PART TWO

Complementary Approaches to Women’s Empowerment
In the first part of the book, I analyzed the effect of armed conflict on the current priorities and working methods of the women’s movement in Nicaragua and Guatemala. This analysis showed a strong predominance of programs envisioning women’s emancipation in the public domain. These programs are influenced by women’s experiences during the armed conflict and by international donors who entered both countries en masse after the armed conflict.

In this second part of the book, I explore in more depth how the movement’s priorities and working methods can be located across the public-private dichotomy (e.g. Pateman 1983). This alleged opposition between a public and a private sphere is an idea which local feminists challenge, but at the same time implicitly subscribe to. The reason for problematizing this issue is fourfold. First, it is related to my fieldwork, which showed a significant preference on the side of actors envisioning women’s empowerment – mainly feminist organizations – to prioritize topics and working methods which are situated in the public domain, such as women’s rights, protests marches and advocacy strategies. By contrast, the personal experiences of women are often neglected – both their experience of oppression and other personal experiences. While this is not inherent to approaches that revolve around public mobilization – and while public mobilization is a pivotal aspect of the feminist movement’s focus on structural change – Guatemalan and Nicaraguan feminist organizations often do not link activities in the public domain to women’s personal everyday realities. When I refer to the “personal experiences” of women in this part of the book, I refer to those experiences which women have themselves in their daily lives, but also to the meaning they ascribe to these experiences on the basis of their particular personal background. This means personal experiences are subjective and might not follow the logic of rationality which reigns the public realm. The logic of these experiences is in contrast with the rights-based approach of Guatemalan and Nicaraguan feminist organizations.

In the empowerment programs of mainstream feminist organizations, relatively little attention is paid to the role of subjectivity and emotion compared to other contexts. Research has shown that in other countries (Hercus 1999 and Reger 2004) and with other types of women’s organisations (Taylor 2000), as well as amongst smaller women’s organizations in Guatemala and Nicaragua (Bercian 2004), feminists paid explicit attention to women’s emotions and employed emotion in a non-politicised way as a means for women’s empowerment. In North America and Europe, for example, the importance of subjectivity is increasingly acknowledged. Research by Reger (2004) on the NYC NOW feminists and by Hercus (1999) on Australian feminist organizations have demonstrated the positive consequences of this strategy, as much for the