CHAPTER 2

Social Movement Spillover and Organizational Learning in the Post-Conflict Women’s Movement

They cannot forgive us that we triumphed where so many others fail... Courage is a virtue appreciated in a male but considered a defect in our gender. Bold women are a threat to a world that is out of balance, in favor of men. That is why they work so hard to mistreat and destroy us. But remember that bold women are like cockroaches: step on one and others come running from the corners.

Isabel Allende, Inés of my soul, 2007

Women’s revolutionary mobilization – and the friction this caused – encouraged women to problematize traditional gender constructs for the first time and ‘to renegotiate their positions and relations within their private and public spheres’ (Berger 2006: 1 and 37). As indicated in the previous chapter, this led to increased women’s activism in the post-conflict period. Following the peace negotiations, there is a further expansion of the number of women’s groups and organizations coming from different sectors of society.¹ This proliferation of different women’s organizations meant that organizations became active in very different domains of society and on different levels, thus fostering a growing consciousness of gender inequalities in the 1990s.

When discussing the post-conflict period, I take the peace negotiations as a breaking point² and analyze how several socio-economic changes following this changing political constellation have influenced the development of the women’s movement. For both Guatemala and Nicaragua, three elements are crucial in determining the post-conflict evolution of the women’s movement. These are (a) the political changes, (b) the economic changes which are a by-product thereof, and (c) the organization of several regional women’s events. In this introductory section, I discuss all three, to contextualize the emergence of the women’s movement.

¹ In Nicaragua, half of the women’s organizations registered in 1995 emerged before 1990, while the other half were created in the short period 1990–1995 (Serra Vázquez 2007).

² Note that I do not see the transition from ‘war’ to ‘peace’ as an absolute or immediate one, and that I acknowledge the persistence of high levels of societal violence in the ‘post-conflict period’.
The most visible process indicating the beginning of the post-conflict period, were the respective peace talks in both countries. These indicated the start of profound social and political changes, which also triggered a process of diversification and specialization within the movement. Due to these political changes women's organizations had to rethink their position with regards to the political system and society more broadly, and had to reorganize their priorities to reflect changes in their environment. In Nicaragua, the anti-feminist election campaign and politics of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro were an additional incentive for women to organize and protest to demand their rights. This was rendered possible – formally speaking – thanks to a liberalization of the rules of mobilization in this same period (Biekart 1999). In the Guatemalan case, women found an additional incentive to mobilize by participating in the peace process, and creating a niche for themselves there.

A second element which accompanied the evolution from conflict to post-conflict societies, and which significantly influenced the women's movement, was the economic restructuring project which was an integral part of the program of the new political leaders. Metoyer (2000: 83) argues that Chamorro's structural adjustment program launched Nicaragua into a process of economic restructuring, which also had profound effects on women. This economic restructuring was also the heartland of the new civilian rule in Guatemala, where the economy had suffered severe blows during the armed conflict. This necessitated structural adjustments to the IMF and Worldbank requirements, which in practice meant the adoption of a decidedly neoliberal policy (Paris 2002). The economic liberalization in both countries had two important consequences for women's mobilization. Firstly, it reinforced the dynamic of women entering the public sphere – which was set in motion during the armed conflict – because it required women to work outside the house to generate a sufficient family income (Berger 2006: 77 and 79). Secondly, the neoliberal restructuring had important social consequences, such as the restructuring of the Nicaraguan Institute for Social Security and Well-being (INSSBI) in 1990 and 1995 and elimination of – the budget for – many social welfare activities. This explains the occurrence of women's groups challenging these reforms, but moreover, the reforms meant that the state became more dependent on organizations of civil society to fill up gaps which it could no longer fill itself as a neo-liberal state, such as free healthcare, education in family planning and women's shelters (Berger 2006: 28). This meant that, on several occasions, organizations of civil society were actively turned to by the state to take on

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3 In this period, unemployment rose to 23.5% and the number of people living in conditions of poverty to 75% in 1995 (UNDP, cited in Serra Vázquez, 2007: 46).