all together.<sup>18</sup> Gutierrez et al. supports this argument by stating that the goal of empowerment is to develop critical awareness, from increasing feelings of collective identity and self-efficacy to developing skills for personal, interpersonal, or social change.<sup>19</sup> De Volo provides a framework for thinking about agency, identity, and voice<sup>20</sup> as shifts that occur on individual levels through periods of social change. Shields and Peterson et al. explore similar issues by developing the terminology of internal self, action, and connectedness as factors of empowering experiences,<sup>21</sup> as well as drawing distinctions between intrapersonal empowerment and interactional empowerment. My definition of empowerment draws from these feminist scholars’ work by considering a wide range of experiences as empowering, but does not focus on community development. Rather, I feature individual women’s stories and consider how they understand their own empowerment, affirming that “empowerment must be anchored within women’s own experiences.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Naila Kabeer, 1999. “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment,” *Development and Change* 30 (3): 435–64.

<sup>19</sup> Lorraine Gutiérrez, Linnea GlenMaye, and Kate DeLois, 1995, “The Organizational Context of Empowerment Practice: Implications for Social Work Administration,” *Social Work* 40 (2): 250.

<sup>20</sup> Bayard de Volo, 2001, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs*, 209.

<sup>21</sup> Laurene E. Shields, 1995, “Women’s Experiences of the Meaning of Empowerment,” *Qualitative Health Research* 5 (1): 15.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra G. Turner, and Tina M. Maschi, 2015, “Feminist and Empowerment Theory and Social Work Practice,” *Journal of Social Work Practice* 29 (2): 151–62.

Ultimately, empowerment in all of these feminist theories is about shifting power relations in individual lives as well as structurally, which is particularly useful when considering revolutionary contexts. Cornwall & Sardenberg explore the concept of “liberating empowerment”<sup>23</sup> as an offspring of liberation psychology, an “approach that understands empowerment as being fundamentally about challenging the structural basis of women’s disempowerment in order to transform society.”<sup>24</sup> In revolutionary contexts, the empowerment individual women experience leads to changes on larger structures. The bridging between the micro and the macro,<sup>25</sup> as Moane phrases it, is key here, as this is the lens that I use in my analysis. It is particularly important to consider this when conducting oral history studies as the structural can only be understood through individuals’ lived experiences.<sup>26</sup> In these feminist empowerment theories, factors such as role models, group solidarity and beliefs, leadership, and education are repeatedly mentioned as important to individual women’s experiences of personal empowerment. I add to this understanding by confirming the relevance of these factors, and identifying additional factors that are empowering to women through systematic analysis of the Global Feminisms Project interviews. They include using legal structures, literature, political networks, and particular reactions to disempowering experiences.

Overall, a review of the literature supports the conclusion that there is a need to explore dynamics of women’s empowerment, particularly in various revolutionary contexts, in order to develop feminist empowerment theory that takes into account the wide range of women’s experiences that they understand as empowering. Neither social movement theory nor

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<sup>23</sup> Cornwall and Sardenberg, 2014, “Participatory Pathways,” 72–80.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Geraldine Moane, 2006, “Exploring Activism and Change: Feminist Psychology, Liberation Psychology, Political Psychology,” *Feminism & Psychology* 16 (1): 73-78.

<sup>26</sup> Geraldine Moane, 2003, “Bridging the Personal and the Political: Practices for a Liberation Psychology,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 31 (1/2): 91-101.

empowerment theories are tailored to gendered understandings of revolution. For this reason I have adopted a “bottom up” grounded theory approach to understanding women’s empowerment experiences as they describe them. At the same time, I was always mindful of the approaches taken in these theories and the potential for their confirmation in the women’s accounts.

## Methods

In order to consider the question of how women are empowered in and through revolution, I used interviews with women activists as primary material while also drawing on secondary resources. I examined interviews with feminist activists from the Poland and Nicaragua country sites of the Global Feminisms Project. I chose these two contexts because they illustrate different unfolding processes of revolution, particularly with regard to the level of violence associated with each political revolution. This project is not a direct historical comparison. Instead, I chose two locations to explore how some empowering themes occur beyond one revolutionary context, including ones that embrace different goals and means.

The Global Feminisms Project is an initiative at the University of Michigan started in 2002 that aims to document women's scholarship, activism, and movements around the world through the creation of an online archive of interviews. Based in the Women's Studies Department and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender (IRWG), it was partially funded by the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School through the Interdisciplinary Collaboration Research Grant.<sup>27</sup> There are currently six country sites available on the website: USA, Nicaragua, Poland, China, India, and Brazil. Each was developed in collaboration with pre-existing partners of the University of Michigan in each country.

Although a common interview protocol was loosely adopted by all of the sites, the interviews from each country site reflect the interests of that country. Each site differs in terms of its methods for selecting interviewees, how it approaches asking interview questions, and the

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<sup>27</sup> Jayati Lal, Kristin McGuire, Abigail J. Stewart, Magdalena Zaborowska and Justine M. Pas, 2010, "Recasting Global Feminisms: Toward a Comparative Historical Approach to Women's Activism and Feminist Scholarship," *Feminist Studies* 36, 1: 17.

interview format. The interviewees represented are diverse not only in their social identifications but also in the topics that they discuss, their approach to the role of women in revolutions, and their conclusions about feminism in their lives and in the domains of their activism.

For the Nicaragua country site, the interviewees were chosen by on-site contacts through connections with the Women's Autonomous Movement (*Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres*),<sup>28</sup> and they represent women who are nationally recognized for their work in feminist activism. Moreover, virtually all of the participants were directly involved with revolutionary processes in Nicaragua. In terms of the interview methodology, the interviewer spoke English only and therefore a translator was present during each interview. A film crew was also present. There was no prior relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview questions all followed a similar chronological structure, starting with childhood and delving into current activism, and the interviewer loosely guided the discussion to cover all topics. The interviews were conducted in one session and were all about one hour long. The interviews were then translated into English by the same translator. Due in part to selection and in part to interview method, all ten of the Nicaragua site interviews focus centrally on the revolution.

For the Poland country site, the on-site partner was the Women's Foundation and Women's Center (eFKa) in Krakow, Poland. This foundation chose to conduct interviews of academics and politicians who were recognized for their accomplishments with respect to feminist issues, regardless of their involvement with Solidarity or revolutionary change in the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the interview methodology, the interviewers, like the interviewees, were

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<sup>28</sup> Shelly Grabe, 2014, "Rural Feminism and Revolution in Nicaragua: Voices of the Compañeras," in *Taking Risks: Feminist Stories of Social Justice Research in the Americas*, edited by Julie Shayne, 285, Albany NY, SUNY Press, July 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Lal, McGuire, Stewart, Zaborowska and Pas, 2010, "Recasting Global Feminisms," 18.

Polish speakers. The site used a very personal approach to the interviews; private conversation preceded each session, and few people were in the filming room.<sup>30</sup> Although similar questions were asked in each interview and followed the same basic chronology as the ones used in Nicaragua, very few questions were explicitly asked, and the interviewees had more space to shape the content of the interview than in the Nicaragua site interviews. Indeed, many of the interviews read almost like a stream of consciousness.<sup>31</sup> The interviews were all translated into English by the same translator.

The Poland site interviews were generally longer (about an hour and a half) than the Nicaraguan, and were conducted with women whose experiences ranged over a longer time period, covering a wider range of historical periods, only some including the period of Solidarity's rise. As a result, only three out of the eleven interviews centrally discuss the revolution process. In order to include more women's experiences, I included interviews in my analysis that were not centrally about the revolution but discuss it to some degree. Thus, I included a total of six interviews from Poland in this analysis, three that are centrally about the revolution and three that include peripheral attention to the revolution.

Keeping these methodological differences in mind, I remain cautious about drawing conclusions from these interviews and about generalizing to the larger national context. In analyzing empowerment in these women's lives, I attend to the fact that they are all recognized feminist activists in two particular countries, and thus are not representative of all women or even all women activists. Women aren't all the same, and I am analyzing accounts from one

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<sup>30</sup> Lal, McGuire, Stewart, Zaborowska and Pas, 2010, "Recasting Global Feminisms," 24.

<sup>31</sup> Abigail J. Stewart, Jayati Lal, Kristin McGuire, 2011, "Expanding the Archives of Global Feminisms: Narratives of Feminism and Activism," *Signs* 36, 4: 894.

context of empowerment -- revolutionary struggles, and only women who became activists. Other kinds of women in other situations may have different stories.

I analyzed these interviews through the process of grounded theory,<sup>32</sup> which is an inductive methodology that allows for the systematic exploration of themes and patterns that come up repeatedly in the interviews. While traditional “content analysis” ordinarily codes for pre-existing themes identified by the researcher in advance of examining the data, I allowed broad observation of emergent themes to guide me in the construction of theory, although within the general themes of gender, revolution, and empowerment. I remained open to codes as I conducted a thematic analysis according to the recommended procedure.<sup>33</sup> The transcripts were coded using NVivo, a qualitative software program that allows researchers to code text and draw comparisons between sites, interviews, and themes. All English translations of Global Feminisms Project interviews had already been imported into the software.

I coded the interviews in two rounds; in the first round, the goal was to develop a few categories of interest, known as the initial or open coding round.<sup>34</sup> These were then refined through indexing for the second round to determine clearer patterns to explore my research question. This grounded theory method allows researchers to rigorously reflect on steps along the process and recode to verify that the codes highlighted are valid through a process called constant comparison.<sup>35</sup> Additional coders are thus not necessary, as the groupings emerge from

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<sup>32</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 2013, “Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners,” *SAGE*.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 2006, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.

<sup>34</sup> Braun and Clarke, 2013, “Successful Qualitative Research,” 214.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 214.



the complete set of data. However, as a support for validity, I discussed my process and the categories I was identifying with my advisor, who had read all of the interviews as well.

For the initial round of coding, I read through all the Nicaragua and Poland country site interviews and familiarized myself with their content. I highlighted text that seemed to address my question about what constitutes empowerment and attached labels for “nodes,” or key themes. This coding led to many distinctions in the definitions of empowerment and disempowerment that I then indexed and grouped into eight codes to use for the second round of coding.<sup>36</sup> These nodes or themes are: *education* (learning, teaching); *ideology* (next generation, belief in a cause, feminist consciousness); *law*; *leadership* (recognition, organizational achievement, creation of organizations); *literature* (reading, writing, publishing); *political networks* (feminist networks, friendships over time, movements collaborating, organizations collaborating); *reactions to disempowering experiences* (personal experiences, experiences witnessed); and *role models* (family, not family). I describe these categories in the results section of my thesis.

Before conducting the second round of coding, I explored each of these categories and wrote about each group of categories, detailing what I would and would not include as reflecting that theme. As I started to code, I made detailed notes in the form of memos about sections I chose to code and what I omitted in order to start creating a codebook. After the second round of coding, I examined the references coded for each theme to draw conclusions and to explore theoretical empowerment pathways. This iterative research process allows for the construction of theory from the data, which yields a more critical and valid discussion of the research question.

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<sup>36</sup> Braun and Clarke, 2013, “Successful Qualitative Research,” 239.

Additionally, it allows for interdisciplinary as well as feminist discussions of theory by generating organic materials. The end goal was not to verify the codes but to verify an understanding of empowerment that I developed from the codes.

In addition to the interviews, I used theoretical resources to inform my discussion of themes that arose when women activists discussed empowerment. Notably, literature in social movement theory, feminist theory, and theories of empowerment and socialism were relevant. I also considered academic research on gender and revolutions, and contextual materials on both Nicaragua and Poland. The most relevant theoretical resources outlined in the literature review became clearer as I examined data from the interviews.

As appropriate, I consider my personal identity in relation to key concepts under study, focusing on ways in which my identity may have influenced my understanding as well as my method. Individual's values, experiences, and presuppositions inevitably influence what they can and cannot see in research. As a white European woman who has never been involved in armed violence or a leader in revolutionary movements, I present this research as an outsider who has become familiar with these women's stories over time.

Methodologically, this study has particular strengths and limitations. First of all, using oral history archives as data is important because theory emerged from lived experience, not from other constructed theory. As Grabe notes, "in the pursuit of knowledge aimed at creating social justice, women's own voices have the potential to document how women are enacting transformation, rather than having the researcher abstractly define or quantify it."<sup>37</sup> I did not aim to quantify empowerment but rather to think about ways that women were feeling their

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<sup>37</sup> Shelly Grabe, 2014, "Rural Feminism and Revolution in Nicaragua: Voices of the Compañeras," In *Taking Risks: Feminist Stories of Social Justice Research in the Americas*, edited by Julie Shayne, Albany NY, SUNY Press, 6.

empowerment in contexts of revolution. However, oral histories do not encompass narratives or stories that aren't told. Although I supplement these women's narratives with scholarship, women could have placed importance on certain aspects of their lives rather than others based on the questions asked in their interviews. Moreover, I am able to discuss a wide range of themes and experiences in my analysis, perhaps at the cost of losing some of the contexts for individual narratives.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there is privilege in telling stories about oneself and that the women highlighted in the Global Feminisms Project in no way represent all women in revolutionary contexts. Indeed, there is a lovely optimism in these archives since all of the women interviewed have already made change and become activists, which is not to be said about the majority of women. I certainly cannot generalize these findings to a larger context, though of course these women have a great deal in common with some other, non-activist women. The Global Feminisms Project itself allows for the documentation of the local and the transnational and acknowledges that feminism has its own history in different places, thus aiming to support a move away from an understanding of one feminist movement that developed in the West.

Using a grounded theory approach in my coding effectively allows me to conduct a feminist analysis. I let theory grow from the data through this inductive and iterative process, although I did look at my research question through the lens of various theories including feminist theories that aim to illuminate women's experience prior to the study. I was also previously familiar with the Global Feminisms Project through classwork and research positions, so the knowledge produced in this thesis was no doubt influenced by this background.

## **Results and Discussion**

### Description and Linking of Coding Categories

The categories described below were developed using thematic analysis, from coding the Global Feminisms Project Poland and Nicaragua country site interviews. They each were identified as answers to the question: how do women who become lifelong political activists understand their empowerment in the context of revolution? I highlight women's lived experience to show that common themes emerged in women's accounts of their empowerment and in turn shape their perspective on and commitment to social change. Although these categories overlap in intricate ways in the interviewee's narratives, each distinctly adds to the theorization of empowerment and revolution. I coded any references made directly to empowerment, as well as citations of reasons for creating action, motivations for persevering, and inner feelings of belonging and potential for growth. The themes included: education (learning and teaching), ideology (next generation, belief in a cause, and feminist consciousness), law, leadership (creation of organizations, organizational achievements, and recognition), literature (reading, writing, and publishing), political networks (feminist networks, friendships over time, organizations collaborating, and movements collaborating), disempowering experiences (personally experienced or witnessed), and role models (family or not family).

In analyzing the interviews, it became apparent that some coded categories linked together and overlapped in consistent ways. Additionally, distinctions between types of categories started to emerge as well as connections between these types. In the way women talked about their experiences as political activists, a key difference appeared between factors that seem to be described as the *sources* of empowering feelings, and factors that are

*consequences or results* of this initial empowerment and/or extend the sense of strength and accomplishment. This distinction between sources and results of empowerment tends to address two different questions: what makes people care and want to do something? And what motivates them to keep going? The importance of this distinction and the subcategories of codes became clear when I took these sources and results of empowerment seriously as separate factors.

Women discussed ten factors (some of which were subcategories of the eight outlined above) as sources of empowering experiences. These included: education (learning), ideology (feminist consciousness), law, reactions to disempowering experiences (personal experiences), reactions to disempowering experiences (experiences witnessed), role models (family), role models (not family), literature (reading), political networks (friendships over time), and political networks (feminist networks).

The interviewees also described ten different factors (also based on subcategories of the original eight categories) that were a result or consequence of empowerment and/or led to further empowerment. These included: education (teaching), ideology (belief in a cause), ideology (next generation), leadership (recognition), leadership (organizational achievement), leadership (creation of organizations), literature (publishing), literature (writing), political networks (movements collaborating), and political networks (organizations collaborating). These distinctions are also displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Illustration of Distinctions Between Sources and Results of Empowerment Within Categories.

<b>Main Category</b>	<b>Subcategory: Source of Empowerment</b>	<b>Subcategory: Result or Consequence of Empowerment</b>
Education	Learning	Teaching
Ideology	Feminist Consciousness	Belief in a Cause Next Generation
Law	Law	
Leadership		Creation of Organizations Organizational Achievements Recognition
Literature	Reading	Writing Publishing
Political Networks	Feminist Networks Friendships over Time	Organizations Collaborating Movements Collaborating
Reactions to Disempowering Experiences	Personally Experienced Witnessed	
Role Models	Family Not Family	

In this section, I describe the coding categories and analyze them using women's lived experiences from both Poland and Nicaragua. The eight original categories, along with their "source" and "result" subcategories are organized in alphabetical order, and not by significance or frequency of occurrence, as well as in Table 1. I then explore connections between these categories as pathways to empowerment.

## 1. Education

This category encompasses statements about and feelings of empowerment that are attributed to education, both through learning (usually a source of empowerment) and teaching (usually a result).

### *a. Learning*

Many women expressed the view that learning was and is critical to their empowerment. Some noted that their initial encounter with people who work for social change was through education. Both elementary education and the university setting were the points of contact for women interviewed in Poland as well as in Nicaragua. Additionally, some saw school as a place to foster activism, especially those who became child activists. In the context of revolution, many women became more and more committed to their activism and practice through learning about underlying inequalities, what people are doing about them, and what they can do to help. In Nicaragua, many child activists were actually sent abroad to receive formal education in literature, and they attributed their commitment to the revolution to this opportunity. Some chose to pursue higher education degrees specifically to aid the revolution. Additionally, some women attributed their successes within movements to the level of education that they received as they gained credibility the more educated they became. In Poland, many of the interviewees received education in other countries, particularly in the United States and in Europe, which exposed them to revolutionary goals as well as feminist ideas.

Learning through educational institutions was described by most women as their initial encounter with feelings of strength and potential, and is thus a source of empowering feelings. Malgorzata Tarasiewicz is an activist for women's rights in Poland and is currently the organizer

and leader of the Polish section of the Network of East-West Women, a coalition that connects feminists from Eastern and Central Europe. She explained that while at university in Poland in 1980, she participated in anti-Communist strikes especially when Martial Law was put into effect. She remembers that “it was the stage of my life which shaped my personality and my social vision most intensively, because things were happening very quickly then, so I was learning a lot of things.”<sup>38</sup> Education was thus a place for her to connect with activists and engage in anti-system movements for the first time.

Juanita Jimenez is a Nicaraguan lawyer, having led the Women’s Autonomous Movement and advocated for women’s health and abortion rights. She remembers that in Nicaragua “as a student, within the context of the Revolution, I think I was able to maximize my capacity in leadership, or my intentions to change things, from my own perspective, despite being very young.”<sup>39</sup> These examples show that not only was school on elementary and university levels a point of contact with the revolution in both Poland and Nicaragua, but it was a place to create, not just shape, vision and ideology due to the connections between education and the revolutionary climate of their nations.

### *b. Teaching*

Teaching, the passing on of tools for change, is a means for many women to feel like they can make a difference; it was often described as a consequence or expression of empowerment. Many women in Nicaragua participated in the revolution directly through teaching, such as

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<sup>38</sup> Malgorzata Tarasiewicz, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Sławomira Walczewska, translation by Kasia Kietlińska, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Gdańsk, Poland, July 4, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Juanita Jiménez, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.



volunteering for literacy campaigns or teaching in rural areas. These experiences were often recounted when explaining their beliefs and participation in movements, and when describing why they kept advocating for change during difficult times. Some of the women interviewed became educators after their involvement with their respective revolutions, whether they became involved in academia or ran seminars through non-governmental organizations. In Poland, some of the interviewees worked in academia to pass along their knowledge of women's contributions to Solidarity, which were and are often silenced. Overall, a large number of the interviewees transitioned from activism and direct revolutionary involvement to teaching either through research institutions or trainings. Most noted that education is a real tool for social change, and they attributed personal feelings of recognition as well as organizational success to it.

As teaching was often used as a tool to further feelings of personal empowerment or pass those feelings on to others rather than a first encounter with activism, this subcategory articulated a result of empowerment that furthers feelings of commitment to social change. Teaching was no interviewee's first account of feelings of empowerment, although many cited the importance of education in the continuation of revolutionary and feminist goals. Yamileth Mejia, a Nicaraguan feminist who joined the national Literacy Campaign when she was young, explained that "I am still a faithful believer that it is in education, that education is the principal base on which a nation can develop. As long as you keep people in the dark, not knowing anything, of course you will be able to do what you wish with them and manipulate them. Ignorance is the best friend of abusive people's manipulation."<sup>40</sup> Mejia expressed that teaching in particular allows for

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<sup>40</sup> Yamileth Mejía, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

democratic systems to emerge that address oppression by challenging power relations, as many other interviewees also expressed in their interviews.

Sandra Ramos is a Nicaraguan leader of the Women's Rights Movement which advocates for the rights of women in maquila or other working sections of the economy. Although her work focuses on critiquing neoliberal policies on national and international scales, she recounted her work in women's organization, explaining how "we began with a strategy of not denouncing when rights are being violated, but rather to accumulate strength by educating women, educating them, educating them to take ownership of their own rights."<sup>41</sup> Education is thus crucial not only in academia, but in every sphere of activism.

Barbara Labuda is a Polish feminist who worked in anti-communist organizations and is now an activist for abortion rights. She started a program in the President's Office for women's safety around drug addiction that "is really nice and really effective, I hope. And I hope that I'm helping a lot of women. Several thousand of women have already gone through this program of mine, and I often meet with them. [...] And I see that they're happy about it. And I am happy, too."<sup>42</sup> The goal of starting this program was to educate women about their health and the strategies they can take to recover from drug addiction. She attributed not only other women's happiness to this educational teaching initiatives, but also her own joy.

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<sup>41</sup> Sandra Ramos, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Labuda, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Slawomira Walczewska, translation by Kasia Kietlińska, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Warszawa, Poland, November, 2003.

## 2. Ideology

This category includes expressions of ideology or a desire for change coupled with beliefs about how change can be accomplished and incite empowerment. It captures how ideas about the future can drive actions in the present through conceptualizations of the next generation, belief in a cause, and the development of feminist consciousness.

### *a. Belief in a Cause*

Perhaps the most evident connection between revolution and empowerment is how belief in a cause or movement leads to feelings of strength and empowerment. Many women expressed the opinion that their convictions and trust in the larger changes that their movement stood for helped them survive tough times. This group aspect of believing in a cause often led women to feeling more connected with their community and thus more empowered. This desire to make changes beyond the individual level and belief that together people can accomplish change was a very powerful collective sensation. Often, this belief became idealized or romanticized, as exemplified by Baltodano, a former revolutionary guerilla who was imprisoned and tortured for her political activism in the underground. She reminisced about how "the rest was taken on with a fighting spirit because in reality our activism and the Sandinista activism in general was full of heroism at that time, of mysticism, of values, of self-sacrifice, it was a time when our best qualities as human beings were brought out."<sup>43</sup> There is beauty and inspiration drawn from this belief in a cause that is particular to revolutionary contexts, but that doesn't truly incorporate the harsh reality of imprisonment or torture in many ways. By recounting this idealism, Baltodano

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<sup>43</sup> Monica Baltodano, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

shows that collective idealism brought women together and furthered their feelings of solidarity and empowerment.

In Nicaragua, this category of “belief in a cause” often included a discussion of militarism as a means to achieve goals. Nicaragua as a nation was highly militarized before the revolution during the Somoza regime, and this context influenced activists’ perspective that taking up arms leads to a feeling of doing something for change. Many women believed that there was no alternative but a violent revolution, and their strong beliefs in their cause justified the violence that they committed. As Baltodano eloquently stated, “the purpose that motivated us to enter the armed fight was the social situation of the people and we dreamed [...] of a more just society.”<sup>44</sup> A violent revolutionary process was thus not by itself a goal, but rather a means to challenge oppression and corrupt rule that was used as a last resort. Beyond belief in socialism as a way to govern and change the world, interviewees from Nicaragua also expressed strong beliefs in the principle of democracy and in feminist structures for organization, specifically when socialism failed them in post-conflict structures.

In Poland, this category included both belief in Solidarity and in feminist ideology, which mostly persisted in the context of silencing and rejection by the mainstream. Many interviewees recounted the story of the Women’s Section being rejected by Solidarity as well as by other women in the movement, which would have created a space for women to advance their goals within the Solidarity movement. Strong sentiments opposing Soviet state communism motivated women to persist through nearly a decade of underground operations. Post-Solidarity, some

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<sup>44</sup> Baltodano, 2011, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua.

interviewees continued to undertake a fight for freedom of expression and feminist praxis in + Poland, especially in academic settings.

For both of the sites, it is important to note that this category of ideology frequently overlapped with the category “reactions to disempowerment.” Belief systems, perhaps especially within revolutionary movements, were often ways not only for women to experience empowerment, but also to preserve it along with their commitment to principles despite resistance. None of the women described believing in a cause without first describing factors for the emergence of that belief, thus belief in a cause is a factor that generates empowerment in these women’s stories. Whether their dedication came from literature or role models or legal contact, their ideology pushed them to keep going.

*b. Next Generation*

The idea of working not just for oneself but for a next generation motivated many of the women interviewed in their work, as they sought to leave a legacy of their work and a record of the role of women in their revolutionary processes. This subcategory encompasses both women’s goals for their own children as well as a broader conceptualization of future generations. Many interviewees from both Poland and Nicaragua referred to their own children or more generally to “the new generation” when expressing why they feel motivated to fight for social change, especially why they continued work on it after the political successes of their respective revolutionary movements.

Since the idea of creating a legacy pushed women to keep fighting for their causes, it was a result of other empowering factors, such as involvement in movements. As Ramos, Nicaraguan revolutionary, explained,

So, we believe, and I personally believe, along with all the women I work with, we believe we have to transfer what we know about feminism to the new generation of women. Why? Because when we brandish the feminist philosophy, oh, we were discredited, they'd say here come the lesbians, the divisors, the ones who don't like men, the ones who—the ones who are going to ruin and taint what it means to be a woman. It was all so horrible and so many women wouldn't come near us. We suffered discrimination, but we told ourselves, well, we're not going to die because of this discrimination; but we have to teach the women, we have to teach them to understand that men are not inherently right, and that's what we are doing now.<sup>45</sup>

These women thus challenged stereotypes and maintained their belief in their causes despite these challenges, notably in order to pass on their feminism to future generations. This sense of duty to others and to themselves motivated many women to keep pushing for their revolutionary and post-revolutionary goals, which shaped a kind of empowerment that is not unique to revolutionary contexts. However, revolution heightened the stakes of women's legacy, particularly as many scholarly works have mis- or under-represented the women involved in each of these revolutionary processes, and it is thus of critical importance that many of these activist women explicitly aim to leave a legacy of change.

*c. Feminist Consciousness*

Beyond belief in the movements that the interviewees were a part of, many of the women expressed empowerment through their feminist consciousness. Although not all of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ramos, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

interviewees identified as feminists, a belief in fighting for women's rights was often expressed in the interviews as additional but inherent to their revolutionary convictions. Some women first encountered gendered issues during their involvement in revolutions by witnessing inequality in military structures, as Dora Maria Tellez recalled; she was third in command during the Sandinista revolution, with very few other women in leadership positions. Other women were introduced to feminism through a wide range of factors, including role models, reading, and education. The resulting feminist consciousness often intertwined with their beliefs in the power of revolution and also provided a space to consider the extent to which revolutions provide serious attention to women's issues. Having feminist consciousness became empowering when in their struggles to understand themselves and their realities they connected with a wider struggle, and the struggle became personal. Many women highlighted how feminism, in the range of ways that they understand it, was (and is) an inspiration for their activism.

However, by gaining a feminist consciousness, many of the women saw for the first time the serious lack of attention that their respective movements were giving to women's issues. For many, these disempowering experiences catapulted their activism post-revolution. Juanita Jimenez, lawyer and leader of the Women's Autonomous Movement, recalls her transition from Sandinista involvement to political work centered around women. After the FSLN successfully overthrew the Somoza regime, "there was a demand for the particular feminist agenda and since it never took off with the revolutionary model, many leaders of the movement that were organizing around the Revolution started the process of creating other types of organizations."<sup>46</sup> This connection between feminist consciousness and activism with revolutionary goals was echoed by other interviewees. Sofia Montenegro, former editor of the official Sandinista

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<sup>46</sup> Jiménez, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

newspaper *Barricada* and now a prominent feminist researcher, remembers that during the revolution, “being a feminist was not a thing,” and that while not many women labeled themselves feminists, she was an outspoken “feminist out of the closet.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, she remembers that “all the rest of the women, as far as they went was to, to think in class terms. To make everybody to understand the dimension of gender was a whole battle, a whole political battle.”<sup>48</sup> This difficulty in conceptualizing gender beyond class dimensions is particular to socialist frameworks. Indeed, many of the interviewees suggested that democratic ideals were connected to women’s rights and their own activism.

Hence, feminist consciousness was frequently cited as an inspiration for activism. Although the interviewees recounted a variety of experiences in their feminist awakening, these experiences often sparked activism and in turn feelings of potential, strength, and empowerment. Martha Valle, former revolutionary guerillera and activist for rural women farmer’s rights, expressed that “I interpret feminism as my fight, as an ideology in defense of women, with the different expression that everyone has decided to make theirs.”<sup>49</sup> This highlights how feminism inspired her fight but also the multitude of ways women engage with their feminist consciousness, whether directly through revolutionary processes or in their work post-revolution.

### 3. Law

The interviewees often considered using the law as the most democratic way of making social change happen. Law as a category includes legal institutions as well as court systems,

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<sup>47</sup> Sofía Montenegro, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Montenegro, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Martha Heriberta Valle, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women’s Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.



legislatures, and laws in each country. Most of the interviewees recounted experiences with the law when connecting to social change, from frustrations with its weaknesses to affirmations of its potential to achieve real change on individual and structural levels. Many attributed their feelings of successfully making change to their connection with the law, whether during the revolutionary process or when fighting for just representation in new revolutionary structures.

In Poland, Solidarity was illegal for a decade before the free elections in 1989, so the legal system was rarely an aid to revolutionary women in that period. In Nicaragua and in Poland, when confronted with corruption and unequal agenda setting in a government that they were a part of after the revolution, women turned to the law to push against these injustices and promote the revolutionary ideals they fought for. These active pushes for change from within an institution are reflected in other women's narratives as well, and are connected to women's feelings of importance and capability. In both environments—dominated by Catholic religion—struggles for legalization of abortion were important activities of feminists who came of age through revolutionary processes that did not imagine women's reproductive rights as relevant.

Whether through experiences with justice or injustice, legal systems provided a spark for many activists, and were the source of empowering feelings. Delgado, a prominent Nicaraguan activist working to end domestic violence, recounted how persistence led to a law being passed in 1996 that saved women's lives and the feelings of strength that she harnessed from this victory. Women in both Nicaragua and Poland were repressed by legal systems, and that repression sparked their activism, but they also used legal systems to further their revolutionary and feminist agendas.

#### 4. Leadership

Many of the women interviewed for this project held and hold leadership positions, ranging from elected positions to unofficial titles, and they discussed their leadership experiences, as well as the power that resulted from these positions. Women in Poland and Nicaragua created organizations, accomplished goals within organizations, and were recognized in many ways for their work, as a result of and resulting in feelings of empowerment.

##### *a. Creation of Organizations*

A large number of the interviewees from both Poland and Nicaragua were recognized as leaders because they participated in the creation of organizations and companies, or because they started their own organizations. Many lifelong political activists began organizing clubs and serving as leaders or chairs during childhood, as Barbara Labuda, who has served as a notable politician and ambassador in Poland, recalled. Whether informally as a child or formally during the revolution or after the revolution, many of these women took the issues they saw around them in the world and turned them into an organizational structure to promote change. Notably, many women felt the urge to do so when the organizations that they were a part of no longer represented their interests, particularly their revolutionary movements. Beyond the creation of organizations, some women actively took on the task of starting social movements. This process was empowering, not just because women were taking matters into their own hands, but because it gave an opportunity for them to start fresh, on their terms. In particular, many noted that creating their own organizations allowed them to come back into contact with people on a grassroots level. The feelings of pride associated with creating movements and organizations, as well as working with others to achieve this, were empowering.

Sandra Ramos recounted her experience with founding a women's organization post-revolution, Nicaragua's Maria Elena Cuadra Women's Movement, which focuses on women's labor rights and provides workshops. She explained that "I'm [...] one of the main founders of that organization. I, along with two other people, came up with the idea of how we were going to reorganize, but really it was more like a collective convocation among all of us, and what now? What are we going to do? Okay, so we're not there anymore but are we going to stay like that?"<sup>50</sup> For Ramos, creating an organization was the only way she could make changes that she believed needed to happen. Due to previous leadership experience, she had the personal empowerment and belief that she could start the organization. The question of "so what" is important in distinguishing these experiences as results of empowerment that continue these battles.

*b. Organizational Achievement*

Many interviewees had become known for their work through organizational achievements, which they describe in their Global Feminisms Project conversations. Some were elected to positions, some were promoted, and some had unofficial titles, but most spoke of feeling empowered as a result of their achievements within organizations and governments. Not only does leadership empower women, but it creates a space for them to make even more change through experience, which is further empowering. Some Nicaraguan interviews also feature discussions of leadership within military structures, as many interviewees, such as Dora Maria Tellez, climbed the ranks of command during the revolution and during government

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<sup>50</sup> Ramos, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

reconstruction. This is particularly notable as Tellez was one of the only women in the Sandinista revolutionary structures, despite women being a significant force on the ground.

All of the women interviewed achieved leadership in organizations or structures. These successes did not spring out of nowhere and were consequences of previous empowerment. Each woman recounted her organizational development as a series of steps and decisions, a “history of leadership,”<sup>51</sup> as Jimenez, women’s health advocate and leader in the Women’s Autonomous Movement, put it.

*c. Recognition*

Beyond what some women accomplished, many experienced positive feelings of belonging and empowerment when they were recognized for these accomplishments throughout their lives. Recognition came from other individuals, organizations, or published materials. It is important to note that all of the women interviewed were recognized for their work to the extent that they were asked to be interviewed for the project. However, as Labuda noted, it is very common for women to not take credit for their roles, partly due to gendered expectations about pride and modesty. After Solidarity came to power, many historians conducted interviews with revolutionaries, and Labuda remembered that “women would always refuse to be interviewed. When something was associated with importance, with prestige, women would give up on it themselves. Our male colleagues never did.”<sup>52</sup>

Despite the fact that most interviewees were relatively modest in crediting themselves for their accomplishments, each woman not only was accomplished, but also recognized for those

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<sup>51</sup> Jiménez, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Labuda, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2003.

accomplishments. For example, Baltodano, journalist and producer of *Barricada*, remembered how “I was more known as Mónica Baltodano in the ‘90s than in the ‘80s because I was in the papers everyday denouncing acts of corruption and I even legally accused Arnoldo Alemán. So then, I continued working with the Sandinista Front and I was very well known in the ranks as someone who didn’t leave a fight.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, recognition and reputation became important for many women to promote their causes and continue their fights, and they recounted these moments with pride.

When discussing recognition for their activism and scholarship, women also highlighted the power of innate characteristics of leadership. Although there is extensive research that shows that leadership does not emerge out of nowhere, women in Poland and Nicaragua cited inner capacities or dispositions that made them leaders and activists. Often, believing in this innate capacity to lead promoted a confidence, encouraged by others, that motivated feelings of empowerment. These citations did not relate to specific deeds but rather to “natural” leadership capacity as a factor of motivating their efforts to be social change agents. In particular, women who were child activists noted an affinity for leadership. Indeed, leadership was often a consequence of empowerment that further empowered women through recognition of their capacity by other individuals and groups.

## 5. Literature

This category includes descriptions of how reading, writing, and publishing were activities that promoted the empowerment of women in these revolutionary contexts by exposing

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<sup>53</sup> Baltodano, 2011, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua.

them to revolutionary and feminist concepts and allowing them to express their goals privately, communally, and publicly.

*a. Reading*

Many interviewees recounted reading as children or as adults and being inspired to take action. Not only did literature provide spaces for women to escape their realities, but it often included revolutionary tales and feminist ideals. In Poland, where many books were banned in the communist bloc, reading was a political act of resistance that served the purpose of staying informed. In Nicaragua, reading was a privilege in a country with high illiteracy rates before the revolution, so interviewees recalled being inspired to spread this knowledge through revolutionary means. This inspiration and learning about revolutionary ideologies encouraged women's senses of importance, and for some was as source of empowerment.

Valle, a Nicaraguan revolutionary who now works to organize women farmers and who grew up in an illiterate family, remembered how “when I began to read, I was the one who kept track of the coffee, I priced the cows, etcetera. And all of this was coming together to make me a woman who made a lot of decisions.”<sup>54</sup> Not only did literacy open doors for her to become independent, but it motivated her to keep searching for platforms to make decisions.

On individual levels, many women were first exposed to ideas about revolution as well as feminism through the books, articles, and newspapers they read. Montenegro, Nicaraguan journalist, explained this clearly in her narrative. She started reading works in her free time and remembered that these articles

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<sup>54</sup> Valle, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

always sent me the footnotes to some gentlemen. They were called Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and that's the way I got introduced to Marxism. So I, I had no idea you know, who these guys were but they kept on mentioning them, and I began to get interested to know a little bit more and that's the way I taught myself to find out about capitalism and all this story.<sup>55</sup>

Later on in her interview she returned to the importance of reading in her life by stating that

I read Zillah Einsentein and it was, you know, it opened my eyes forever. So that's the way I say, what am I doing here, you know, I have to go back and I became a feminist, you know, that way. Not through an organization, and not through any contact. I was an isolated teenager, and the only thing I had was the books.<sup>56</sup>

It is thus very clear that for this woman and for many others interviewed, reading was pivotal in their understanding of their goals and the activist they later pursued.

Other women remembered literature as a literal meeting point with revolutionary and feminist agendas. Cabrales recounted reading a magazine called *Gente* along with other women in the *barrios*, which during the Nicaraguan revolution were revolutionary neighborhoods or groups. This periodical was led by Sofia Montenegro, another Global Feminisms Project interviewee, and featured progressive ideas, particularly about women's involvement in FSLN structures. Cabrales recounted that "we would buy it and we discussed what she wrote about in the *barrios*, we read it and shared it. It was like a support pamphlet for us, in terms of reflecting

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<sup>55</sup> Montenegro, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

on our work.”<sup>57</sup> Not only did this reading connect these women but it motivated them to reflect on and continue their work, empowering them as a group and motivating them individually.

*b. Writing*

Writing has been a tool for expression for many women and revolutionaries, whether what is written is intended to be published or for personal reflection. Writing helped women carry on throughout the revolution. In Nicaragua, women used personal writing such as diaries and journals as a tool to stay motivated, especially when in the mountains for military missions. Valle remembered her time in the mountains and recalled that “we wrote a book about everything we sang about,” not only the revolution but the “natural poetry always motivated me, with the trees, with the stones, with the earth.”<sup>58</sup> For her, writing helped her stay committed to the revolution and the values that it encompassed.

In Poland, many of the interviewees were writers and academics, and thus reflective writing was a part of their expression throughout their lives. In particular, the three Polish interviewees who discussed the Revolution as central to their accounts grew up in academic families and remembered philosophical reflection during their childhood as important to developing their values and senses of self. Not only was writing and reading essays a place for developing feminist consciousness, but it offered a space for interpreting the revolution and internal processes associated with it. Personal expression is not empowerment per se as it does not engage the self in political ways, but the potential that it has for generating feelings of belonging is a form of empowerment.

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<sup>57</sup> Cabrales, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Valle, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.



*c. Publishing*

When interviewees discussed published works such as newspapers or academic pieces, they expressed a sense of pride and passion, both individual and collective. In this way, publishing was a result of empowerment. In Nicaragua, revolutionary newspapers were an important news source in which women were able to incorporate gender analyses into the discussion. Many interviewees noted reading these articles and gaining inspiration either during the revolutionary process or post-conflict. Delgado, Nicaraguan activist focused on the National Literacy Campaign during the revolution and now a research specialist on media and politics, noted that in Nicaragua women needed to write their history and lives in order to pass on their knowledge. Ramos, fellow revolutionary and current director of a women's organization that teaches women various skills, corroborated this, explaining that the daily lives of women needed to be written down and published so they would be remembered in history. This is particularly important in revolutionary contexts where the lived experiences of all are not remembered equally in history.

While women in Nicaragua discussed the role of revolutionary newspapers such as *Barricada* and the importance of both producing and publishing it for women in the revolution, Polish women discussed printing works during the Solidarity underground revolution, which led to feelings of connectedness. They were only able to publish due to previously earned legitimacy, so the recognition and pride that came from publishing furthered their sense of empowerment, and is therefore a cause as well as a consequence. In Poland, publishing had a unique historical role for women involved in Solidarity. Women were often the leaders in publishing, making copies of censored books and writing articles underground, because male leadership had been captured and imprisoned. After the revolution, publishing had a special

place for women who reclaimed the revolution and wanted to pass on knowledge that women were actively involved in it.

Other interviewees also noted that after their work in their respective revolutions, they turned to the international spotlight to publish. Indeed, Nunez, founder of the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), published reports for the United Nations about human rights abuses in Nicaragua. Tarasiewicz, leader of the Polish section of the Network of East-West Women, wrote for Human Rights Watch about Solidarity's repression of women's issues and the Women's Section. The pride and resulting ability to make change on multiple levels, particularly beyond the national context, translate into empowerment for many of the interviewees. Some of the interviewees noted the importance of initiatives such as the Global Feminisms Project, stating that "it's a pertinent project and we thank you for doing it."<sup>59</sup>

## 6. Political Networks

This category captured how alliances, including personal relationships, structural connections, and international collaborations, enabled women to discuss their revolutionary or post-conflict goals, bond and make coalitions, and strengthen their own commitments to social justice.

### *a. Feminist Networks*

Feminist networks have different profiles in accounts by Nicaraguan and Polish women activists. In Nicaragua, many of the interviewees expressed the importance of connecting with other feminists around the world, especially in Latin America. Delgado, who has worked to end

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<sup>59</sup> Violeta Delgado, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

domestic violence internationally and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for her work with CINCO internationally, noted that “if it weren’t for [regional alliances] a lot of us would have been in a situation of greater risk.”<sup>60</sup> Many highlighted strong feminist alliances within Nicaragua and across the continent and world, alliances that provided spaces for active participation and growth of feminist leadership. Some even understood there to be a collective feminist movement and identity in Nicaragua through these connections and shared ideologies.

Mejía, a Nicaraguan who was actively involved in the revolution, reflected on her feminist journey by expressing that “to be a part of that... you felt like a piece of sand and suddenly you see yourself with all these monumental women, because of their thoughts, because of their actions, because of their honesty, because they are part of what is now that great women’s movement, how all that was built slowly, I think it’s beautiful.”<sup>61</sup> Getting in touch with feminist networks was an important moment in all of these women’s lives who for the most part joined revolutions without feminist contexts. This sense of connection and coalition was often cited as a motivating factor to keep pursuing activist careers.

In Poland, feminist networks were much less common. Graff, an interviewee who left Poland to live in the United States but returned later in life, explained that she was looking for feminists to connect with and when she finally found them, she experienced “a feeling of relief;” “this was it.”<sup>62</sup> This feeling of connection and acceptance was important to many of the interviewees because it gave them a space to explore their own activism while placing it in the context of a larger movement. Indeed, a majority of the women interviewed noted this feeling of validation. However, Labuda, a Polish anti-communist activist, noted that many political circles

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<sup>60</sup> Delgado, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Mejía, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Graff, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2005.

during Solidarity were dominated by male intellectuals, which was very interesting but not especially welcoming to women. Some regional feminist networks also exist in Poland, such as the Network of East-West Women which, according to Tarasiewicz, the current leader of the Polish section for the Network, wanted to work together across regions to get more strength in their push for women's representation.

In all, it was important to many interviewees for women to be together, and while the group found strength in togetherness, individual women did too. Many interviewees discussed this collective identity and the importance of spaces of shared ideology in terms of empowerment, because they provided motivation to persist through turbulent revolutionary times as well as through post-revolutionary struggles.

*b. Friendships Over Time*

Similarly to role models who are not family members, friends provide important motivation for activism and are often at the root of empowering feelings. Many of the interviewees described their friends as lifelong pillars of support and motivation. Friends often set each other up with jobs, or simply provided spaces for conversations. For some women, friends were their initial contact with revolutionary movements. Not only were particular moments in individual friendships important, but some women noted how important it was to receive support over time from friends, especially throughout difficult revolutionary times. This category often overlaps with role models, who are admired, but may also be friends.

Indeed, Jimenez, Nicaraguan revolutionary and lawyer, stated that "for me, well, the solidarity gave me a lot of strength, the support of the women on a national and international

level. This gave legitimacy to my work.”<sup>63</sup> Labuda, Polish revolutionary and activist, valued her friendships as well through political networks by stating that “they were simply the people to whom I was strongly attached. There was this great warmth among us, and we gave each other a lot of support. That’s what it was like emotionally that there was a lot of devotion and a lot of warmth.”<sup>64</sup> Through admiring language and reflections on their own activist journeys, these women showed that friendships and networks provide a space to draw motivation and empowerment from, but also form productive political connections.

### *c. Movements Collaborating*

A major source of strength not only for revolutionary and feminist movements but also for individual women was provided when movements connected along ideological and practical lines. Connections between social movements, as well as connections between academia and practical groups, were cited as important links that generated strength in communities. This coalition work was especially important internationally and although some women cited global feminism as a unifying force, most interviewees expressed how recognition by other groups fighting for different causes was important for advancing their goals.

For example in Nicaragua, movements connected along socialist lines to protect various interest groups. Women noted that they personally grew through these connections as they broadened the scope of their own movements. In Poland, it was crucial for anti-communists to work in collaboration with other movements. Feminists had to collaborate with Solidarity fighters despite ideological differences since Soviet bloc repression was total. Tarasiewicz, a Polish organizer and leader of the Network of East-West Women, attributed an intensification in

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<sup>63</sup> Jiménez, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Labuda, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2003.

her development as a person to when she started collaborating with the Freedom and Peace Movement. For her, this was the “most interesting time of my life,”<sup>65</sup> since it was the first time that she saw her activism have an impact. Her anti-communist strike participation as a student did not have the same impact as the coalition work did.

*d. Organizations Collaborating*

Beyond movements collaborating, many organizations collaborated for specific goals. In both country sites, interviewees described the importance of these alliances not only for working towards revolutionary goals but for providing individual strength and support. Cabrales, a Nicaraguan feminist who was active in the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women and now heads the *Collectivo de Mujeres Itza* for women who are victims of gender-based violence, eloquently expressed that “it’s easier for us to voice all these actions with the other organizations, because we know that alone, we could not do it – because the system is so strong, so heavy.”<sup>66</sup> Cabrales has built coalitions internationally and highlights that many organizations or departments spearheaded by the interviewees could not have survived without collaboration and coalition work. However, these connections come out of the creation of organizations and individual feelings of potential as well.

Furthermore, Baltodano, an activist who was involved with the Sandinista student movement and now confronts corruption within Nicaraguan politics, stated that “I have always been active in some movement and joining other people, men, women who have the same positions [...] so that gives me some level of strength,”<sup>67</sup> highlighting that organizational and

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<sup>65</sup> Tarasiewicz, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Cabrales, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Baltodano, 2011, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua.

leadership strength is acquired through these collaborations. These political networks were thus important in both Nicaragua and Poland to further specifically feminist agendas.

## 7. Reactions to Disempowering Experiences

This category encompasses feelings of strength and empowerment that arise in response to disempowering experiences or to seeing inequality around oneself. These references highlight how the past drives the future and shows that victimization and empowerment are not mutually exclusive.

### *a. Personal Experiences*

Many interviewees recounted personal experiences of disempowerment; in fact, this category was most one of the most frequently articulated in both Poland and Nicaragua. All women interviewed from the Nicaragua and Poland country sites cited instances of disempowerment that led them to question the status quo, whether as children or as adults. Some references were very direct moments of restriction, such as imprisonment. However, women often narrated these negative moments as stories of survival and strength, as animating experiences. In one example, Baltodano told her own story of imprisonment for her activism during the Sandinista revolution in these terms: "we endured it well, continuing the fight from within the prison, converting the prison into a trench because we found ourselves together -- a group of women -- and we were very organized."<sup>68</sup> Baltodano was imprisoned alongside other female Sandinista fighters. She added that in moments when she started doubting her own strength, her words to herself and to others were clear: "And we have said, you aren't going to

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<sup>68</sup> Baltodano, 2011, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua.

break us with fear.”<sup>69</sup> Not only did this experience lead to individual empowerment despite its horror, but also to collective feelings of strength and organization that pushed them all to persist through repression. This shift in thought does not erase the brutal reality of imprisonment and repression.

This category also includes references to disempowerment arising from revolutions failing to account for gender struggles. Molyneux names this a “revolution betrayed” theory, as women were placed on the sidelines of their respective movements. Baltodano expressed that “during the Revolution many of our struggles were postponed because we said the Revolution came first.”<sup>70</sup> However, she went on to explain, “I think that the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Front opened a larger space for radicalism in our feminist positions.”<sup>71</sup> Some women noted that during the revolution it was easier to accept that feminist issues were postponed, as the focus was on the fight, but that post-conflict, this felt more like a betrayal than a compromise. Labuda reflected on her experience moving back to Poland after receiving an education in the United States and how “it was shocking to me” that “in this Polish democracy, there was no room at all for thinking about women’s rights.”<sup>72</sup> She concluded that “my feminism is at the cross-roads, national, civic and political. I mean it is also woven into this genealogy of the democratic, but also very patriarchal, youth opposition.”<sup>73</sup> Women thus dedicated their feminist ideology and passion for social change away from some revolutionary goals and towards feminist goals. Furthermore, some women expressed that failed coalitions motivated them to start their own organizations or movements, and sparked within them the passion to do so.

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<sup>69</sup> Baltodano, 2011, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Labuda, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2003.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*



In Poland, the same feelings arose within movements, with Graff remembering a particular Solidarity meeting where her voice was continually silenced and recounting that “we got furious, so we left this meeting, the three of us, the three people who had just met, and we started thinking about what to do.”<sup>74</sup> Although she was confronted with repression, this frustration was translated into action. Women often translated their marginalization and deep anger into feelings of motivation, connectivity, and belief in a cause. Although it is unclear what differentiates people who turn to action from those who are overwhelmed and demoralized by these experiences, the women interviewed and the results of this study show that a combination of empowering experiences and confidence in oneself may lead to action as a reaction to disempowering experiences.

*b. Experiences Witnessed*

The interviewees also witnessed experiences that politicized them, whether the experience was related to them personally or witnessed from afar. Many interviewees from both Poland and Nicaragua directly linked their life’s work to inequality that they witnessed as a child. Women commonly used language such as “impact” and “profound” when discussing these experiences. Montenegro, a Nicaraguan feminist who joined the Sandinista movement as a student, recounted how witnessing the combats and insurrections around her “had an impact and [...] consolidated my decision, you know, that it was a necessity to get rid of the dictatorship, no matter what.”<sup>75</sup> Although this experience didn’t happen to her, it sparked her activism at a young age, leaving her to become involved in the revolution.

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<sup>74</sup> Graff, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Montenegro, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

Violent experiences witnessed past childhood also affected the issues that interviewees chose to focus their careers on. Cabrales recounted that while she was involved in the revolution in military structures, she witnessed many instances of domestic abuse instigated by people she was working with towards a more just society. She reflected on how “that also had an impact on me, how could there be so much cruelty in a relationship? So all those things I had seen, I wanted to ask questions about.”<sup>76</sup> Because of this experience, she called for a reform in training of Sandinista officers and despite facing backlash, was able to incorporate questions about relationship health into intake questionnaires for revolutionary fighters. Cabrales went on to become a researcher and advocate for women particularly in abusive relationships, so this experience clearly set her on her lifelong activist path. These experiences thus sparked an interest in ideology and a reason to persist for many women that are often recounted as a pivotal point in the development of their activism.

## 8. Role Models

Most interviewees attributed some type of empowerment to the people in their lives that inspired them along the way, whether it was close family, friends, or absolute strangers.

### *a. Family*

Unsurprisingly, the most cited acknowledgements in this category were the women and mothers in the interviewees’ lives. Appreciation of mothers was common throughout the Nicaraguan interviews, often cited as a source of empowerment. Delgado, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 for her commitment to the women’s peace agenda, noted that “I have to pay homage to the women in my family. Yes, I think that certainly the liberating

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<sup>76</sup> Cabrales, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

example of my mother and of many other women who didn't doubt letting me spread my wings. I think that they marked the course of my life."<sup>77</sup> Mejia, a Nicaraguan revolutionary whose involvement took her from the National Literacy Campaign to working for the Project for Comprehensive Services to Victims of Gender-based Violence, eloquently stated that her mother and grandmother were "the fundamental pillars of my own internal power."<sup>78</sup> Nunez, Nicaragua's first woman on the Supreme Court, credited her mother: "she really did support the development of my self-esteem."<sup>79</sup> These models of strength motivated many women over the course of their lives, not only in their revolutionary goals but when facing difficulties and remembering the evolution of their activism in hindsight. Many women also noted positive effects of their fathers and siblings in their lives. Valle grew from a young illiterate farmer into a revolutionary and organizer for rural women, and stated that her father taught her virtues which "gave me the strength to fight from the time I was very young until today."<sup>80</sup> These appreciations were not just for contributing support during childhood, but also for introducing ideas or sparking intellectual realizations. For some interviewees, parents were their first and direct connection to revolutionary movements, both in Nicaragua and Poland.

In Poland, Tarasiewicz claimed that her mother's family "gave me this sense of power that they were so brave, and that in my family women provide me with such sense of support."<sup>81</sup> These narratives show that parents and family inspire empowerment in many different ways, but mostly through belief in oneself. Even for women who were not directly involved in

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<sup>77</sup> Delgado, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Mejía, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Vilma Núñez, *Global Feminisms Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship*, interview by Shelly Grabe, translation by Julia Baumgartner, University of Michigan Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Managua, Nicaragua, June, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Valle, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> Tarasiewicz, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2003.

revolutionary processes but for whom revolution was an important context to their activism, family history was very important to finding value in self. Uminska, a Polish philosopher and scholar who has translated feminist works and published her own, remembered how her father was a principled communist who ended his life. In many ways, this trauma sparked her journey of exploring her relationship to communism and shaped her writing process as she thought about her own identities and links to feminism, although it did not inspire her to join a revolution.

*b. Not Family*

Some interviewees also noted important people in their lives who served as role models but were not direct family members. Some noted inspiration at young ages through education or through literature. Others recalled celebrities, distant classmates, famous thinkers, and close friends as inspirations to join revolutions, critically think about feminism, or simply reconnect with their own empowerment.

Delgado remembered interacting with brigades around her in the community in Nicaragua and stated that “it obviously impacted my life; it inspired in me a commitment to change. I think it shaped my character to survive in different conditions and [...] developed in me a stronger commitment to the revolution.”<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile Mejia heard Delgado speak when she was younger: “I told myself, ‘I want to be a part of this, I like how these women think, I want to be like them.’ So I began to learn about how to be a part of this grid that is the Network of Women.”<sup>83</sup> As both a source of empowerment and a motivation to join revolutionary processes, role models are inspiring figures that shape individual perspectives on social change.

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<sup>82</sup> Delgado, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Mejía, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

In Poland, Graff remembered the warm and intellectually inspiring feminist Bozena and stated that “it was thanks to Bozena, to a large extent, that I started opening up to my Jewishness.”<sup>84</sup> She went on to explain that understanding her identities, including as a Jew, opened up a space for her to become an activist in Solidarity. These role models inspired women to commit to ideologies and take action.

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<sup>84</sup> Graff, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2005.

### Reflections on Coding and Development of Pathways to Empowerment

Of course, the boundaries of the categories that were coded for sources and results of empowerment are not firm; the categories overlap in many ways, as they are based in individual experiences and narratives. For example, education can both cause empowerment and be a result of empowerment, while also being linked to other categories such as law, as is highlighted by Nunez's story. Nunez is a Nicaraguan lawyer who was the first woman on the Supreme Court. She was involved in revolutionary processes and once Somoza was overthrown, started working in the international human rights framework. She actively chose to study law at the University of Leon because that seemed like a field where she could gain the skills to understand the injustices in the world around her, especially since someone had been able to take her family's money legally when she was younger. Simultaneously, the university setting was where Nunez came into contact with the Student Movement and was able to take part in demonstrations against Somoza's dictatorship and members of the National Guard alongside other students. Thus, education and law as categories related to empowerment intertwined in this example. Furthermore, education was both an empowering factor, as Nunez came into contact with revolutionary groups; and it was also a result of empowerment, as she chose to pursue this education with the specific goal of gaining skills and power in mind.

Thus, another important observation that came out of this analysis of the coded text is that some categories are frequently talked about by interviewees as leading to other categories of empowerment. These links can be thought of as *pathways* or *dynamic connections* among coded categories. They are not strictly causal, as sometimes the order is in one direction, sometimes the opposite, but they define some important linkages. In particular, sources of empowerment seem to lead to further empowerment in consistent ways. There are many recurring trends as well as

interesting nuances in these pathways, but three stand out in their importance for considering how activist women understand their empowerment in contexts of revolution.

The first consistent trend that emerges in both Nicaragua and Poland is *disempowering experiences, both personal and witnessed, that lead to development of an ideology or belief in a cause, which in turn sparks leadership through the creation of organizations and recognition for this work*. In particular, for these women disempowering experiences often led to a search for action to make changes locally or structurally. Cabrales is a Nicaraguan feminist who started her activism as a young student. She recalled witnessing a Somoza guard kill a man in her neighborhood, remembering how “that impacted me a lot and I developed a lot of rage against Somoza, yes.”<sup>85</sup> Cabrales went on to join the Sandinista Front and join the revolutionary ranks, but when looking back, she recounted this disempowering experience that she witnessed as a catalyst in this decision. Indeed, she stated that “I think this is what created in me this profound anti-dictatorship sentiment, and you can see how even today I still have that profound anti-dictatorship sentiment that I reject what is going on these days.”<sup>86</sup> Cabrales is currently vocal against government corruption and maintains the values and ideology of freedom that she developed as a young student. Indeed, her belief in the Sandinista cause as well as the feminist consciousness that emerged during the revolution as a reaction to women being put on the sidelines, led her to becoming active in the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. She currently heads the *Collectivo de Mujeres Itza* which provides resources for victims of gender-based violence.

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<sup>85</sup> Cabrales, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

This pathway is reflected in many of the other women's interviews as well. It may be particular to revolutionary contexts that experiences of disempowerment that are witnessed and experienced include a certain level of violence that scars women while catapulting their activism, or a total level of repression also present in non-violent revolutionary contexts that drives women into the resistance. In revolutionary contexts, anti-dictatorship sentiments are available to frame experiences with, which may contribute to how likely someone is to pursue action to counter disempowering experiences. For the interviewed women who all became lifelong political activists, it was evident that revolutionary goals as well as feminist ideals motivated them to overcome the disempowerment and oppression that they faced. However, whether disempowering experiences lead to empowerment depends on a lot of things, and in no way do I suggest that it is good for women to experience these moments. It is precisely because many women are only scarred by these experiences and don't discover ways to turn their experiences into positive social changes that it may be useful to identify pathways that help women transform these experiences into activism.

A second consistent pathway is having *role models combined with receiving education lead to ideology, both believing in a cause and focusing on changing social structures for next generations*. For example, Delgado started participating in the revolution through the National Literacy Campaign as a young child and remembered that her mother was often absent; as a result, she spent time with the young people in the brigades. She remembered that "it obviously impacted my life; it inspired in me a commitment to change. I think it shaped my character to survive in different conditions. And so uh—I think it obviously developed in me a stronger commitment to the revolution."<sup>87</sup> Delgado went on to join revolutionary forces, in part inspired

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<sup>87</sup> Delgado, *Global Feminisms*, Nicaragua, 2011.



by the people that she worked with as a young girl. Coupled with the education in literacy that she received and the texts that she read about feminist ideology, Delgado grew into her lifelong career of political activism. She has run for the National Assembly and now works with CINCO, an organization focused on the media's role in politics, and has even been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In her interview, she reflected on the fact that her work was sparked by her role models and her education, and insisted on the power that women have to pass on their work to next generations. This focus on leaving a legacy is particularly important in revolutionary contexts where women were and are often invisible in their revolutionary contributions.

In Poland, women talked about this same trajectory in different ways. For example, Tarasiewicz, anti-Communist organizer and current leader of the Network of East-West Women, recalled her role models and inspirations in a more abstract and historical way. Throughout her interview, she remembered the women in her family who were involved in Polish revolutionary work before her although she never met them. She noted that

of course, [it is] terrible what happened to them, but it gave me this sense of power that they were so brave, and that in my family women provide me with such sense of support, and that women were perhaps the bravest, both the ones who fought during the war, and the ones who had managed to wait it out somehow, hidden in some cellar, and then by themselves, here at these Regained Territories, managed to reinvent their lives in such terribly hard conditions.<sup>88</sup>

As a feminist in a country torn by post-war trauma, recalling these stories became incredibly important to her to conceptualize her ideology. Combining these role models with her education

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<sup>88</sup> Tarasiewicz, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2003.

in Poland, she started working at NGOs and building coalitions between women internationally to promote women's rights. Although she did not talk about passing on her work to next generations explicitly, she mentioned that the work she does is aimed at all women, but specifically at Polish women who still are not represented in politics and in feminism. In all, role models and education both sparked women's understanding of their potential to make change, and for some, this resulted in clear values that motivated their social change work.

A third notable pattern in these women's lived experiences is how *feminist consciousness put some on a career track of teaching*. Their feminist consciousness may have come from education or role models or reading literature, but it led them into theoretical spheres and to their development of Women's and Gender Studies in both Nicaragua and Poland. Graff, a Polish feminist scholar, received her education in the United States. She did not focus on women in her writing but attempted to understand her relationship with Poland and Solidarity as an outsider. Until she read feminist work and started to unpack Polish patriotism and victimization, she was unable to understand her own experiences. When she moved back to Poland with this feminist consciousness, she turned to activism while pursuing her academic career. Indeed, she remembers Shana Penn, an American feminist who wrote about women's roles in Solidarity, coming to Poland to conduct interviews, and realizing that "feminist was in fact somehow useful for Polish history."<sup>89</sup> Graff became an assistant professor of English at the University of Warsaw in 1995 and has since then published her first book, *A World Without Women* in 2001. In her interview she highlighted how her "feminist activism is patriotic," notably because "I want to regain Poland for women, and it's not about America."<sup>90</sup> This distinctive Polish feminism that

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<sup>89</sup> Graff, *Global Feminisms*, Poland, 2005.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

she now teaches and publishes on came out of her feminist consciousness. Although none of the Nicaraguan interviewees became professors or academics, they discussed teaching in relation to their feminism in the organizations that they have created or are a part of.

Although these particular links in pathways emerged clearly and consistently throughout these interviews, it is also obvious from the collection of Global Feminisms Project interviews that empowerment can be understood in multiple ways in multiple contexts. Thus, these are simply examples of pathways to empowerment that need to be examined in the future through broader studies. In particular, the question remains of whether these pathways are unique to recognized activists, to women more broadly, or to individuals in contexts of revolution.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study show that studying feminist empowerment through practice is important, as it widens the understanding of empowerment through women's lived experiences. In examining how women are empowered in contexts of revolution through the Global Feminisms Project archives from Poland and Nicaragua, this thesis offers an opportunity to consider how social change actually changes individual women's lives as well as societal structures.

In this study I defined empowerment as a feeling of belonging, participation, having a voice, and/or being a full member of a community, which leads to action or stronger feelings of membership. For coding purposes, I looked for women's explicit mentions of feelings of empowerment that involve the sense of self as engaging in a political way. As empowerment manifests itself in different ways on individual and structural levels, this definition is not exhaustive. I identified eight ways that women discuss their empowerment: education (learning and teaching), ideology (next generation, belief in a cause, and feminist consciousness), law, leadership (creation of organizations, organizational achievements, and recognition), literature (reading, writing, and publishing), political networks (feminist networks, friendships over time, organizations collaborating, and movements collaborating), disempowering experiences (personally experienced or witnessed), and role models (family or not family). These common themes emerged across both sites.

This research thus goes beyond the causes of empowerment that scholars traditionally cite, which include role models, education, and leadership. With this study I add to feminist empowerment theory by conceptualizing a wider range of feelings and experiences that women

experience as empowering. I also added to existing scholarship by featuring the lived experiences of women in revolutionary contexts. By highlighting the achievements of lifelong political activists and revolutionary women in Poland and Nicaragua, I effectively challenged that women can be involved in political and social change processes only as victims.

Indeed, no woman from either Poland or Nicaragua presented herself as a victim of revolution or even of pre-revolutionary circumstances; instead, they acknowledged the difficult circumstances facing them and other women, but also highlighted their direct involvement in activism, showing that women can be simultaneously empowered and disempowered. Of course this may be in part the result of selection of activist participants. Regardless, it is important to keep questioning this binary as it limits women's understandings of their potential in creating social change. Although it is unclear what differentiates people who turn to action from those who are overwhelmed and demoralized by these experiences, the women interviewed and the results of this study show that it is most likely an accumulation of empowering experiences and confidence in self that lead to action as a reaction to disempowering experiences.

By exploring processes that can have empowering effects on women in the context of socialist revolution, this study illuminates how empowerment occurs in this particular kind of context, as well as some of the processes that underlie empowerment in many contexts. The connections between revolution, gender, and socialism became clear. In both Nicaragua and Poland, women were often placed on the sidelines during revolutionary processes as well as during post-conflict reconstruction, but they turned this repression into drive to create social change in their own ways. Gender expectations governed women's involvement in revolutions as well as post-revolution structures. Whether this was intertwined with a socialist agenda or with an anti-communist framework, there was no substantial re-definition of gender roles considered

by either revolutionary movement, sparking many of these women's activism. By featuring the stories of women in both violent and non-violent revolutionary contexts, I have shown that women can face oppression by either structure, and that empowerment comes from a wide range of other factors.

My observation that women described both sources and results of empowerment that create these feelings is also important for the analysis of feminist empowerment in the future. It enables future research to further explore nuanced understandings of feminist empowerment which was not feasible with a "fuzzy" concept that left sources and results collapsed into one category.

In addition, there are important connections between types of empowerment as highlighted in the development of empowerment pathways. I highlighted three pathways that occurred frequently in these interviews: from disempowerment to ideology to leadership, from role models and education to ideology, and from feminist consciousness to teaching. Although these are fluid, noticing how lifelong political activists spark their journey and motivate themselves to keep going is important for developing a more adequate feminist empowerment theory, as well as for feminists who seek inspiration in their own activist careers.

The strengths of the grounded theory method I used resulted in the strengths of the analysis, as I could connect empowerment theory and practice through the use of lived experiences. Using revolutionary contexts as a basis for understanding feminist empowerment allowed me to show connections between feminism and social movement theory. By exploring categories of empowerment as both sources and results of empowerment, I provide a nuanced analysis that clearly aligns with current literature in feminist empowerment theory. Indeed, I

provided a new context for analysis through the framework of revolution, and I showed that empowerment is not only an individual process but rather a multi-level one.

It is important to note that my social identities as a young white European-American woman who has not been a part of revolutionary struggles inevitably shaped some aspects of my analysis in ways I can recognize and some I no doubt cannot. In particular, I was more likely to admire revolutionary women because I have not faced the kinds of struggles many of them have, and I was eager to identify how they used their experiences to maintain their activism as a young adult considering many career options. I also drew extensively on interviews from Nicaragua because there were more sources available but also because I was more curious about violent revolutionary processes that are much more unfamiliar to me. My exposure to Global Feminisms Project interviews prior to conducting this research made me more alert to some aspects of these women's experiences such as their first encounters with activism or understandings of feminism, and may have made me less able to recognize others.

There are many questions that this work does not cover due to its scope. An important direction that these results can be taken in is how understanding empowerment and global feminisms can be incorporated into the teaching of Women's Studies, both through theory and practice. The Global Feminisms Project has already provided guidelines for using lived experience narratives to move away from homogenizing experiences from non-US national contexts. Rios and Stewart argue in their work that by using oral histories and sharing stories, we reduce invisibility of the wide range of women's experiences which in turn tackles privilege and opens conversations.<sup>91</sup> Yet what kind of support can academic departments, organizations, and

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<sup>91</sup> Desdama Rios and A. J. Stewart, 2013, "Recognizing Privilege by Reducing Invisibility: The Global Feminisms Project as a Pedagogical Tool," In *Deconstructing Privilege: Teaching and Learning as Allies in the Classroom*, 115–31, New York: Routledge.

movements provide to women to generate or continue feelings of empowerment? What structural barriers to feelings of empowerment have not been addressed through this research? How do these findings apply to feminist empowerment theory that is not in the context of revolutions? Do these themes also emerge in other revolutionary Global Feminisms Project sites? The pathways outlined should be explored further as well as categories of empowerment that did not come up in these interviews.

Women can reflect on their own activism and empowerment by listening to the stories of the incredible women featured in this work. Whether it is by questioning the status quo or looking up to role models or finding meaningful leadership opportunities or reading an inspiring scholarly piece, it is valuable for everyone to find the moments when “a lioness wakes up” in you so that we can all continue to make our revolutionary social change.



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