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## **A Denaturalized Woman**

### **Gender, Sexualities and Nation Building in Nicaraguan Abortion Discourses**

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This study has been carried out within the framework of the Minor Field Study (MFS) Scholarship Programme and the Travel Scholarship funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

The MFS Scholarship Programme gives Swedish university students the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in low- and middle income countries, or more specifically in the countries included on the *DAC List of ODA Recipients*, in relation to their Bachelor's or Master's thesis.

Sida's main purpose with the Scholarships is to stimulate the students' interest in, as well as increasing their knowledge and understanding of development issues. The Minor Field Studies provide the students with practical experience of fieldwork in developing settings. A further aim of Sida is to strengthen the cooperation between Swedish university departments and institutes and organisations in these countries.

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## **Abstract**

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In 2006, Nicaragua installed a complete ban on abortion, which spurred much debate in Nicaraguan civil society and had a strongly negative effect on women's rights and lives. Previous research has dealt with the abortion discourses and found that much of it makes out a conflict between protecting the life of the fetus or that of the woman. However, there have also been found arguments relating to gender, sexualities and the nation. This area has although not been thoroughly investigated. This bachelor thesis discusses how notions of gender and sexualities are constructed in relation to Nicaraguan abortion discourses, and how this can be seen as part of a nation-building project. By applying discourse analysis on seventeen semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of civil society organizations that are engaged in the abortion debate, for and against abortion rights. The theoretical framework is based on gender and nation building, femininity/masculinity and naturalized motherhood.

The conclusions drawn suggest that the anti-abortion discourse highly emphasizes the role of the Mother as the primary responsibility for women, both for the national collective and for how they should live out their gender and sexualities; i.e. within the borders of reproduction. A contrasting gender role is also presented, that is a feminist, unfeminine woman with a promiscuous and libertine sexuality. Abortion is seen as being un-Nicaraguan and connected to international influence, homosexuality and illicit sexual behaviors that are outside of national culture and values and abortion is thereby a threat to the nation.

The pro-choice discourse attempts to deconstruct deterministic presentations of women and their sexualities and frame abortion as an important women's right, and claim that abortion rights could allow for also breaking with traditional gender roles and notions of women's sexualities.

*Keywords:* Nicaragua, abortion, gender, sexualities, nation building, discourse

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## **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

CSO – civil society organization

FSLN – Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (*Sandinista Front for National Liberation*)

ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NGO – non-governmental organization

Sida – Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

SRHR – sexual and reproductive health and rights

UN – United Nations

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

*All couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children, and to have the information, education and means to do so.*

International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 1994

So states Principle 8, in the ICPD Program of Action, which serves to guide United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on how to promote sexual and reproductive rights and health (SRHR), and within this field to place extra focus on women's rights and gender equality. SRHR is an emphasized focus in much international development cooperation; Millennium Development Goal (MDG) number five focuses on maternal health and universal access to reproductive health (United Nations 2014), Swedish Sida place SRHR as a main issue, within their work on gender equality (Sida 2014) and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emphasize its importance for development and for women's lives and health. Still, in parts of the world SRHR are facing a backlash. In 2006, the Nicaraguan government installed a law reform that criminalized therapeutic abortion, which is abortion in the case of rape, incest, severe fetal malformation, and/or if the woman's life or health is at risk. This made abortion illegal under all circumstances and placed the country in the top two percent of the world's strictest legislation on abortion (together with El Salvador, Chile, Dominican Republic, Malta, and Holy See). It also meant a great setback in terms of women's rights in Nicaragua and has greatly affected women's ability for reproductive autonomy (United Nations 2013; Replogle 2007). The law reform was instated along with an important election, when the party Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) returned to power, and it caused heavy debates in the Nicaraguan civil society; with political parties, the Catholic and Evangelical Church and anti-abortion civil society organizations (CSOs) on the one side, and women's- and feminist organizations on the other (Heumann 2007: 218-222). The debate mainly focused on protecting the life of the fetus, versus that of the woman, on moral philosophy about when life begins and on women's human rights (ibid: 220-231). However, the abortion ban was also legitimized and disputed using arguments related to sexualities

and nation building, where ideals of gender roles were a prominent part. These types of arguments have not yet been thoroughly covered by previous research.

Through analyzing seventeen interviews, conducted in January-March 2014 with Nicaraguan representatives from CSOs engaged in the abortion issue, I aim to contribute with such understanding.

## 1.2 Purpose and aim

The purpose of this thesis is thus to analyze how the discourses on abortion relate to gender and sexualities, among CSOs actively participating in the abortion debate in Nicaragua today, and how this relates to the Nicaraguan nation-building project. The main focus is placed on the anti-abortion discourse, since their opinions represent the current legislation and the government's approach to the issue.

I chose the themes as previous research and theories on the subject indicate that they should be of great relevance for understanding resistance against abortion. They constitute part of what ideologically drives both resistance against and struggle for SRHR, and I believe that any strive to promote such rights needs a comprehensive and holistic perspective that also includes these themes. However, up until now, there has not been any research conducted in the Nicaraguan context that includes this emphasis.

Nicaragua is an especially interesting country to investigate when it comes to complete abortion bans, given that the law reform was so recent. The abortion ban and –discourse has had serious implications on Nicaraguan women's lives and health, which further contributes to the importance of developing a better understanding of the context.

## 1.3 Research questions

- *How is abortion constructed in relation to notions of gender and sexualities in the Nicaraguan abortion discourses, among CSO-representatives actively engaged in the abortion issue?*
- *How can this be understood as part of a Nicaraguan nation-building project?*

## 1.4 Terminology

When it comes to labeling the abortion CSOs in the thesis, several options have been considered. These terms have been *pro-choice* or *pro-abortion* for the one side and *anti-choice*, *pro-life* or *anti-abortion* for the other. I have decided to apply the terms

pro-choice for the side that advocates abortion rights, and anti-abortion for the side advocating an abortion ban<sup>1</sup>.

Gender is commonly described as ‘the social sex’, i.e. the social roles that are attributed to our biological sex. In this thesis, I have applied R.W. Connell’s approach, that gender is part of a large-scale social structure, where several social institutions are involved. Gender is constructed through a socialization process, that changes over time and gives certain content to the social categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, which allows for only some characteristics, identities and actions, while excluding other. The content within e.g. the category ‘man’ is collectivized and normalized, and embedded in most societal structure, which makes for a hierachal power relation, and opens up for oppression (Connell 1987: 134-141).

The “gender order”, as Connell terms it, and conceptions around gender are closely linked with sex and sexuality (ibid: 167). In this thesis I will refer much to sexuality, where I will use the plural term *sexualities*, in order not to (re)produce an image of a homogeneous female sexuality, and in order to also include male sexualities. But, how do I then understand this term in the thesis? Sexualities can be described as a collection of individuals’ sexual behavior, habits, orientation and desire, and as Connell, I see this as socially constructed and loaded with contextually based meaning, expectations and understandings, linked to one’s gender identity (ibid: 169). Given this understanding, sexualities is not something that can be objectively described, but something that must be individually defined.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the terminologies bring with them certain implications and biases. Pro-abortion has been rejected, as it would profile all these organizations as wanting to universally promote abortion, which would be a wrongful indication of their ambitions. The term pro-choice will be applied, as it is the most accurate way to describe the movement’s agenda. It is also close to how many of the organizations define themselves in the field; i.e. as *pro-derecho a decidir* (pro-right to choose). When it comes to the opposing side the term anti-choice holds negative connotations, while pro-life could indicate that the pro-choice side is anti-life, which cannot be claimed, given their work for improving women’s health and lives and their work against gender-based violence. Therefore I have decided to apply the term anti-abortion, as I consider it the closest representation of their standpoint in the debate.

## **1.5 Background**

### **1.5.1 Nicaraguan (abortion) politics**

Nicaragua is a small country, with a population of about 6 million. It is the poorest country in Central America, with 42,5 percent of the population living below the national poverty line (UN Data 2013).

Nicaragua's political history has been turbulent and violent. In 1937 begun a military dictatorship led by the Samoza family, which ended in 1979 with the Sandinista revolution. The revolution was led by FSLN, which is a left-wing party that during their mandate instated several reforms, which in some ways improved the conditions for the working class, women and youth in the country. Several of Nicaragua's women's organizations formed during these years. The Sandinista rule ended in 1990, after an eleven year long civil war between the party and counter-revolutionary forces (Kampwirth 2008:123-125).

The 2006 election came to be important for Nicaragua's modern political history, as it meant the return to power for FSLN and their leader Daniel Ortega. Karen Kampwirth describes how FSLN demonstrated a new closeness to the Catholic Church in this election, in reforms, rhetoric and representation. It seemed as if FSLN had become a reformed party in 2006, and the rapprochement to the Church had a great impact on the abortion law reform (Kampwirth 2008: 125).

Abortion on request has long been criminalized in the Nicaraguan penal code, but therapeutic abortion was legal from 1870; conditioned upon the consent of a board of doctors. A combination of unclear instructions as to when abortion was to be granted, and a shortage of medical staff (seven doctors per 10 000 inhabitants) made the access to therapeutic abortion highly limited, and most of the few cases that were granted were those where the woman's life was seriously threatened (Heumann 2007: 219; Reuterswärd et.al. 2011: 821).

According to the 2006 legislation, a woman who solicits or consents to an abortion risks one to four years of imprisonments, and the same penalty applies for a non-medical person who aborts a fetus, given consent from the woman. Any medical staff that performs an abortion risks five to ten years of penalty (Código Penal de la Republica de Nicaragua 2007). According to Jill Replogle, this has made many medical staff restrictive when it comes to pre-natal care, as they fear the risk of

persecution if the medical attention needed could endanger the fetus, which has decreased the quality and reach of maternal care in Nicaragua (Replogle 2007: 15-17).

The legislative change stirred much debate in the Nicaraguan civil society. Nicaragua has many women's organizations that in different ways work to promote women's rights and representation and they form the pro-choice side of the debate while conservative, often Catholic Church-affiliated groups and government-aligned organizations drive anti-abortion arguments. These CSOs work through public campaigns, political demonstrations and other means of formation of opinion (Heumann 2007: 218). The women's organizations framed the law reform as a backlash in terms of women's human rights and were concerned of what effects it might have for women's health and lives. Six months after the law reform, 42 women had already died as a result of pregnancy-complications that could have been avoided by abortion. Many women still solicit abortions in Nicaragua, but are now often having them in unsafe and unsanitary circumstances, also causing health-related problems and sometimes even death for these women (Kampwirth 2008: 131).

### **1.6.2 Reproductive and gender relations in Nicaragua**

The institution of family is central in Nicaragua, both for state- and individual relations. Nicaraguan families are highly diverse. It is common that the extended family lives in the same household as the immediate family and there is a high incidence of lone-mother households<sup>2</sup>. This high frequency of lone-mother households is mainly caused by male abandonment, migration, labor flexibilization and –informality, when the children in the majority of cases stay with the mother (Martínez Franzoni & Voorend 2011: 996).

The size of Nicaraguan families varies greatly. The average fertility rate is 2,7 children per woman, but there seems to be a great urban-rural divide, as the rural fertility rate is as high as 7 children per woman (UNFPA 2011; El Envío 2014). Many of the mothers are young, and Nicaragua has the highest adolescent pregnancy rate in

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<sup>2</sup> The term lone-mother households is in this context meant to suggest a household, in which a mother holds the sole responsibility for economy and care, without the support of her partner. The commonly applied term *female-headed households* has been rejected as it includes a problematic suggestion that female 'headship' is an anomaly, which is caused by male absence. Women are rarely classified as heads in general terms, even though they often hold the major responsibility for both care and economic provision. By applying the term lone-mother households, I aim to circumvent these problems. *For a more extensive discussion on the topic see:* (Moore 1996).

Latin America, with 109 out of 1 000 pregnancies (World Bank 2014). The maternal mortality rate in Nicaragua has decreased since 1990, and the decrease continued also after the law reform, however at a slightly slower pace. The 2011 maternal mortality rate was 95 out of 1000 live births, and in 2006 the number was around 110 (UNFPA 2011).

Another cause of death for Nicaraguan women, which is far greater than maternal mortality rates, is violence against women. Violence from a partner or other family member is the number one cause of death for women aged 15-45, and there are 31 reported cases of gender-based violence each day (Human Rights Brief 2011). Sexual violence rates are also alarmingly high, with 14 reported cases daily. For both categories of violence the hidden statistics are likely to be significantly larger as many women fear the consequences of reporting, partly due to a high degree of impunity for the perpetrators and to the stigma associated with being a victim of sexual violence. 80 percent of the victims are adolescents, which also contributes to the high rate of adolescent pregnancy (*ibid*).

## 1.7 Previous research

There have been several studies made concerning the Nicaraguan abortion discourses and circumstances, and concerning abortion discourses in general. The previous research that I include in this thesis is carried out by Silke Heumann (2007), Karen Kampwirth (2006; 2008), Barry Gilheany (1998), and by Camilla Reuterswärd, Pär Zetterberg, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Maxine Molyneux (2007).

I initiate by accounting for Gilheany's study *The state and the discursive construction of abortion* (1998), which addresses how state interests and gender relations affect abortion politics. According to him, state interests in abortion and in sexualities cannot be understood as a unitary and cohesive phenomenon, but as something that varies between different cultural and historical contexts. He has analyzed much of the existing literature on abortion politics and discourses, and relates state interest in abortion to state interest in sexualities, through biopolitical practices. Biopolitics is a term used by Michel Foucault (1977; 1978), which incorporates all political acts that relate to and shape our understanding, and control of human bodies and bodily behavior. When it comes to sexualities, this can for example be legislation on homosexuality, contraceptives and abortion (Gilheany 1998: 58-59). How sexualities are understood depends on the cultural and historical context, where

it can e.g. either be seen as a pleasure, or a taboo and risk, and this has different impacts on how sexualities (and fertility) are regulated. Sexualities are relevant for both positive and negative approaches to abortion, where pro-choice discourses tend to view abortion as a means for female sexual self-determination and as a liberation from the connection between sexual pleasure and childbearing, while anti-abortion discourses apply sexual behavior in more negative terms, where abortion is related to female promiscuity, immorality and hedonism (ibid: 62). Gilheany's research will be of relevance for my thesis, since an elaboration on the inclusion of sexualities in the Nicaraguan abortion discourse only has been a peripheral issue in previous research.

Sociologist Silke Heumann (2007) analyzes the Nicaraguan abortion discourse from 1999-2002 in *Abortion and politics in Nicaragua: The women's movement in the debate on the Abortion Law Reform 1999-2002*, and looks to statements made by the Catholic and Evangelical Church, the government, anti-abortion groups, medical staff and by feminist organizations.

Central arguments that Heumann found among the anti-abortion groups were that legalized abortion would "promote a culture of death", and that they want to defend the life of the fetus from the moment of conception. She also saw that the woman, and circumstances of the pregnancy were constantly excluded from the anti-abortion discourse, and that the only prominent actor that could be depicted was the fetus (ibid: 219-222). Abortion was consistently framed as a murder and a sin, and Heumann meant that this has contributed to hindering women from claiming abortion as a right (ibid: 218).

Within this discourse, the feminist movement was accused of supporting international control of the Nicaraguan population, and that the feminist campaigns would also bring with them increased homosexuality, libertinage, criminality and moral decay, which would lead to the destruction of the family. Heumann interprets this as an attempt to maintain a hierachal gender division, with clear, differentiated roles for women and men, within the sphere of a heterosexual reproductive marriage (Heumann 2007: 221). Political scientist Karen Kampwirth made similar findings in her research (*Resisting the feminist threat: Antifeminist politics in post-Sandinista Nicaragua 2006, and Abortion, antifeminism, and the return of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Leftist Politics? 2008*), while linking the anti-abortion attitudes (which she views as part of an ongoing feminist backlash in Nicaragua) to increasing globalization, with strengthened efforts for global gender equality, and such issues are

gaining more ground on the international development agendas. In parts of the Nicaraguan context, women's rights are becoming equated with international influence over national politics (Kampwirth 2006: 743-75; 2008: 123).

In the same year that Nicaragua tightened its legislation on abortion, Colombia went in an opposite direction and liberalized their abortion law. In *Abortion law reforms in Colombia and Nicaragua: Issue works and opportunity contexts*, political scientists Reuterswärd et.al. compare the two law reforms to see what initiated them, through analyzing the political opportunities at the time, the relation between the Church and the state, and between civil society and the state (Reuterswärd et.al. 2011). In their article they discuss how the Catholic Church has always mobilized against SRHR in Latin America (ibid: 808). In the case of Nicaragua they found that the 2006 election created a “window of opportunity” for the Catholic Church to push forward such development (ibid: 818). The only group that strongly opposed the law reform was the Nicaraguan women’s movement, which according to Reuterswärd et.al, at the time was slightly weakened and fragmented, much due to rejection from the FSLN. Meanwhile, the anti-abortion movement was stronger than ever, resulting from 16 years of right-wing rule that had already drawn back some advances in SRHR that were made during the revolutionary era (ibid: 826). The FSLN also saw a “window of opportunity” in the Church alliance and made criminalization of abortion into one of their main issues for the election in exchange for the Church’s support. President Ortega spoke of abortion from a nationalist point of view, and claimed that the global community had promoted SRHR in Nicaragua in order to underpopulate and control the country (ibid: 819).

Previous research on the Nicaraguan abortion discourse and law reform has come to several common conclusions; e.g. that the Catholic Church and the FSLN both took advantage of the circumstance of the election in 2006, to either win votes and power (FSLN) or to strengthen their position and agenda in society (the Church).

Both sides of the debate have received some international support – either economic or other, in their work. This seems to have strengthened the anti-abortion movement, while the support given to the pro-choice movement seems to have motivated the anti-abortionists (Kampwirth 2006; 2008).

The political motivation behind the criminalization seems to have been covered, but what has been less developed is research on how patriarchal structures are produced and reproduced through the abortion discourse. By entering the

discourse through the emphases on sexualities, gender roles and nation building, I strive to contribute to this understanding.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Discourse theory

Since my method for analysis is discourse analysis, I will here present the theoretical foundation for this, while the application of it in this thesis is found in the methodology chapter. For both theory and method I have decided to apply Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's approach as their semiotic tools and focus on the discursive struggle best suits my research purpose, while other discourse scholars, such as Norman Fairclough would be more applicable in a study of change over time (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 25-28).

What is central to discourse analysis is language, as it is through language that we understand and make sense of the world. Winther Jørgensen and Phillips mean that by attaching certain meaning to words, in relation to other words and by rejecting some meanings to them, language forms a 'web' of words with different meanings, and through this a whole understanding of 'reality' is formed (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 20). Such web is what constitutes a discourse. There is no one definable actor behind each discourse, but they are constantly produced and reproduced through people's speech and action. The discourses thereby both shape us, and are shaped by us, so when we speak and act we also shape the social world, and this is what Winther Jørgensen and Phillips call discursive practice. However, different people affect discourses differently; e.g. a person of 'high status' can have a greater impact on shaping a discourse (*ibid*: 15, 25).

Laclau and Mouffe base their theoretical perspective partly in semiotics, and they mean that in each historical and cultural context, there are several discourses existing alongside each other that attach different meanings to different words, that they refer to as *signs*. However, for each discourse, the ambition is to only have one meaning attached to each sign, and to achieve an absolute attachment of its own meaning. Due to this, discourses are in conflict with each other for such absolute attachment. Through these *discursive struggles* discourses constantly change, i.e. they are contingent. Signs that are often subject to these discursive struggles, and that hold

a privileged position within one or several discourses are called *elements*. Examples of elements could be the sign ‘immigrant’ within a nationalist, compared to a multiculturalist discourse. When a discourse manages to achieve absolute attachment, and the sign or element is no longer, or is only rarely, disputed by competing discourses, this sign becomes a *moment* (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 33-36; 40-42).

Discourses build up what is considered to be ‘true’ or ‘false’, which creates a situation where certain statements are allowed, and considered to be natural, while others are ruled out. This affects what we come to consider being normal or deviant. Therefore, when the meanings within the discourses change, this changes how we understand the world, and it thereby brings about social change (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 18-19, 24).

In discourses, meaning is also attached to people’s identities, circled around so-called *master signifiers*, such as ‘woman’ or ‘worker’. Through the meaning attached to the master signifiers, individuals are offered an identity, which can be given, taken or negotiated through discursive practices (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 50). While some identities can easily interact and exist simultaneously for an individual, like for example the identities ‘Nicaraguan’ and ‘mother’, others conflict with each other. This conflict is within discourse theory called antagonism and is expressed when discourses attach contradictory meaning to two identities. This antagonism is created deliberately, since the combination of them would threaten the absolute meaning that is strived for within the discourse (*ibid*: 55).

## **2.2 Gender and sexuality in nation building**

For theories concerning nation building, nationalism and how this relates to gender and sexualities I have combined the work of gender scholar Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) and sociologist Joane Nagel (1998).

Nagel focuses on linkages between masculinity and nationalist ideology in nation building, while also drawing on the works by Yuval-Davis, who investigates how women are presented and included in nationalist purposes, through bearing the responsibility of cultural and biological reproduction of the nation (Nagel 1998; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Common for the relation between gender and nation building is a presentation of naturalized (hetero)normative gender roles that are ordered in a hierachal fashion

with a hegemonic masculinity and subordinated femininities (Nagel 1998: 245-247). The concept of hegemonic masculinity comes from R.W. Connell (1987), who claims that in any society, within the gender roles that are set up, there are different versions of both masculinity and femininity. How these masculinities and femininities are expressed of course differs between social contexts, and relates to other societal categories, such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. At the top of the hierarchical relationship of gender roles is the hegemonic masculinity, which is constructed in relation to other, subordinated masculinities and all femininities. How the interplay between different versions of masculinities looks makes out an important part of the societal patriarchal order (Connell 1987:183). The term Connell uses for the most elevated form of femininity is *emphasized femininity*. That is the type of femininity that “best accommodates the interests and desires of men”, i.e. the one that is least in conflict with (the hegemonic) masculinity. The hegemony of one type of masculinity (and in dialogue with this, also the emphasized femininity) is upheld through social structures and is part of nation building. This does not eliminate other, inferior versions of masculinity and femininity, but there are attempts to maintain the subordinate position through e.g. legislating against them, or through discursive practices, that label them inferior and/or deviant (Connell 1987: 183-9; Nagel 1998: 245). Connell’s theory concerning this is not only applicable in terms of nation building, but also in general gender analyses on society. I have however chosen to incorporate it under this section on nation building as Nagel continuously refers to Connell, stressing the importance of the construction of masculinities and femininities in nation-building projects. Nation-building project is a term that refers to the process of constructing what is inside and outside the boundaries of the national collective; culture, traditions, norms and values. Within this models for gender and sexuality play a central part (Nagel 1998).

Nagel sees nationalism as an in essence masculine project, involving masculine institutions, processes and activities that aim to serve male privileges. The roles that are commonly given to women in nation building are either elevated as icons of nationhood that support and ‘make way’ for masculine roles and privileges, or they are devalued as threats to it (Nagel 1998: 243-244).

One could argue that Nagel’s perspective tends to devalue women’s agency and actions in nation building and it does not explain why women actively (and willingly) participate in these masculine activities, if they are in fact reproducing male

privileges and interests. This leaves female participation in the anti-abortion CSOs unexplained. Nagel does however emphasize that she does not wish to understate the contributions made by women in the making of nations; for instance as activists, citizens, and leaders (*ibid*: 243).

Yuval-Davis focuses much on the importance of family relations in nation building, and argues that within nationalist discourses, “nations [...] constitute a natural extension of family and kinship relations” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 15). Families, marital arrangements, reproduction and sexuality, are thereby not ‘private’ matters but are highly public as, in extension, they represent the nation. Women’s sexual and reproductive lives are therefore controlled for within nation building, as they are part of family formation processes (*ibid*: 13). Such control can be either encouragements or force, regulated by e.g. economic contributions, discourse and legislation, such as criminalizing abortion (*ibid*: 22).

### **2.2.1 Biological representation and collectivity**

Yuval-Davis presents the *people as power* theory, according to which the future of the nation is considered to depend on a continuous growth of the population. Women should serve the nation by birthing new citizens. If women refrain from doing so, e.g. through soliciting an abortion, they would within such discourse be presented as being disloyal to the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997: 29-30).

It is also important to consider the wider social context in society, and the balance between women’s individual rights and their belonging to national, community or religious collectives. “Women’s positionings in and obligations to their [...] national collectivities [...] affect and can sometimes override their reproductive rights” (Yuval-Davis 1997: 26). When action is taken to control and limit SRHR it can be hard for women (who are also often part of a religious or national collective) to make resistance (*ibid*: 35). Nagel discusses the same phenomenon; “if they [women] stand up for their rights as women, they appear to be disloyal to their community, traitors to the national cause” (Nagel 1998: 255). Hence, both Nagel and Yuval-Davis present a conflict between women’s individual rights and the nationalist notion of ‘the good of the collective’.

### **2.2.2 Nations, sexualities and women**

Gender relations and sexualities are at the heart of the cultural constructions of social identities, as they help set up the demarcations and boundaries between the national

and the ‘other’ collective (Yuval-Davis 1997: 39). A common trait within nationalist ideologies is that womanhood is closely linked to motherhood, i.e. that the most elevated role for women in nation building is that of the mother (ibid: 45). “As ‘mothers of the fatherland’, their purity must be impeccable, and so nationalists often have a special interest in the sexuality and sexual behavior of their women” (Nagel 1998: 254). This purity is often contrasted by the image of “enemy women”, who are in different ways seen as a threat to the nation, and who is often linked to sexual behaviors such as promiscuity, prostitution and lesbianism (ibid: 256).

### **2.3 Naturalized motherhood**

In the article *Deconstructing Motherhood*, sociologist Carol Smart (1996) presents a theory of how the link between motherhood and womanhood is affected by legal and discursive practices. She claims that motherhood is not the natural outcome of (hetero)sexual activity, but that it is instead an institution that is presented as natural, i.e. that is actively naturalized (Smart 1996: 37). This naturalization is carried out through legal and discursive actions, e.g. legislation on (and access to) abortion and contraceptives and through an idealization of a specific type of sexual behavior (Smart 1996). In order for a woman to enter into motherhood, she has to follow a certain chain of events, lined up by Smart as the following:

(hetero)sexual activity - pregnancy - birth - mothering – motherhood

At each point of the chain, the next step is not self-evident, but the woman has the possibility to break the chain at each link (e.g. by aborting the fetus to avoid birth, or by using contraceptives to avoid pregnancy). However, to do so is loaded with varying levels of social acceptance and options, depending on the historical and cultural context. Thereby, a woman’s ability to make decisions at each link of the chain cannot be seen as isolated from societal pressures and encouragements – both legal and discursive (Smart 1996: 39). These measures can thereby create inevitability in the chain, and naturalize the relationship between a sexually active woman and motherhood, which will ultimately mean a loss of control for women over their own sexualities. In this context, abortion rights can be understood as a resistance to compulsory motherhood (ibid: 47).

### **3. Methodology**

The thesis is based on a qualitative case study and discourse analysis. As suggested above, the focus of the text is on how the different discourses include nation building, sexualities, and gender roles in relation to abortion.

#### **3.1 Semi-structured interviews**

For this thesis, I have conducted a total of seventeen semi-structured interviews. I deemed this model of interviewing the most suitable for my study, since a structured interview would make the study too close to quantitative research and would leave little room for me to adjust my questions according to the interests of the informants. Through an unstructured interview I would be less able to use the interview in order to tease out the parts of the discourses that I am interested in. A semi-structured interview is carried out using an interview guide, where some questions and themes to be covered are included. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview also enables the researcher to allow the informants to lead the way to finding unexpected perspectives within the field of interest, and let their voices (and not only theoretical suggestions) contribute to determining what is relevant (Bryman 2012: 469-470). However, one must be cautious in interviewing, not to lead the interview by allowing one's own pre-understandings guide the direction of the interview, which is a risk and weakness of interviewing (Bryman 2012: 474). By using the interview guide as a frame of reference and not as a fixed schedule for the interviews, and being sensitive to the statements brought forward by the informants, I was able to embrace this cautiousness.

The interviews were conducted in January to March of 2014 in Managua, León, Matagalpa and Estelí, which are all located in northwestern Nicaragua. Twelve of the informants belong to the pro-choice discourse and all of these respondents were women, most of whom held a central position in the CSO they represented.

Five interviews were conducted with members of the anti-abortion discourse. In this part of the sample, only one of the informants held a central position in a CSO focusing on abortion. The remaining four informants were voluntarily active in one, or several anti-abortion CSOs, and contributed on basis of their profession, i.e. as a doctor or a lawyer.

The sample stemming from the pro-choice discourse is larger than that from the anti-abortion discourse, which has had slight implications on the data. While I

have achieved theoretical saturation from the pro-choice informants, I can only claim partial saturation from the anti-abortion sample. Theoretical saturation means that no new or relevant data emerges from the interviews in a certain category; i.e. that the interviews seem to bring the same type of insights and perspectives to an issue (Bryman 2012: 421). Still, I make no claims for covering the entire scope of what has been brought forward in all of the interviews, as the selection of quotes has been based on what best serves to answer my research questions and focus.

The reason for the skewed sample is that the anti-abortion representatives proved to be more difficult to contact for an interview. While most pro-choice CSOs had Internet-pages and telephone numbers, this was not the case for the anti-abortion CSOs, and out of the 15 actors I contacted, most declined to meet with me. I suspect that this has partially been due to what I, as a researcher, can come to represent in the Nicaraguan abortion context. Being a Western, young woman, it is likely that I appear to represent the pro-choice discourse, something that can have made the individuals reluctant to meet for an interview. According to Alan Bryman (2012), characteristics of the researcher, e.g. race, gender and socio-economic status, can have implications both on which type of information is gained from the interview and on how the informants come to approach the interviewer, which can cause problems with the quality of interview data (Bryman 2012: 227). During the interviews I did however maintain a neutral position and did not reveal my personal standpoint.

Bryman stresses the importance of establishing a suitable level of rapport with the informant in the interview situation, which means that I, as an interviewer had to build a positive relationship with the informants which would make them willing to participate in the interview, but without building too intimate a relationship, which could make the informants give me the information they imagined to be what I was looking for, rather than to truthfully answer the questions (*ibid*: 218). I experienced that this was achieved, and that the relationship between the informants and I was positive and honest.

The themes covered in the interviews were arguments for and against abortion, consequences of the current situation and what could come from an alternative situation, sexualities and sexual behavior in Nicaragua – in general and in relation to abortion. The interviews also dealt with the meaning of the family and nation in Nicaragua, womanhood versus motherhood and national responsibilities.

When writing up the interview guide, I applied Lofland and Lofland's (1995) technique that is presented by Bryman, to keep asking oneself the question "what about this is puzzling me?", in order to keep the focus in accordance with the research questions (Bryman 2012: 473). The interview guide was also developed in dialogue with the theoretical framework and previous research – mainly from Heumann (2007), Kampwirth (2008), Gilheany (1998) and Yuval-Davis (1997).

All interviews were done without a translator; since my Spanish skills are enough to satisfactorily conduct the interviews, which allowed me to avoid the potential negative effect from using a translator, such as misunderstandings from the translation and/or personal attributes of the translator. I have translated all quotes in the thesis, and some have been slightly edited after translation to be understandable for the reader.

### **3.2 Sampling**

The informants in this study represent some of the most prominent and active CSOs within the issue of abortion, and they are actively working to either maintain or change the abortion ban, and spread their views. They are thereby both knowledgeable concerning the abortion discourses and can be considered to be among the people who contribute the most to shaping them. I chose my sample since I found it relevant and representative to the research topic. Representativeness of a sample is based on whether or not the information can be considered to be typical of its kind (Bryman 2012: 544).

The sampling method for the thesis has been purposive sampling and snowballing. Purposive sampling is done strategically, through allocating suitable informants, relevant to the research questions (Bryman 2012: 418). Through finding contact information to key individuals among the pro-choice and anti-abortion CSOs I came in contact with the initial sample. From this purposive sample I continued with snowball sampling, i.e. asking initial informants for additional, relevant contacts (Bryman 2012: 424). By applying this combination of sampling methods, I built a sample that was a combination of informants that were found through previous research and informants based on who the CSO representatives considered to be relevant for my thesis, which served to remove some of my presupposed understandings of who would be relevant for my research and grounded the sample in both theory, previous research and on-site context.

### **3.3 Discourse analysis**

As mentioned above, I am using Laclau and Mouffe's model for discourse analysis. I find this suitable for the thesis since a main focus of the research question is the discursive struggle between the pro-choice and anti-abortion discourses, concerning how gender and sexualities are constructed in the abortion discourses, and how this relates to Nicaraguan nation building. Their type of discourse analysis grants effective tools for analyzing discursive struggles through their usage of signs, elements and moments (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 25-28).

I will in this thesis analyze the discursive struggle in the Nicaraguan abortion discourse, by teasing out relevant signs, elements and moments, and what meaning is being attached to them. I found these signs and elements through seeing to if they were reoccurring in the interviews, and if they were given a central meaning. I also places analytical focus on how signs were related to each other, and what meaning was given to certain contexts and concepts.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Given the sensitivity of the issue, all informants have been given feigned names, and all names of organizations have been removed in the analysis. For a complete list of organizations interviewed, see appendix 7.2. In order for the reader to position the informants in the Nicaraguan civil society, I use the labels *high-ranking representative* for informants holding a central position in an organization, and *active member* for informants either volunteering, or holding less of a central position.

The interviews were sound recorded and transcribed, and all informants were asked to sign a contract of informed consent, which stated their right to anonymity, and to decline to answer any question, as well as where and how the thesis will be published.

Feminist sociologist Ann Oakley discusses the potential problems with the research interview as a method. She means that the interview creates an uneven power-relation between the informant and the interviewer, when he/she seeks out information from the perspective of the researcher (Oakley 1981: 31, 38; Bryman 2012: 492). Brendan O'Rourke and Martyn Pitt mean that this hierarchical relationship is also upheld in that the interviewer holds significantly more information about the research purpose and also has the interpretative power over the interview data (O'Rourke & Pitt 2007: 8). Both Oakley and O'Rourke and Pitt claim that the

semi-structured interview is therefore the best-suited method for collecting data in an egalitarian way. Oakley calls it a feminist approach to interviewing, and emphasizes the importance of a high level of rapport and reciprocity between interviewer and informant, and of adapting the interview after the perspective of the informants (Oakley 1981: 33-45).

In this thesis, I applied this method by allowing the interview guide to be shaped by the answers given, and by explaining as much as possible to the informants about the research purpose and focus. I also offered all informants to give me any questions they might have. According to O'Rourke and Pitt, such transparency positively affects the hierarchical informant-researcher relationship (O'Rourke & Pitt 2007: 9), which has been important to me in conducting my study.

### **3.5 Limitations**

This thesis covers parts of the Nicaraguan organized civil society discourse on abortion, mainly in relation to gender, sexualities and its relation to nation building, in early 2014. As discourses are contingent, the following results should be read with such understanding (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 35).

To an extent, this thesis could have been conducted through document analysis of campaign material, newspaper articles and such. It can be claimed that this would better suit a discourse analysis, since the data would then have been produced without researcher influence, which is theoretically preferable to discourse analysis. In an interview situation, the informant is aware of that their responses will be used for a research purpose, which might affect how the discourses are presented (O'Rourke & Pitt 2007: 5). However, O'Rourke and Pitt claim that the research interview can be very well suited for discourse analysis, by using the interview focus in order to stimulate the production of discourses that are of particular interest to the research (*ibid*: 7). O'Rourke and Pitt mean that “the interview may allow the emergence of discourse that might be hard to capture in more naturally occurring data” (*ibid*: 10). Since gender, sexualities and nation building are not themes that are at the forefront of the Nicaraguan abortion discourse, and are rarely specifically mentioned in the majority of the written material, I found that interviews would better serve my research purpose and questions.

As with much qualitative social science research, the generalizability of this study is limited. However, to generate generalizable findings for an entire population

(or in this case, for the entire Nicaraguan abortion discourses) is not the point. Bryman means that what can be found through the qualitative interview is unique pieces of data that contribute to ‘telling the story’ of a certain phenomenon (Bryman 2012: 406), and in the case of my study also to channel the voices of the informants, something that I mean is equally important as producing generalizable findings.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

I will begin this analysis by explaining how the word abortion is constructed within the discourses, and by accounting for the connection made between womanhood and motherhood, as I see this as something that affects how other claims are made in the discourses. Thereafter, I will account for how gender, sexualities and nation building enter, and are constructed in the discourses.

### 4.2 The meaning of abortion

The word abortion is a central element in the discourses as they struggle for their own absolute attachment of meaning to it; in the anti-abortion discourse abortion is connected to signs such as *sin*, *murder*, *crime* and *wrong*, while the pro-choice discourse often frames it as an *interruption of pregnancy*, or as *removing a fetus*, and attach it to signs such as *women's human rights*, and *a public health problem*. Similar to what Kampwirth (2008) found, I saw that when it comes to the discursive struggle for the meaning of abortion, the anti-abortion discourse seems to have gained most ground. Therefore, by avoiding the word abortion, the pro-choice discourse can circumvent the negative connotations presented in the anti-abortion discourse and continue to attach their meanings to abortion; such as a women's right.

How the fetus is referred to also has a strong impact on how abortion is understood; anti-abortion argumentation commonly presents it as a *baby*, *child*, or *human being*, or describes it as *the unborn*, *the voiceless* and *the defenseless*. If the fetus is understood along these terms, that contributes to the understanding of abortion as murder. In contrast, the pro-choice arguments rather refer to it as a *product*, an *embryo* or as a *fetus*; thereby distancing abortion from the meaning of ending a life, or killing a child. They also compare having the right to abortion to having the right to amputate an injured arm, which is another example of how they dehumanize the fetus,

making the idea of the fetus as a baby, that can be either murdered or protected, delegitimized.

#### 4.3 The naturalized mother

Motherhood is something that was mentioned in every interview conducted, and I thereby found it to have a central importance for the analysis. There seems to be a struggle between naturalizing motherhood (from the anti-abortion discourse) and to deconstruct the connection between womanhood and motherhood, and emphasize the aspect of choice (in the pro-choice discourse).

Every woman is ready and made to be a mother, it's her natural role and women have an intrinsically strong maternal instinct.

*Juan Carlos, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO, 19.02.2014*

This gives an example of how the connection between woman and mother is naturalized in the Nicaraguan anti-abortion discourse. Here the woman is understood as being born to become a mother, and through using the signs *natural role* and *intrinsically strong maternal instinct* the frame set up is an example of how naturalization and inevitability is created discursively in the chain of events that Smart lines up in her theory (Smart 1996: 39).

To deny motherhood is a form of violence. To what? To my female nature, it is a part of my body, it is there, as part of my body - my sexual organs; they are a part of me being a woman.

*Daniela, active member of several anti-abortion CSOs; 27.02.14*

Daniela, same as Juan Carlos, also connects motherhood to something that is natural for women to complete, but she also presents abortion as a violent impediment to the right to motherhood. She thereby excludes the meaning of abortion as a voluntary decision from a woman who does not wish to turn a pregnancy into motherhood and thereby removes the woman's agency from the narrative. Juan Carlos also brought up similar arguments in his interview;

When provoking abortion, the woman is tortured [...]. Our mothers are tortured by the feminists [...]. What never enters the front is that a woman with a maternal

instinct is going to suffer when you extract it [the fetus]. You never take into consideration that this woman's maternal instinct produces what we call post-abortion syndrome.

*Juan Carlos, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO, 19.02.2014*

In this quote, women are even being tortured by abortion, and by feminists who are presented as violators of women's health. Again the agency of a woman who solicits an abortion is ignored, which can contribute to an imagery of a passive female role. By referring to pregnant women as *mothers* he also reproduces the naturalized notion of motherhood, as something that arises already by the point of pregnancy, which returns us to Carol Smart's chain of events, and we see a discursive and semiotic act of naturalization. Such discursive expressions and acts of naturalization would, according to Smart (1996: 39) have an impact on women's abilities to break the chain between sexual activity and motherhood, since several of these options are loaded with negative meaning. Here, I also want to include Nagel and Yuval-Davis, and their view on motherhood in nation building; the 'women as mothers'-discourse can also be seen as part of the nation-building project, where women are primarily constructed as mothers; mothers who are tortured, and lacking agency, who should be protected from abortion. Abortion can thereby be seen as a threat to the nation, through how it damages 'its mothers'.

Very, very stuck, anchored in the minds of the people is this idea, that pregnancy is equal to motherhood, meaning that you are pregnant and automatically that already makes you a mother. Then, when a woman aborts she is practically considered to be a bad mother, the worst of all mothers, because she is the mother who [...] kills the fruit of her womb. [...] A woman who aborts breaks with what is naturally assigned to her when she reaches the world – she becomes a denaturalized human being!

*Gladys, high-ranking representative, pro-choice CSO, 03.02.2014*

This quote from Gladys also speaks of naturalized motherhood, but as a problem for women and as a problem for the understanding of abortion in Nicaragua. She claims that it builds a meaning of abortion as something that denaturalizes women as they thereby break from fulfilling their natural role as mothers. Abortion then becomes, not only an act of crime and murder, but also a form of denying your womanhood, since

mothering is presented as the primary role for women, and by deviating from this norm, a woman becomes *denaturalized*.

It seems as the naturalization of motherhood has gained a hegemonic position in the abortion discourses, which in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory means that even the pro-choice discourse needs to relate to this understanding and shape their discursive practices thereafter (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 55-56). The way this is done in the pro-choice discourse is that they attempt to deconstruct this momentified attachment, and distance pregnancy from motherhood through highlighting the aspect of *choice*. Choice is related both to *motherhood*, but also to *sexuality, contraceptives and gender expressions*. Thereby, the pro-choice discourse's struggle can be seen as an attempt to loosen the deterministic approach to the 'chain' (Smart 1996) that is constructed in the anti-abortion framing. Choice is however understood differently in the anti-abortion discourse;

The right to choose is the exaltation of selfishness in society; first me, then I, then me. Family is not what comes first, but if you have a problem, then your family should help. So, the right to choose means to place one person above the collective.

*Daniela, active member, several anti-abortion CSOs, 27.02.2014*

Within the anti-abortion discourse, choice is attached to selfishness, and to a lack of respect for others, e.g. the family. Such selfishness is close to what Gilheany referred to as hedonism, which he sees as a common aspect in many anti-abortion discourses (Gilheany 1998: 62). In similar statements made in the anti-abortion interviews, deciding about abortion was given the meaning that the woman ignores what is best for the collective – society and the family, to instead see to her own wishes, which in this context is understood as something negative. Added to the female role and responsibilities, besides assuming their mothering role, is selflessness. I will return to the juxtaposing of women's individual rights versus the good of the collective later on in the analysis.

#### **4.4 Abortion and sexualities**

The issue of sexualities is included in the abortion discourses, both for and against abortion rights but it is constructed differently in the discourses. In the pro-choice discourse responsibility concerns e.g. *using protection*, and *not harming anyone else*.

The informants from the pro-choice CSOs mainly spoke of sexuality in connection to signs such as *rights*, *pleasure*, and *freedom from prejudice*, while the anti-abortion informants rather connected it to *risk*, *irresponsibility*, *reproduction* and *moral decay*. The discursive struggle on sexualities can be teased out to construct it as positive or negative. Returning to Laclau and Mouffe, considering the different meanings and signs that they attached to it, and the privileged position it holds in the discourses, *responsibility* could be seen as an element in this context (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 34).

Within the anti-abortion discourse responsibility was mainly used in relation to female sexualities and was given the meaning *not to become pregnant*, *to be faithful*, *to practice abstinence*, *not to have sex at an early age* and *not to have several sexual partners*. Respectively, an ‘irresponsible’ sexuality was constructed together with signs such as *promiscuity*, *libertinage*, *lesbianism*, *prostitution* and *unfaithfulness*.

They [women who abort] are women who have been unfaithful to their husbands, and become pregnant, and so that the husband will not find out that there is another man, they turn to abortion. [...] Even if you do not prepare yourself, and have an unwanted pregnancy, abortion is still not the solution to your error!

*Daniela, active member, several anti-abortion CSOs, 27.02.2014*

When I performed abortions, I met women who came in three or four times a year, because they were promiscuous and were with another and another man.

*Mario, active member, anti-abortion CSO, 27.02.2014*

In these two quotes, women who solicit abortions are connected to the aforementioned ‘irresponsible’ sexualities, and the woman herself is presented as an irresponsible person, who has committed an *error*. In this discourse, abortion is constructed as part of the ‘irresponsible’ sexual behavior, or as an indicator of that, which excludes circumstances such as abortion due to sexual assault or physical complications, and contributes to creating a strong stigma towards the women who wish to solicit an abortion – they become irresponsible and sexually deviant. This ‘irresponsible’ sexuality corresponds to how Gilheany found that anti-abortion discourses commonly view female sexualities in relation to free abortion (Gilheany 1998: 62). By bringing in Nagel, the ‘irresponsible’ sexuality can be seen as an

example of the “enemy woman”, which is used to create an imagery of how the ‘Nicaraguan woman’ should and should not be. The “enemy woman” is a representation of a sexual behavior that is to be considered non-Nicaraguan, and in this context, Nicaraguan women should represent the nation through their sexualities.

A common theme in the pro-choice interviews was that there is a widespread perception in the anti-abortion discourse that sexualities and reproduction are the same, especially when it comes to female sexualities. The informants spoke of an imposed motherhood and of a discourse that disempowers women in their sexual experiences through the construction of myths, prejudice and guilt in relation to sex. This also ties into the idea that motherhood has become naturalized, which Smart (1996) claims can serve to limit women’s control over their own sexualities.

Sexuality free from prejudice means to break down the moral and ethical barriers of human reproduction. We do not have absolute freedom; I do not have the freedom to shoot you, or to cut your arm off [...]. Speaking a-religiously about sexuality, our sexual organs are our reproductive organs that are designed to reproduce. Every thing has its function [...] and if I want to use my reproductive organs, but not for a reproductive purpose, I will destroy them.

*Juan Carlos, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO, 19.02.2014*

In this quote, an unrestricted sexual behavior that goes outside the limits of reproduction is compared to violent offences such as shooting someone and mutilation, and they are presented as harmful and destructive. Considering that this statement is made in relation to abortion, it is primarily women who should ‘take the responsibility’ to keep their sexualities within the realm of reproduction, since it is only the female sexualities that are “revealed” by abortion (Gilheany 1998: 63).

A recurring theme in the interviews was which effects would come from liberalizing abortion. In the anti-abortion interviews, a scenario was painted up, where women who solicit abortions would be damaged, both physically and mentally, and then resort to ‘irresponsible’ sexual behaviors.

There are studies that say that women who abort get married up to three or four times, because of the emotional instability that cannot be repaired, You can take a

bath and be equal before society but what happens internally, and psychologically to your values?

*Patricia, active member, anti-abortion CSO, 11.03.2014*

Patricia, a doctor who also works with an anti-abortion CSO means that the procedure of abortion in itself can have negative effects on female sexualities, and that it makes them have more sexual relations, due to changes in their values. She thereby also implies that women who have not had an abortion would not want several marriages, and constructs such conjugal behavior as deviant and negative. Throughout the interview, she also went on to speak of how abortion leads to increasing criminality, alcoholism and violence. Again, abortion is painted up to be a threat to the nation, and its stability and security. Juan Carlos explained what he sees would come from free abortion and sexual liberties;

It is a chain of events that results in that there is no family, there is no order and no pregnancies, but there are abortion credits, sexually transmitted diseases, abandoned children, mistreated women, and then the dissatisfaction that liberty gives. So you look for other means of satisfaction [...], and that is the road to homosexuality, pedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia... It works as a vehicle for other things.

*Juan Carlos, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO 19.02.2014*

There is, according to him, a connection between abortion rights and illegal and harmful consequences in relation to sexualities, such as pedophilia, necrophilia and sexually transmitted diseases. He also connects it to sexual diversity such as homosexuality, which in this quote is given negative connotations. He also brings up the issue of family that he means will be endangered by sexual liberties, which he explained was due to that people will not be faithful and committed to each other, but will rather seek brief satisfactions. Given the centralized role that Yuval-Davis (1997) and Nagel (1998) ascribe to the family in nation building, abortion is in the anti-abortion discourse constructed as a threat to the very foundation of Nicaraguan society, and a reproduction-oriented sexuality is given the meaning of safeguarding this institution, something that I will return to later in the analysis.

In the abortion discourse, behind the abortion discourse, is the discourse on sexualities, in the way that, if you look to the logics of the pro-life's, if you permit women to have therapeutic abortions then eventually you will allow abortion on request and this will open the doors for these women to live their sexualities as they want, and with whomever they want. Meaning; behind the abortion discourse is a discourse against sexuality.

*Ramona, high-ranking representative, pro-choice CSO, 07.02.2014*

Ramona, who works for a religious pro-choice CSO sees the abortion ban as driven by a wish to control and limit female sexualities from becoming *libertine*, where they express their sexualities with *whomever they want*. She describes a logic within the anti-abortion discourse where criminalized abortion can impede this sexual behavior. Many of the pro-choice informants expressed similar arguments, and claimed that the anti-abortion discourse serves to limit, control and disempower women in their sexual experiences, as sex is so connected to reproduction and responsibility. According to Gilheany's findings, abortion serves to "reveal sex", which makes it subject to scrutiny and can tend to build a limiting discourse around sexualities in relation to abortion, that sets up boundaries for what is acceptable and appropriate and what is not (Gilheany 1998: 62). It creates a discursive opportunity to control female sexuality.

The day that women really recognize the right to their sexuality, the connotation of family is going to have to change, and it is already changing. For example: to think of a young Nicaraguan woman who lives freely with her partner has before not even occurred to us because that is seen as a horrible thing. [...] If this young woman does not like her relationship, if the relationship is aggressive, or if she feels that it is not working for one of a thousand reasons, [...] then she has the possibility to build a new relationship. To the Church that seems terrible. That is why I say the day that women actually assume their sexuality, the connotation of family; the world of family is going to change completely.

*Ramona, high-ranking representative, pro-choice CSO, 07.02.2014*

Ramona goes on to speak in positive terms about the same scenario, but where abortion rights that open doors for female control over their sexualities is something positive. She also means that this can lead to women being able to transgress other

socially gendered boundaries, e.g. in relation to family and relationships. She presents a family structure where the woman has little abilities to act out her agency in a way that is not in accordance to a specific behavior, e.g. to *live freely with her partner*, or to leave an aggressive relationship to build a new one. These are behaviors that are outside the confines of what is normatively considered to be acceptable female behavior. With Connell (1987) this can be described as an inferior femininity, i.e. not the emphasized femininity that matches the hegemonic masculinity. The woman should be compliant, and should accept even aggression from a male partner. Compliance is a term that Connell uses to describe what is often central to an emphasized femininity, and that seems to be expressed in the quote above. The abortion ban and the discursive construction of abortion together with ‘libertinage’ and ‘irresponsible’ sexual behaviors can in this context be seen as the upholding of the hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity that Connell speaks of (Connell 1987: 183-189).

In sum, sexualities are within the anti-abortion discourse mainly connected to female responsibility, or irresponsibility. This irresponsibility constructs a deviant sexuality that can be placed in contrast to the emphasized femininity, which is the desired role for the ‘Nicaraguan’ woman. From both discourses, abortion rights are seen as potential ‘door-openers’ for a changed female sexual behavior, which is either constructed as something negative (in the anti-abortion context) or as something liberating (in the pro-choice discourse). As in the case of womanhood versus motherhood, female sexualities are naturalized into meaning reproduction, which also contributes to momentifying motherhood as natural for all women to enter into. Gilheany (1998), means that a common trait within pro-choice discourses is to see abortion rights as a means for liberating the connection of sexual pleasure and childbearing or, if referring to Smart (1996), to break the inevitability of the chain between sexual activity and motherhood. The discourses meet concerning that abortion rights could affect female sexualities, but the discursive struggle becomes either a ‘limiting’ discourse, against abortion, or an ‘enabling’-discourse pro abortion rights, i.e. whether or not abortion rights would be positive for female sexualities. The elevation of motherhood, in connection to womanhood is something that ties into the relation between sexualities and nation building.

#### **4.5 Abortion and the nation**

When turning to the theme of nation building in the abortion discourses, the sign *responsibility* was again important. In interviews with pro-choice informants they claimed that the anti-abortion discourse presented female national responsibilities as becoming mothers, and to populate the nation, which according to Yuval-Davis (1997) and Nagel (1998) are common traits in nation building.

From the nation it [the responsibility] is to be a mother. It is like the principal role that women have to carry out [...]; to care for the children, to give the children everything, but this is mandated for women, and I think that men do not have any social responsibilities, meaning, the man can leave and abandon the children without being questioned, but a woman is questioned even if she works, and if she abandons the children then she is the bad mother, she is the denaturalized mother.

*Claudia, high-ranking representative, pro-choice CSO, 26.02.2014*

Here Claudia speaks of a nation-building discourse that she means obligates women to become mothers, with responsibilities not only to give birth to children but also to assume the caring role for them, while men are relieved from these familial duties. She returns to the statement made earlier in the analysis, that if a woman does not assume her mothering role according to the idealized norms, she is deviant – she is a denaturalized mother. In other pro-choice interviews it was mentioned how women's duties also include to *obey the wish of her husband*, and to *be self-sacrificial*. This contributes to the presentation of the emphasized femininity in Nicaragua that was aforementioned, where the woman should be compliant, selfless, and a caring mother. Nagel claims that “the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism go hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity” (1998: 249), which in the case of the Nicaraguan abortion discourses could mean that if a woman goes against the frames of the emphasized femininity, e.g. through having an abortion and thereby rejecting motherhood, she is consequently rejecting both the feminine and her national duties and norms.

The narrative presented by the anti-abortion discourse is somewhat in accordance with this presentation, in that *populating the nation* is a commonly mentioned sign in relation to women's national obligations, where abortion can be seen as a way of breaking them. However, within the anti-abortion discourse women

are also included in the nation-building project as *workers*, *students* and *citizens* but these identities are presented as secondary categories for women and are consistently used to in relation to women's primary role – as mothers. According to Yuval-Davis, and the people as power-theory, to populate the nation is commonly brought forward as women's primary national duty (Yuval-Davis 1997: 29-30).

One of the most central themes within the issue of nation building in the abortion discourses is family. It was given the meaning of being *the foundation of Nicaraguan society*, *the base for support*, and *solidarity*. In the anti-abortion interviews the family is given a superior importance to the individual, and people should serve their families, rather than themselves. In this context, abortion is also, as mentioned above, given the meaning to be selfish, and to serve one's own will, rather than to strive for the good of the collective. This brings us back to the juxtaposing of the right of the woman versus the will of the collective. Yuval-Davis (1997) mentions this, and how women's strive for their individual rights are often met with resistance, if it is presented as going against the will of the collective, which makes out women as traitors, or disloyal to the (national) collective. Here we can also find a discursive struggle, where the pro-choice discourse construct women's individual rights as positive and connect it to positive signs, in relation to abortion, while the anti-abortion discourse rather construct this in relation to damages for the national or familial collective.

Being in a family, means that I will guarantee that Nicaraguan continues to be Nicaragua, that Sweden has more swedes, that Costa Rica has more ticos [Central American expression for Costa Ricans], because there is family. So the family is defined as the guarantee for the human race.

*Daniela, active member, several anti-abortion CSOs, 27.02.2014*

In this quote, the family is meant to ensure that the national population continues to grow. The family referred to in the quote is the heterosexual matrimonial family. In other interviews the family was also presented as the *protector of human life*. The family is thereby given an essential meaning for the continued growth and existence of the Nicaraguan nation, which in a Yuval-Davisian (1997) interpretation is an important motivation behind resistance against abortion.

The family, and its importance for the nation was also included in relation to the construction of sexualities;

Behind the gay agenda, the homosexual agenda, which is sexual and reproductive rights in the issue of abortion; is population control. What they strive for – this is the interpretation from our countries – is to eliminate [Latin] America, through stopping our births. [...] Then who is your enemy? [...] The heterosexual person, the person in matrimony, who has children. Why? Because they increase the population.

*Daniela, active member, several anti-abortion CSOs, 27.02.2014*

This quote gives an example of how sexual diversity and SRHR can be presented as a threat to the foundation of the nation – the family, and that this threat is conscious with the aim to destroy the family. Thereby, to resist abortion turns into a protection of the own race and nation.

In the pro-choice discourse, the family was also presented as the foundation of Nicaraguan society, and the solidarity and support given within Nicaraguan families was again emphasized. Another aspect that was included was the different gender roles embedded in the institution of family. Signs that were connected to the female role when referring to the traditional view of family were *caring, obedient, mother,* and *self-sacrificial* while the traditional male role was attached to signs such as *provider, head of the household* and *the chief*, which gives an example of which identities can easily be adopted by men and women in Nicaraguan society, and what would be placed outside the gendered norms. Given how the normative gender roles were presented in the pro-choice discourse, they also problematized the institution of family, as a sphere that could limit women's life-choices.

A central topic in the anti-abortion interviews was a comparison between what was considered to be Nicaraguan culture and values, and how that relates to abortion.

Nicaragua, as a state, and as a republic has always been a state that respects the person and the citizen inside the maternal womb. We have always considered it to be a person, not a product, not a thing, not an object - it is a person.

*Daniela, active member, several anti-abortion CSOs, 27.02.2014*

Legalized abortion is a business, that is part of the global culture of death, that allows mercy killing, that allows gay marriage, that allows abortion and that destroys the classical family as it is today. [...] In a very simple way; by killing the baby, the family does not form itself.

*Mario, active member, anti-abortion CSO, 27.02.2014*

Culturally it [resistance against abortion] represents a satisfaction of the national, traditional and cultural sentiments, so it is a defense of these fundamental and cultural rights that the Nicaraguan population has.

*Juan Carlos, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO, 19.02.2014*

The statements made in these three quotes were frequent in the anti-abortion interviews, and they express that abortion is part of a foreign culture, that does not represent Nicaraguan culture and values. Abortion is also presented to be a foreign industry, or business, that threatens to destroy the family. Thereby, criminalizing abortion is a form of national resistance and cultural protection. Nagel and Yuval-Davis both claim that globalization and external influence stimulate a re-traditionalization of values, that tend to be based on protecting male privileges, often in relation to reproduction and sexualities, and aim at tightening control over women (Nagel 1998: 254; Yuval-Davis 1997: 36). In this narrative, embracing, or protecting traditions are used as a legitimizing basis for this control. This was also what Heumann (2007) and Kampwirth (2008) found, and I argue that the image of an external threat has great impact on how abortion is understood as a protection of the nation, along with attaching it to the meaning of murder and sin, serves to legitimize the abortion ban.

They [pro-choice CSOs] are organized in different types of NGOs, and they receive much money to promote abortion [...] They live off of this money and these salaries and possibly, I think that they have all had an abortion before [...] and now we know that they are women who do not use make-up, who do not care about their appearance, that have short hair so that they look like men, very disordered. They do not look very feminine and they walk around with their feminist friends, dressed in black, looking like witches! [...] This, after a certain point, goes against Nicaraguan culture. The Nicaraguan woman is very feminine, very maternal.

*Juan Carlos, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO, 19.02.2014*

When speaking of the pro-choice CSOs, the anti-abortion informants often connected them to international NGOs that focus on SRHR, which they claim go against Nicaraguan culture. Juan Carlos presents the women who are in favor of abortion as being financially supported by international NGOs, and as all having had an abortion. He also gives these women an identity that, according to him, is un-Nicaraguan; they are unfeminine women, feminists, while the Nicaraguan woman is feminine and maternal, which cannot in this context include e.g. being a feminist, or having short hair. He presents an antagonism between being a good, Nicaraguan woman, and being a feminist, in favor of abortion. This can, according to Laclau and Mouffe be done deliberately to protect the unambiguous meaning that is strived for in the anti-abortion discourse (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 50). The anti-abortion discourse needs to construct feminists as non-Nicaraguan in order to maintain the meaning of abortion as part of a foreign culture, which contributes to the understanding that the anti-abortion discourse part of a nation-building project.

Nicaragua is a poor, developing country and *development* was also mentioned within the abortion discourses, and was connected to the international community.

There are countries wishing to promote abortion in [Nicaragua], [...] but abortion is mostly not yet accepted in Nicaragua. So there is an interest of lying to us in this ideology, [...] that abortion means to modernize these underdeveloped countries. But personally I don't see how killing children can turn into the development of a country?

*Martha Olivia, high-ranking representative, anti-abortion CSO, 11.03.2014*

There are cultures that are brought in from other countries that are not recognized here. The contribution that can give real development to the country [Nicaragua], from other countries is rather judged.

*Claudia, high-ranking representative, pro-choice CSO, 26.02.2014*

These two quotes represent a discursive struggle on how international influence and development concerning abortion is constructed as either negative or positive. According to Martha Olivia, the international community frame SRHR as *modernization* in order to lie to the Nicaraguan people, but that she still interprets

abortion as *killing children*. The international community is again given the meaning of posing a threat to Nicaragua. Pro-choice Claudia agrees to that SRHR are something that, at least partly, comes from the international community. However, she sees this *culture* as a positive contribution to Nicaraguan development. SRHR are used as a marker in the struggle that constructs international influence as either contributing or damaging. Within the pro-choice discourse nation building enters the arguments mainly through signs such as *citizenship, rights* and *gender equality*. Abortion rights, presented as women's human rights, would enable women to fully enjoy their citizenship and it would benefit national development through strengthening gender equality.

In sum, abortion's relation to nation building is again connected to responsibility; where the female responsibility is framed as mothering, caring, and, in some cases, to adhere to a specific gender role – that of the emphasized femininity. The family is understood as the basis of society that will also ensure the continued growth of the national population. Abortion and sexual diversity are constructed as threats to this basis, which is largely driven by international interests and represents a culture that is non-Nicaraguan. This effectively frames abortion as a form of national resistance and cultural and racial protection.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This thesis has dealt with how gender and sexualities are constructed in the abortion discourses, and how this can be understood as part of Nicaraguan nation building.

The sign abortion is in the anti-abortion discourse presented as a murder, sin and crime, which effectively rejects pro-choice claims to abortion as a right, which is how the representatives of the anti-abortion organizations primarily frame it. Another important finding is that the anti-abortion discourse serves to naturalize motherhood, by presenting it as a natural and instinctive part of womanhood, and by equalizing female sexualities and reproduction. They also lift motherhood up as a primary responsibility for women vis-à-vis the nation. Here we can find a struggle between the discourses, where the pro-choice discourse strives to deconstruct the sign of motherhood by emphasizing women's choice.

Sexual behaviors that are outside the limits of reproduction are in the anti-abortion discourse given negative connotations, such as being immoral, or destructive

to women, society and/or the family, and are connected to liberalized abortion laws and/or to women who have either solicited an abortion or who are pro-abortion rights. In the pro-choice discourse, sexualities are again linked to choice and they claim that the traditionalist, anti-abortion discourse serves to limit female sexual experiences and expressions. Abortion, and other SRHR are within the anti-abortion context connected to unwelcome international influence, turning resistance against abortion into national defense.

In the anti-abortion discourse, when it comes to the construction of sexualities and gender in relation to abortion, I have found that there is a creation of two different types of female identities and sexualities; the Responsible and the Irresponsible. As part of the Nicaraguan nation-building project, abortion is used as a marker of difference between these two categories, creating insider and outsider positions.

The Responsible woman/sexuality is presented together with reproduction as the primary sexual expression and motherhood as the primary identity. In this context, given the naturalization of motherhood, a woman who performs an abortion is rejecting her natural role and is thereby a denaturalized woman. The Irresponsible woman/sexuality is in this discourse expressing her sexuality outside of reproduction by being promiscuous, libertine, homosexual or even childless. She can also be constructed as unfeminine and a feminist, which is presented as not belonging to Nicaraguan culture. Hence, the Irresponsible woman is not only denaturalized, but she is also unfeminine and non-Nicaraguan.

Through Connell (1987) and Nagel (1998) I interpret these two female identities that are constructed in the anti-abortion discourse to correspond to the “enemy woman”, representing the Irresponsible woman/sexuality, and the emphasized femininity representing the Responsible. Women’s character and sexualities are here used to mark the boundaries for what is inside and outside the Nicaraguan national collective, and the anti-abortion discourse can thereby be understood as part of the nation-building project. The emphasized, responsible femininity is used as a tool for presenting part of Nicaraguan culture, where the Mother is an elevated symbol who is selfless, caring and with an invisible sexuality that mainly serves reproductive purposes, and thereby fulfills a national duty of populating the nation. The “enemy woman”, on the other hand, who is an ‘outsider’ in the nation-building project, adheres to the ‘wrong’ type of sexual behavior and poses a threat to the Nicaraguan family, which is placed as the foundation of the nation. She is also a threat to the

patriarchal hierachal gender order, which is included in the structure of the nation-building project. Added to this, she is connected to international influence over Nicaragua, which again emphasizes the ‘outsider’-role, where a foreign culture is imposed in the national context, again with abortion as a marker of difference.

The emphasized femininity serves the good of the collective, while the “enemy woman” prioritizes her individual interests, and is thereby selfish and a traitor to the national collective. The conflict between the good of the collective and a woman’s individual rights is also visible in the pro-choice discourse, but here individual rights are presented as positive, and necessary for positive Nicaraguan nation building. Also in this discourse, abortion is a marker between good and bad, but in an opposite relation; where abortion rights build a full female citizenship, while criminalized abortion limits it. The pro-choice discourse attempts to deconstruct the naturalized relationship between womanhood and motherhood, by framing motherhood as a choice. They attach this deconstruction to the meaning of possibly opening doors for women to transgress the boundaries of traditional gender roles, in that abortion laws can either limit or allow for different sexual behaviors, and through these, differentiated gendered roles.

Given these findings, the Nicaraguan abortion discourses constitute part of how women’s identities and sexualities are given and negotiated as part of the construction of the nation Nicaragua. This serves to affect how women can live their lives, both sexually and identity-wise. I believe that this study has contributed to a wider understanding of how abortion laws and discourses are connected to wider phenomena as the construction of gender and sexualities in the Nicaraguan society.

I would like to suggest for future research to conduct a study that incorporates the perspectives from women who are faced with an unwanted pregnancy, in a society with a complete abortion ban. In my thesis, some of the informants spoke of how they viewed the experiences of these women, however these women’s first-hand experiences were outside the scope of my thesis. I do however believe that the stories and perspectives from the women who are themselves faced with such situation would contribute greatly to understanding how an abortion ban affects women in that society.

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## **7. Appendices**

### **7.1 Interview Guide**

### **7.2 List of Organizations Interviewed**

## 7.1 Interview guide

- Cómo se llama?
- Cuál es su posición en la organización?
- Cuáles son sus tareas principales?
- Qué actividades tiene su organización en el tema del aborto?
- Cuáles son sus objetivos en relación al aborto?
- Diría que sus metas representan a la cultura y a los valores Nicaragüenses?
  
- Por qué le parece que el aborto está criminalizado en Nicaragua hoy día?
- Qué valor tiene el derecho al aborto?
- Qué opina usted que representa el aborto en Nicaragua?
- Diría que hay un tipo de persona que típicamente busca hacerse el aborto?
  
- Aquí en Nicaragua, qué diría que conforma la nación? Cuáles son los criterios que le hace ser parte/miembro de la nación?
- Cuáles son las obligaciones para una persona frente la nación? Son los mismos para hombres y mujeres? Le parece que se rompa alguna de estas obligaciones en solicitar el aborto?
- Cuál es la conexión entre ser mujer y ser madre?
- Qué define ‘la familia’?
- Qué significado tiene ‘la familia’ para Nicaragua?
- Qué roles diría que tiene la nación y la familia en el asunto del aborto?
  
- Le parece que la sexualidad de la gente tiene que ver con el tema del aborto?
- Le parece que una legislación diferente sobre el aborto, tuviera efectos en el comportamiento sexual de la gente?
- Le parece que una legislación diferente sobre el aborto tuviera efectos para la familia Nicaragüense?
- Cómo afecta el aborto a Nicaragua como país?
  
- En que posición estaría su organización según estas frases:  
CULTURA DE MUERTE                            DERECHO A DECIDIR  
LA SEXUALIDAD LIBRE DE PREJUICIOS  
SER PRO-FAMILIA/PRO-VIDA

... y según estas citas:

“Programas de planificación familiar son instaladas en Nicaragua por los EE.UU. y otros poderes mundiales, para mantenerlo débil y despoblado”

“El aborto terapéutico ha sido usado como una escapatoria, para poder hacer el aborto voluntario”

## **7.2 List of Organizations Interviewed**

### **Pro-choice Organizations**

- Aula Propia: feminist think-tank
- Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir: pro-choice organization
- Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa: women's rights organization
- Ipas: International SRHR-organization
- Mary Barreda: women's and children's rights organization
- Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres: women's rights umbrella organization
- Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista: political party
- Programa Feminista el Corriente: women's rights and SRHR organization
- Proyecto MIRIAM: women's rights organization

### **Anti-abortion Organizations**

- Asociación Nicaragüense de la Mujer (ANIMU): anti-abortion organization
- Asociación Nicaragüense para la Vida (ANPROVIDA): anti-abortion organization
- Centros de Ayuda para la Mujer: anti-abortion support center for women
- Fundación Si a la Vida: anti-abortion organization