Is There a Real Women’s Movement? Cooperation, Fragmentation and Divisions in the Movement

As the previous chapters established, the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan women’s movements are characterized by a substantial degree of fragmentation. This chapter explores the nature of this fragmentation and its effects on the potential for cooperation, for creating synergy and for establishing a collective identity. The second section of the chapter considers the dynamics which nourished this fragmentation.

Fragmentation: Diversification or Duplication?

In the constitutive phase of the women’s movement, several factors – such as a high degree of dedication amongst the participants, newly opened political spaces, massive international aid, and growing awareness of women’s issues – benefited the expansion of the women’s movement. In parallel with this expansion, a process of differentiation took place. This section analyze how the process of differentiation affected the goals, identity and structure of the women’s movement.

In both countries, what I call the women’s movement is comprised of many individual organizations, each with their own specific goals and ideas. The organizations are often united by little more than the overall aim of improving women’s situation. In the early 2010s, there is little clarity – also amongst women’s organizations themselves – on the nature and extent of relations between these different organizations, and most deal with the issue of alliances on a day-to-day basis. The fact that there is little structural collaboration amongst actors of the movement means that alliances within the women’s movement and between the women’s movement and other social actors are unstable and hard to map. Moreover the mere existence of differences between organizations is invoked by some interviewees as a reason which impedes the formation of coalitions. Differentiation is thus impeding collaboration in some cases. As a member of a think tank for the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion expressed:

It is very hard to coordinate between actors which see things differently, even if, in essence, they have the same goal. Organizations work
In both Guatemala and Nicaragua, the way in which actors of the movement are dealing with the process of differentiation is thus leading to divisions. There are many overlapping dividing lines within the women’s movement. My interviews showed that, in the movement as a whole, women from many different layers of society and different backgrounds are represented, but that within one organization, women often have similar socio-economic characteristics, and that the extent to which these women actually interact with one another or join the same organizations is relatively limited. Feminist organizations active in the urban area for example mainly consist of educated middle-class *ladina* women\(^1\) with social networks and professional skills, often having a leftist orientation. Women working in organizations in rural areas and those fighting for practical gender needs on the other hand, oftentimes lack formal education, yet have an impressive level of expertise and competence in their field. Between both types of organizations, there is often little communication or collaboration.

This lack of collaboration and interaction was for example illustrated by the round table on femicide organized by the Latin American Faculty for Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Guatemala City in the Spring of 2010. The topic of this event, which concerns the lives of many women from all sectors of society, only attracted five representatives of indigenous women’s organizations, on a total of one hundred to one hundred and fifty participants. Talks with both the organizers and one of the participants from an indigenous women’s organization afterwards showed two different realities. A member of the organizing panel suggested that over time they have experienced many difficulties in reaching indigenous women, because ‘there is a tendency amongst these women to withdraw to their own structures and facilities’. On the contrary, the representative of an indigenous women’s NGO confirmed that there is indeed little participation of indigenous women in the mainstream structures of the women’s movement, but she attributed this lack of participation to the latent ‘persistent discrimination’ which still characterizes the interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous women’s groups. In this case, divisions on the

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1 The word Ladino – not Latino – in Guatemala officially refers to a distinct ethnic group (MIN-EDUC 2008) However, in popular use, it refers to the non-indigenous population, and especially mestizo people (mixed – European and native american – origin) from the middle class whose primary language is Spanish.