CAPÍTULO 13

LEADING WOMEN. REFLECTIONS ON GENDER STRUGGLE AT WORK IN NICARAGUA AND NORWAY, LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY

Dra. Turid Hagene
Colegio Universitario de Oslo
Noruega

RESUMEN

El artículo demuestra y analiza el hecho de que en Nicaragua hacia fines del siglo XX, había un porcentaje más alto de liderazgo femenino en los centros de trabajo, que en Noruega, patria de la autora. Noruega además es conocido por tener varias décadas de política pública de igualdad entre los sexos. El artículo explora algunas interpretaciones de este paradoja. Se destaca la capacidad de acción que demuestran las mujeres nicaragüenses en una cultura de género donde se enfatiza la diferencia. En el caso noruego se ha establecido una maquinaria de igualdad, en la cual se enfatiza la competencia directa entre los géneros, conllevando dilemas poco placenteros para las mujeres. Tanto las estrategias de diferencia, como las de igualdad, parecen reproducir la desigualdad de género. Tal vez sería mejor propagandizar como meta la justicia que la diferencia o la igualdad?

Descriptores: Mujeres. Liderazgo femenino. Política. Igualdad de Género. Justicia. Nicaragua. Noruega. Siglo XX.

INTRODUCTION

When I was working in Nicaragua 1988-90 I was often struck by the frequency of women holding positions as directors at all levels. Later on, an analysis of statistical material confirmed that women in Nicaraguan workplaces seemed to have entered into leadership positions at least to the same extent as in Norway, if not more. The fact that a "macho culture" like Nicaragua should have produced more female leadership[1] than several decades of public

policy of gender equality in Norway constitutes a paradox, which inspired me to explore some possible interpretations. An obvious place to start would be the conditions and contexts in which Nicaraguan women deploy their leadership; to explore the constraints with which the women are confronted and the spaces which they carve out for themselves. As to the Norwegian side of this comparison, I will look for ways of understanding how the public policy of gender equality in the field of female work leadership could render less results than no public policy at all in the Nicaraguan case.

When we study the level of rhetoric, demonstrated for instance in laws and regulations in Norway in conjunction with the level of practice, we open up for discovering simultaneous, complex and contradictory processes. I will focus on what it is that characterizes the practices and the rhetoric at work in the Nicaraguan and the Norwegian society respectively. What kinds of similarities and differences can we find when comparing the two cases, and which are the insights that we can gain from this comparison? Working with this kind of questions I will offer some interpretations of the paradox presented initially. I will then use the empirical material thus presented and analyzed to illuminate the debate on equality vs. difference within feminist theory, with a view particularly to explore how each of these approaches seem to affect male dominance and female subordination in the respective societies.

But first let me clarify my basis for comparison. Norway and Nicaragua are both small countries relatively similar regarding territory and population.[2] Difference is however what comes to mind when we look at the socio-economic situation, occupational structure, social organization and labor issues generally. Another difference pertains to the interest in and the resources allocated to registering data on the country's inhabitants. In Norway it is virtually impossible to stay unregistered, due to public systems of civil register, taxes, insurance and welfare. In Nicaragua the population has little to gain from being registered, the rate of

informal employment is high, and not even the exact size of the population is registered. The link between the interest in monitoring the population and the modern art of social engineering is discussed in the last sections addressing issues of modernity, where also the household and housework practices of each country are commented on.

The argument in this essay takes as its point of departure that there is a higher *proportion* of female leaders in Nicaraguan workplaces than in Norwegian ones. However, the *absolute number* is not, because the absolute number of leaders in Norway is about 10 times that of Nicaragua (See Appendix Tables 2 and 3). An important contribution towards an interpretation of this difference is constituted by some data on the occupational structure of each country.

In the informal sector hardly anyone would be recorded as director, and very few in the primary sector. In Nicaragua some 76 percent of the workforce are registered in these two sectors. In Norway, however, 90 percent are registered in the secondary and tertiary sector, which is where the formal occupational hierarchies prosper (See Appendix Table 1). Another explanation of the much larger absolute number of leaders in Norwegian statistics is the broader definition applied in the years 1981 and 1990 (See Appendix Table 3).

Material and methods

Now to the material which will constitute the basis for interpretation, analysis and comparison in this essay. Concerning Nicaragua, apart from statistical data, my work is based on my own qualitative material from observations, interviews and experience. This material was mainly gathered in 1992 during fieldwork for a thesis in history. I carried out participant observation at three workplaces where Norwegian volunteers were employed, as my project covered the "transfer of knowledge" in the context of the Norwegian Volunteer Service. I also

carried out 38 interviews in Nicaragua related to issues of leadership style, 16 of them with directors who had worked with Norwegian volunteers. As a supplement to the official statistics from Nicaragua, I have constructed Table 4, based on my own material. I carried out this fieldwork against a background of my experience from 1988-90, when I was in charge of the Norwegian Volunteer Service in Nicaragua, and thus lived and worked in close contact with the directors and other personnel at a great number of workplaces in a variety of branches.

I have not carried out a specific fieldwork in Norway, but support my argument with written sources such as articles on the subject --based on fieldwork carried out by other researchers--statistics, laws and regulations, and of course my own experience in many different workplaces in this country over a couple of decades. Norway has the experience of several decades of public policy in favor of equality between the sexes, including a Gender Equality Act from 1977 (Det juridiske fakultet 1994). The reader might get the impression that I see Norway as a case of "all equality, no difference". I must underline that what I shall present, is mostly the governmental rhetoric and legislation over the past couple of decades on issues pertaining to female work leadership. The articles, however, to which I refer, are built on Norwegian women's lived experiences. When it comes to the feminist movements in Nicaragua and Norway, both approaches of equality and difference have been represented. This also applies to the thinking of the Norwegian legislators dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, as is clearly stated in an article by Hagemann (1990). Particularly the Labor Protection Laws have taken as their point of departure that women represent a difference from what was seen to be the (male) norm. Women were thus understood to be in need of special protection. However, already in 1936 Norway was the first industrialized country to pass a Labor Protection Law without any general protection of women. Within the realm of rights

legislation, gender equality is underlined all along. By 1912 women in Norway were formally admitted to most public offices (Hagemann 1990). [3]

Was there a similar governmental rhetoric on gender equality in Nicaragua during the Sandinista period? When analyzing the statistical material from this period (1979-90) (See Appendix Table 3), we notice that the proportion of female leaders in Nicaragua was higher than the corresponding figure in Norway. This is so, even if the percentage of women in the labor force was higher in Norway during all the years which the table comprises. This could be taken as an indication that the Sandinistas might have been implementing a policy of gender equality. The stand of the Sandinista party towards issues of gender equality and feminism is extensively discussed by Mulinari (1995) in *Motherwork and Politics in Revolutionary Nicaragua.* The Sandinista approaches range from gender neutrality when speaking about women's participation in the guerilla struggle, to a reification of motherhood. Suffice it here to say that no law or regulation was introduced in order to promote women's access to leadership positions. Besides, if we look at Table 2, we notice that the years preceding the Sandinista revolution present the same picture relative to the Norwegian figures: Nicaragua has a lower percentage of women in the labor force, and a higher proportion of female leaders. Table 2 and 3 indicate that, in search of interpretation of these figures, cultural more than political analysis might be fruitful (See Appendix Tables 2 and 3).

Let me also comment briefly on the methodology that I have used in this essay. From my Norwegian perspective as a middle class intellectual woman, I have observed and reflected on the lived experiences of some Nicaraguan women. Positioning myself within these reflections, I turn my gaze the other way around, and look at the Norwegian experiences from this other perspective. In this process I have to some extent drawn on unarticulated knowledge and

intuition, which is a source of understanding that I share with many people who "travel" between different cultures.

"Women are more responsible"

In this section I will discuss the ways in which women's sense of responsibility are expressed, based on interviews about and observations of their leadership style. One of the female leaders spontaneously offered some comparisons between her own leadership style and that of her male colleagues. I will refer to her as María Elena. Her account suggests that women conceptualize female leadership as distinct from male leadership. María Elena worked in a medium-sized organization, located in the capital Managua, but serving people all over the country. She explained:

> "…I am the only woman director out of four. I'm also the only one to fulfill the obligations. I'm responsible for more people, but I always fulfill my duties. People from the outside look us up for training. We're the only department that makes money for the organization, and I give it all to them. Women are more responsible. If a man comes to work with a hangover, he doesn't want to do anything. The other directors, if they can, they do, but they don't go out of their way. They say, "Give me more money. They didn't give me gas. They didn't give me per diem…"[4]

So she pointed out that she works harder than the male leaders, is uncorrupted and serves the organization better. As to alcohol, its consumption is assumed to be an integral part of manliness (Lancaster 1992: 39). In popular discourse, the only way for a man to refuse drinking without losing his manliness, would be to become an *evangélico* (member of a Protestant sect). When discussing the experience of a project where only women had been recruited as construction-workers, some men explained to me that women were better workers than men, because they didn't come to work with a hangover (personal communication, Nicaraguan officials, 1989). Thus the assumption is that to get drunk is part of maleness, but not of femaleness.

Responsibility is another trait which she found distinguished her from her male colleagues. She pointed out that they would rather blame someone else than assume the responsibility for unresolved tasks. This also formed part of the general female discourse on gender differences in Nicaragua. Men were considered to be irresponsible and somewhat childish (Hagene 1994: 180), leaving it to women to provide for the children economically, emotionally, and with regard to care. According to some sources, single mothers as head of families accounted for about 50 percent of Nicaraguan families (Close 1988: 160). The statement by María Elena about women being more responsible than men suggests that she saw women in the work arena much in the same way as in the domestic arena. This, however, brings us to the question of whether Nicaraguan actors conceptualize reality as divided into categories like "domestic" and "public", a question I will address further below.

María Elena also provided other examples of her moral superiority as compared to her male colleagues. They would for instance make use of the car that was assigned to them for private driving, during the week-end, to go to the sea-side and so on, whereas she did not, though she had a license. She remarked that the organization had economic problems and very well could have saved money keeping just one vehicle at the disposal of the four directors. But as the male directors were used to regarding the car as their own, they wanted to have one car each.

"I have to set an example"

When María Elena was about to explain how she makes her subordinates listen to her, she rephrased the wording:

> "…In my case, it's not that I have to make them do anything, I do it together with them. If they have to work Saturday and Sunday, I work with them. If they have to enter at eight, I arrive before that. I have to set an example…"[5]

A similar philosophy was expressed by the leader of a production cooperative in a small town an hour's drive from Managua. I will refer to her as doña Ana. In her case, there were no male colleagues, in fact there were no men at all in the cooperative. Thus, she did not compare her leadership style with that of men.

Doña Ana had to travel more than an hour from the countryside to the cooperative, whereas the other members lived nearby. Even so she was always among the first persons to arrive in the morning, started working immediately, and worked incessantly the whole day, stopping only for lunch-break. Most of the other members went home for lunch, which was not possible for her. She had completed a course in pattern-making and tailoring as the only member of the cooperative, and was thus central both in the production process and leadership of the cooperative organization. In addition, she took her turn cleaning floors and lavatories, and made sure to stay out of quarrels, shouting and intrigues. She told me that she considered it important to set an example for the cooperative members in the areas of discipline, responsibility, behavior, knowledge, and ways of communicating. She particularly wanted the women to adjust their behavior to the requirements of a work arena:

> "…We had problems with discipline, people arrived late. There was no respect, just clashes, discussions, and the radio on full blast. I've told them coming here is not like being at home in our houses. I want this to be a real workplace…"[6]

We could assume from this account that there were negotiations going on as to the interpretation of the work arena; was it to be something different from the domestic arena, and in that case, which were the rules to be applied?

The Nicaraguan gender system

At this point it would be useful to take a closer look at the Nicaraguan gender system. There is not an extensive literature, but I have found useful interpretations in Lancaster (1992), Ekern (1987), Melhuus (1992, although her material is from a Mexican mestizo village), and I refer to my previous study (Hagene 1994). I also find that Connell's work (1987) offers valuable insights into matters presently under exploration, particularly his discussion of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.

Lancaster (1992) develops a discussion on the concept of *machismo*, which he defines as an organization of social relations that produces and circulates values, ultimately one's social standing. It structures power relations, not primarily between men and women, but rather between and among men. He underlines that men constantly have to prove their masculinity, through their every action, gesture and posture. Everything is conceived of as gendered; activity denotes the masculine, and passivity the feminine. Men have to constantly come out on top of all these exchanges, or else they descend to zero, to the *cochón* (the passive male who is penetrated sexually by another man (Lancaster 1992: 236 ff.).

Machismo thus is about power, a struggle between men to assert a place in the male hierarchy, where women can be used as props, and *cochones* serve as the negation and stigma to uphold the definition of masculinity. *Machismo* is more about relations between men than between men and women. This system defines power and activity as male. So how are we to understand the role of women in this system? There is an ample literature on the sufferings of women under *machismo* in Nicaragua (e.g. Cenzontle 1990; Sequiera et.al. 1989; Rodriguez 1990; Murguialday 1990). If we do not choose to conceptualize women merely as the passive victims of *machismo*, but consider them as actors and creators of their own identity within the space available to them, we need to go beyond *machismo* to explore the strategies which women develop for creating and utilizing these spaces. These strategies may amount to the

reproduction of the gender system, but we also need to explore whether they constitute a measure of undermining male hegemony. The material on female leaders in Nicaragua presented in this essay may be a case in point, raising the question of whether the proportion of women in leading positions may contribute to a subversion of male hegemony in the gender system.

In her work on a Mexican mestizo village, Melhuus (1992) describes how a married couple could share a common interest in defending the husband's masculinity and respect. This was closely linked to the women's virginity/chastity and the men's role as provider for the family. Women in this system were therefore restricted to the home, and not allowed to be seen to make their own living. To choose not to comply with this restriction would endanger the masculinity of their husbands and thus the respect of their house. Ultimately shame would be the outcome for a woman who chose this strategy. We can thus uncover aspects of this gender system which make it plausible that women contribute towards its reproduction, maneuvering according to their interests within the space available. Men monopolized power, but women seemed to be conceived of as morally superior. Men's honor to a large extent depended on the morality of their women, whose social standing again was dependent on their men's honor.

In Nicaragua neither female virginity nor the man's role as provider for the family seemed to represent values of the same importance as in Melhuus' material (Lancaster 1992; Ekern 1987; Hagene 1994), possibly with the exception of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. Women were freer to move about and certainly to make their own living and maintain their family, but they were still considered morally superior to men. This was expressed in the enormous importance allotted to motherhood in the Nicaraguan context, which appears to be closely interrelated with the strains of *machismo* on men: men had to be constantly on the

move from one *patrón* to another, from one woman to another, and in constant competition about power with other men, to reproduce their social standing in the hierarchy of men. A mother was supposed to be a source of caring, nurturing and self-sacrifice, and would often be the only person in a man's life who would always be there and could be trusted. Women as mothers would have to be responsible and reliable; it seemed that Nicaraguan society would otherwise fall apart (Ekern 1987). Thus, women tended to be seen as morally superior to men. In the same process men were allowed to remain eternal children for their women/mothers. To be irresponsible was constructed as part of male identity, whereas motherhood was central to femaleness.

A particularistic gender code

During my interviews with Nicaraguan leaders, the women especially pointed out that their activities would often be judged by a different standard than those of male leaders. The question of visibility would also apply to them in an inverse manner. María Elena explained that in the minutes from office meetings she was never mentioned although she had participated in the discussion. In the context of work she was invisible. But if ever she entered into conversation with one of the men at a party at work, it seemed as if she had entered into a field of female visibility. There would soon be rumors that she was having an affair with the man, and the way people talked about this between themselves and with her, would make it difficult for her to maintain the respect she needed in her position as a director. She considered respect to be a key concept, together with that of setting an example. She told me she was not anti-social, but had to know with whom and when she could go out. She underlined the importance of drawing a strict line between social relations at the workplace and in her private life. "…If I go out with a man after seven, that is entirely my own business…" However, she

judged it necessary to take precautions so as not to fall victim to *el chisme* (gossip) or *la crítica* (criticism). Thus, suspected sexual activity would undermine the respect she needed from her subordinates as a director, and gossip and criticism were the means used to maintain and enforce this code.

For men this code would work the other way around. One male group-leader, who was rather shy and anonymous at work, used precisely the suspected sexual activity-trick to gain more respect from his subordinates. Let us call him Felix. The staff of four went on a tour of inspection. They were traveling in one car, and were going to spend the night at a hotel. Much to the surprise of the Norwegian volunteer who participated in the trip, an extra woman turned up in the car, and when they arrived at the hotel, she checked in with Felix in the same room (Personal communication from the volunteer). So the word was that Felix had a *sucursal* (branch, i.e. mistress), which seemed to increase the respect his subordinates had for him as a man, and as a leader. Of course, in neither of these cases was there any information available as to the sexual activity actually taking place. But the appearance given would be enough, and it would count inversely for male and female leaders, as it would in general for men and women. We observe that in the case of Felix, he could make use of a woman to improve his standing in the hierarchy of men, regardless of his actual relationship with the woman in question or what went on between them.

We also note that for the male leader, it was not desirable to separate public and private domains, as the means to enhance his ranking as a man would also boost his standing as a leader. Now, in the case of María Elena, what made her a better woman also made her a better leader, but these standards did not allow her to engage openly in what was taken to be emotional or sexual relationships. The leadership style of setting an example would rather be an extension of the motherhood role, of a woman's role in relation to children, not to men.

Thus the particularistic gender code which valued assumed sexual activity inversely for men and women, in the field of leadership came to imply that women would be required to divide work and private life into separate domains.

Emphasized femaleness

My material also contains another possible leadership style, presented by two women holding the position of head of department in an industrial plant in Managua. I will refer to them as Fátima and Mérito. The plant was owned by the state, and about one third of the employees as well as one third of the leaders were women (See Appendix Table 4). The directors in this factory did not have to punch in, whereas everybody else did, including Fátima and Mérito. I spent a couple of weeks of participant observation at this plant, and one morning I was seated in the office of one of these leaders, just in front of her, observing and making notes. These leaders, unlike the administrative director arrived early in the morning. They shared the office with their secretaries, and started the day with cheerful music on the radio, chatting, drinking coffee and eating some cakes. The secretaries however soon sat down at their desks to type, while the two heads of department engaged in an activity which we could describe as make-no-work (Goffman 1971). I quote from my fieldnotes:

> "…Fátima empties all her desk drawers and pours the contents onto her desk. Mérito follows the same procedure in her office. The door is open between the two offices. At times they are interrupted by telephone calls or visitors, and then go on ordering the contents of their drawers. Mérito then starts arranging her appearance: she brushes her hair, removes her make-up with a big towel, takes out a mirror and puts on new make-up. She collects her hair at the back, and puts a pencil through it. Then she starts tidying her handbag. She holds it upside down and shakes it, and begins to order the contents of her purse. Now Fátima has reached the make-up part, producing a car-mirror from her purse. ...At about ten o'clock in the morning they have finished this activity, and finally start to do their regular work…"

The fact that the two women engaged in make-no-work in a conspicuous manner while I was seated in their office, taking notes, did not stand out as unusual in the Nicaraguan context. Both men and women were often observed doing this in circumstances when people in a more western setting (e.g. Norway) probably would do the opposite, i.e. appear to be very busy, to make-work. So, Fátima and Mérito probably demonstrated their status this morning. It is interesting, however, to note that the activities they chose to do so, at the same time expressed clearly that they were women. Unlike their female colleagues whom I have just described, they did not underline the moral, motherly side of femaleness. Instead of emphasizing their role as women related to children, we might interpret their performance as an emphasis on their role as women related to men, as underlining their difference from men. Thus, even if their performance differed from that of the other women in my material, it was still a case of emphasized femaleness.

This emphasis seemed very important for women in the Nicaraguan urban context, whose femaleness was expressed through the use of make-up, hairstyle, adornments, clothes, shoes, body language and gestures, activating a "…familiar feature of sexual display of behavior and clothing that emphasize stereotyped sex differences ...(G)irls emphasize their vulnerability in tight skirts and high-heeled shoes, sheer stockings and make-up that is constantly in need of repair…" (Connell 1987: 181).

María Elena remarked that European women (probably based on the ones she had observed in Nicaragua) hardly used any make-up or adornments at all. Female Norwegian volunteers[7] reported that their lack of make-up and proper female clothing seemed to annoy and even scandalize people. In public discourse women, particularly foreign, who walked about in singlets and sandals, were understood to be immoral. It would seem that women could gain access to the moral superiority attached to femaleness by obeying a specific

appearance code and performance of emphasized femaleness. Women who failed to comply with this code, dressing and looking more like men, seemed to be conceived of as somehow immoral, and an offense to both men and women (Hagene 1994). Thus, women could be "more responsible", "set an example" etc., or partake of this female moral superiority mainly by obeying the female appearance code. In either case they would underline their difference from men.

A gender code which plays down competition between men and women

During my participant observation at Nicaraguan workplaces, I was struck by the impressive presence of sexuality in all kinds of settings; from the weekly meeting of directors to the more informal chat. I noticed various ways in which to deal with sexuality: flirting, joking, teasing, playing with words, double meanings, and - in one case - violence.

The underlining of femaleness could be understood also as a signal that the woman in question would not put up any competition with men, and that she could be used for the ranking of men between themselves. This discovery was shared by several Norwegian volunteers who were employed at the workplaces where I carried out the interviews. The Norwegian women noted that their male directors often did not take them seriously as professionals, but tended to engage in flirtation, compliments, invite them out for a beer, and so on. One of these volunteers said: "…it took me some time to understand that this had nothing to do with me, that he was just doing his job as a man…." The female volunteer could thus serve the purpose of raising the director's ranking in the hierarchy of men, an operation which at the same time emphasized her gender and played down her professionality. Thus, the flirtation would also tend to neutralize any possible professional competition from the female volunteer.

The gender code would also apply to the male volunteers, as one of them observed: he was being "inspected" by the secretaries at the factory, but failed to perform his "job as a man" as he did not start a flirtation with the women who came to have a look at him. So, the rumor was that he was a *cochón*. He also discovered that the solution was to learn how to play with words and twist the accusations around in order to boomerang on whoever started teasing him. These everyday practices produced and reproduced maleness and femaleness, underlining the differences, categorizing people and sanctioning those whose behavior resisted or challenged the categories. At the same time these practices served to create and recreate the hierarchies among men, constructing men and *cochones*, and to undercommunicate the competition between the sexes.

Leadership - a male space?

When I observed the high proportion of women in leading positions in Nicaraguan workplaces, I was surprised, probably because I had expected that the prevailing *machismo* would not allow a substantial number of women to enter into what I understood as a male space. But of course, this presupposed a way of categorizing and compartmentalizing reality which was not necessarily that of the Nicaraguan actors involved. To begin with, the differentiation between public space and domestic space cannot be taken for granted. I have in my material several indications that negotiations were taking place over precisely this question. In the cooperative setting to which I referred above, the leader, doña Ana, was struggling to make other members accept the conceptualization of workplace and home as different kinds of space. In the factory to which I referred in Managua, where Fátima worked, she complained that her subordinates did not distinguish between their private life and work, and thus involved her in their personal problems. Fátima offered an example:

> "…Once doña Chilo let a female work companion stay at her house, and this companion had an affair with one of the men working here. So both of them stayed with doña Chilo, the man being married elsewhere. Doña Chilo got tired of housing the two of them, and in a meeting, she asked me to get them out of her house!…"[8]

Also María Elena, whom we met in the first part of this essay, pointed out that people often did not distinguish between work and private life. She found that this had consequences for her as a female leader, and that she had to make this distinction particularly strict, otherwise she would loose respect as a female leader. She pointed out that this was not the case for her male counterparts.

We can thus infer that the conceptualization of "public" and "domestic" as two separate domains existed to some extent, but it was contested and not generalized. It seems that the division of reality into separate domains like public, domestic, economy, religion, leisure, politics and so on, pertains to a modern way of thinking.

Along with these categories goes the idea that only what is relevant to the domain in question is supposed to be applied to the judgment of the persons present in it. In Norway this is called "to stick to the matter", or we criticize others for "taking the man, not the ball". Under the influence of this rhetoric, the criteria for judging one person in one domain, is supposed to be equal to those used to judge any other person in the same domain, regardless of gender, age, family, color, ethnicity, economy etc. In the field of gender policy in Norway, at the level of discourse, supposedly no importance should be given as to whether it is a man or a woman who occupies a position, as long as the person fulfills the requirements, cf. the Gender Equality Act (Det juridiske fakultet 1994).

In contemporary Norwegian society, gender neutral procedures with explicit reference to documented qualifications are supposed to be followed when selecting a person for a job, particularly in the public sector, where there exists a detailed handbook of laws and

procedures (e.g. Statens personalhåndbok - Handbook of public personnel). These regulations are further explained in a section below. According to the Gender Equality Act, it is explicitly forbidden to introduce gender criteria into the selection. The Nicaraguan directors I interviewed found this whole formal, written and regulated procedure utterly amusing. To them, the obvious way to go about hiring someone was to "spread the word" and employ someone they knew, or someone known by somebody they knew, someone whose qualifications were known and who could be expected to be loyal. One director said, "…How am I to find the best applicant out of the 300 who would apply if I put an ad in the newspapers?…"[9]

In the Norwegian version of modern society, public discourse has it that this is precisely what you are supposed to do. Also, according to the modern division into domains, sexuality has no role whatsoever at the workplace and is deemed irrelevant and underplayed in the discourse about work. In reality, as the multiple accounts of sexual harassment taking place at Norwegian workplaces indicates, sexuality is very much present also at the work arena. Even if modern society has developed a discourse of impersonality and universalism (Banuri 1990), modern people don't seem ready to chop themselves up into the pieces which correspond to this discourse, but they go to work embodied in their own body, so to speak, gender, sexuality and all. Thus, there is a gap between the universalist rhetoric and reality in Norway, which seems to have a bearing on the situation of Norwegian female leaders.The gender of the leader is not supposed to matter. The code to be applied would therefore not be that of a man or a woman, but that of a leader. This may raise a number of problems which I will consider further below.

In societies where the impersonality of modernity has not been at work for such a long time, there is generally a tendency to a more holistic outlook on persons. Information about a

person's gender, color, family etc. will be vital in order to know how to relate to this person, and what particular code should be used. People tend to be seen in their context, which will not vary greatly with the activity in which the person is participating. Applied to the matters under study in this article, we could say that with a particularistic code, a woman in a leadership position is still above all a woman. Thus, if leadership is not categorized as belonging to a particular domain, there is no domain to conceive of as male space.

But we know that even if reality has not traditionally been understood as compartmentalized, men and women have been conceived of as quite different beings, with capacities and gifts for different forms of activities. For instance, in Nicaragua at the time of the Spanish conquest, to light the fire and sweep the house in the morning were tasks reserved for men, and women were not allowed in the temples (Arrellano 1990). Women, however, monopolized the commercial activity of the marketplace, where men were not allowed to enter. Thus, even if leadership is not thought of as a male space in today's Nicaragua, leadership could be considered an activity appropriate to or reserved for men, or part of what is understood as maleness. This would be in keeping with Dealy's reasoning (1977), where he develops the concept of *caudillaje* culture, which structures the interaction between Latin American men as they compete for power. He describes this as a system of leaders/followers or patrons/clients, and leadership could thus be seen as the outcome of the constantly ongoing exchange between men. Women in this system constitute part of the objects about which men compete, and are certainly not supposed to enter as subjects into this competition.

There is yet another line of reasoning which would lead us in the same direction, i.e. that certain tasks would be linked to a particular gender. In pre-Columbian America, particular tasks were understood to produce gender, thus a person who performed a female task would become a woman, and male tasks would produce men (Whitehead 1981). This line of thinking

seems to have some validity still in Nicaragua, as men are afraid to be seen to perform housework and other "female activities", lest they be considered *cochones*.[10] The fact that Nicaraguan female leaders so clearly emphasize their femaleness, could also be seen as a strategy to protect themselves from threats of "masculinization" stemming from performing "male tasks".

A strategy of difference

To sum up the Nicaraguan experience so far, regardless of concepts about gendered spaces or gendered tasks, women have to a large extent entered into leading positions at the work arena. I have argued that they have done so mostly emphasizing their femaleness, particularly their moral superiority based on the role of the mother. Even if leadership should have been considered male, women are actually engaged in this kind of activity under the banner of femaleness. Thus, one interpretation of the findings would be that women have become leaders not in spite of, but rather because of the particularistic gender code that made it possible to undercommunicate the competition with men. This interpretation is further substantiated when contrasted with the Norwegian experience, which I will address in the next section.

In Nicaragua the concepts and categories involved in this discussion seemed to be under negotiation. Women entered into leading positions, not claiming that they were the equals of men, but underlining that they were women. Morally, this implied that they saw themselves as better than men, but at the same time they did not question the male power at the work arena nor any other place, since men and women were judged by different standards. The gender code, which was part and parcel of a cultural system that served to hierarchize men over women, and establish a ranking order among men, was kept intact. Thus, the constant

reproduction of men's social standing could go on much the same with female leaders as with male ones. Female leadership did not entail a degenderization of women; in most cases it rather meant emphasizing their gender. The particularistic gender code simultaneously opened up for different and contradictory processes; the possibility of women to conquer leadership positions underplaying the competition with men, and the reproduction of the existing gender order where men as a group rank higher than women. This complexity and doubleness can inspire us to imagine the gender order both as a stable structure and a vulnerable construct depending on the choices of the actors involved.

Modernity and agency

The Norwegian case presents a picture with a different emphasis. For several decades the official Norwegian gender policy has been one of equality between men and women, and the prerequisites for female leadership should be better than ever.[11] But, when it comes to holding leading positions in the work arena, both in public and private ownership, women represent only 22 percent (See Appendix Table 3), an utterly meager result of decades of universalist gender equality rhetoric. Not only is the Norwegian policy of gender equality completely different from the Nicaraguan strategy of gender difference, but the different approaches have been developed in social contexts which also contrast each other strongly, as I pointed out in the introduction. The two societies could be compared along a variety of dimensions; of particular relevance for the present discussion is the difference in penetration of modernity. Before I go on to develop this point, let me just mention another contrast between the two societies under analysis: the household and the housework. In Norway, most people live in small, nuclear families, single mothers often alone with their children, and domestic servants hardly exist. In Nicaragua, domestic servants are the rule in homes where women are

employed outside the home, and people often live in some sort of extended family. I assume that the Nicaraguan constellation offers more space for some women to take on leadership tasks, although definitely less for others! The Norwegian family pattern and way of life bestows household and family responsibilities on every individual woman (and to a small degree on men).

Let me then return to the discussion of modernity. Some aspects of modernity stand out as crucial in this context, i.e. an emphasis on disembedded, abstract, impersonal rationality, a tendency to formalize and rutinize procedures and document them, and speak in terms of predictable, equal treatment of each single individual under the same law, regulation or procedure (see Giddens 1990). According to this thinking, the individual in this case would be stripped of any other qualities than the ones relevant for the procedure in question. This approach would constitute an example of what Banuri denominates *The Impersonality Postulate,* defined as the assumption that impersonal relations are inherently superior to personal relations. He also points out that a powerful asymmetry is thus introduced in the analysis of social issues by concentrating intellectual energies only on those aspects of social behavior which can be encompassed within an objectivist matrix (Baruni 1990: 74).

In Norway a series of laws, rules and regulations have been developed in the post-war period to guarantee each individual's access to apply for and obtain employment, particularly public posts. These posts must be advertised in the newspapers, indicating the requirements which the applicants must fulfill and the date by which the application must be submitted. The regulations indicate who should participate in the process of selecting the employee, and the impartial criteria according to which the selection should be made. After passing the Gender Equality Act in 1977, the gender dimension was fitted into the existing rules which already regulated employment procedures. Also, a system of quotas was established, indicating that

priority was to be given to women in predominantly male professions. However, this was only to be applied in cases of equal qualifications, which apparently must have been a difficult concept as the quotas seem to have had little influence on the increase of women in male jobs.This regulation, however, seems to have had a heavy propagandistic effect in the opposite direction, in terms of creating the impression of "unequal competition" in favor of women!

In contrast, in Nicaragua there are no laws or regulations concerning how people should be recruited to jobs, and consequently no text into which rules about gender equality could be incorporated. Women as well as men, besides their qualifications, have to rely on their personal networks in order to attain leadership positions as well as any other job. It could be argued that also in Norway, when it comes to practice, personal connections turn out to be important in order to get a particular position. In Nicaragua, however, this is also how it is in principle. Thus, agency is much clearer in Nicaragua. Women cannot be pacified by alluding to some neutral, objective machinery to grant them their rights, as no such machinery exists. Besides the importance of personal networks, their success would depend on their self-presentation within those networks; to what degree they manage to present themselves as capable leaders. In this respect the Revolution of 1979 might have added some important aspects to the image of Nicaraguan women, both in their own eyes and in those of society. Many women gained experience participating in guerrilla and political activities, and thus expanded the limits of femaleness as previously understood.[12] However, it should be noted that the female discourse about this kind of activity carries a heavy connotation of sacrifice, thus qualifying their activity as strictly female, cf. tales of women having to leave their newly born babies, in order to attend to an even greater task, that of liberating the *patria* (father country!).[13] As in the case of leadership, women entered into guerrilla struggles in a gendered way, underlining their female capacity for sacrifice. In the Nicaraguan case women seem to

have a clearer, more personal understanding of their own agency, at the same time that this very agency was boosted with new dimensions from revolutionary experiences. The vision of Nicaraguan women was not blurred by the existence of an impersonal machinery of public regulations, which could be one interpretation of the Norwegian case.

With an ample penetration of modernity, as in the case of Norway, society seems to adopt a faith in social engineering, in the possibility of controlling society itself scientifically. The interest in categorizing, quantifying and documenting every social phenomenon stands out as another dimension pertaining to modernity. The authorities apply the social sciences to obtain certain changes. The collection of statistical data is fundamental for the design of policies, and for measuring their results. Reflexivity is thus a dimension of modernity which seems to accelerate the pace of change, and thus the faith in gaining control of social development. However, the very same reflexivity sparks off a series of unintended consequences, as " the knowledge of the social world contributes to its unstable and mutable character" (Giddens 1990: 44). A case in point would be the fate of female directors in Norway.

The equality trap of modernity

The mainstream political discourse of modernity seems to link equality inextricably to a disembodied, abstract, impersonal rationality (Flax 1992: 196). As spelt out in Norwegian equality rhetoric, this abstractness, when applied to the requirements attached to leadership positions, stands out as gender neutral; not male, not female, but "leaderish". This supposition is discussed by Joan Acker (1993). She argues that the job evaluations carried out to describe the necessary requirements address the job, not the person who performs it. A job can be standardized and rationalized, but the person cannot, unless he/she is only conceived of as an

abstract, bodiless person. What is spoken of as gender equality for individuals, amounts to gender neutrality in job descriptions and procedures regulating employment and work. The apparent gender neutrality, however, blurs the underlying gender structure and perpetuates it despite simultaneous intents to diminish it. As soon as the individual who is going to fill the job emerges, it is bound to have a body, and a gendered body at that! My contention is that in the Norwegian case, maleness has been made the universal category into which femaleness has to fit. With Flax we could ask "whether "equality" can mean anything other than assimilation to a pre-existing and problematic "male" norm" (Flax 1992: 196). In the Norwegian case, this gap between rhetoric and reality presents women with dilemmas different from those of Nicaraguan women: head on competing with men, and bridging the rhetoric/reality gap.

Maleness presented as a universal category implies ranking men and women in the same hierarchy, judging women by the same male standard as men. Thus, women who want to become leaders have to enter into competition with men on an individual basis. Men seem to resist this competition, using a variety of mechanisms to counter it, which mainly can be summed up as making it unpleasant for women to participate in this kind of competition. With Connell we observe that some occupational cultures are supported by "…the simplest possible mechanism, the exclusion of women…" (Connell 1987: 181). Consequently even women who have gained leadership positions often choose to withdraw from leadership (Amble 1993).

In order to bridge the rhetoric/reality gap, Norwegian women seem to be caught in a double-bind as they make their way into leadership: To be accepted as leaders, they must shed their female identity, and if they comply with this requirement, they are conceived of as mannish (Amble 1993). In this dilemma, many women experience a pressure towards a gender neutral performance at work, a drive to appear to be someone else. As Amble puts it (1993) women face "problems working in a culture where they cannot be themselves, or in a culture

which does not recognize them when being themselves."[14] For although gender is not essence, but "…ways of living certain relationships…" (Connell 1987: 179), it still constitutes part of people's personality, both the self and our ideas about it (Flax 1992: 196). Women can choose between several strategies in this dilemma, and one of them is withdrawal. The space for female leaders to be whole persons is felt to be too small. Male resistance to female leadership, and female withdrawal from leadership positions in Norway could be the outcome of the individual competition between the sexes that is inherent to the official policy of gender equality/neutrality. The relatively low percentage of female leadership in Norway could thus partly be understood as a result of the very Equality Machinery[15] which has been adopted to favor the opposite result!

In the Nicaraguan context, women seem to have been able to enter into leadership positions in the workplaces under the banner of femaleness. They emphasize their difference from, and moral superiority to men, a strategy which has been facilitated by the "double standard" of the Nicaraguan gender system. In this system, women are used by men to define themselves and construct their own maleness, competing to rank higher in the hierarchy of men. When female leaders emphasize their femaleness, they communicate at the same time that they do not constitute a threat to men's hierarchizing activities. It would seem, however, that women at a more general level thus participate in the reproduction of the gender system, which entails women's global subordination to men. Simultaneously, however, this serves the purposes of the women themselves in their own projects. A similar reasoning is thoroughly explored in Villareal (1994) in a study from Mexico, where the summing up of the case of Juana could illustrate this point:

> "…If she accords her man "his place" and respects his authority, she will be seen as a good woman in village social life. ...She creates space for him according to her interests, since he will now have more possibility of being esteemed in the village because he is obeyed and respected at home. In this way, she is not only passively obeying social

> norms, but is finding her way through them to convey a specific image of her man as father and husband, and thus to fulfill her own goals. ...She chooses to conform, but in doing so, she also reproduces and legitimates these norms and behavior…" (Villareal 1994: 14).

A question which arises from my present discussion of Nicaraguan female leaders, is whether the spaces created through this particular brand of subordination subtly may undermine male hegemony.

It would be apparent from my material that Nicaraguan and Norwegian women have chosen different ways of relating to male hegemony. In my attempt to think about these ways, I have found Connell's (1987) discussion of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity helpful. His discussion is not of face-to-face relationships, but move on the very large scale. He explains how masculinities are ordered between themselves and in relation to women. With hegemonic masculinity, he refers to a form of masculinity which has ascendancy over other forms (which therefore necessarily exist, but are subordinate to the hegemonic masculinity) through maneuverings other than brute power. Femininities demonstrate more variations, as they are all based on the global dominance of men over women, and thus no one form can claim hegemony over the others. Connell classifies them according to their different responses to male hegemony: compliance with subordination to accomodate the interests of men (emphasized femininity), resistance, non-compliance or complex forms of compliance, resistance and co-operation. We recognize of course the Nicaraguan strategy of difference and emphasized femininity as compliance, as it strives to accommodate the interests and desires of men. The Norwegian strategy, exemplified by the Equality Machinery, seems to present a case of resistance-defiance at the level of rhetoric, as it challenges male privileged access to leadership positions. At the level of practice, as I have argued, this strategy seems to entail women's acceptance of maleness as a norm for their own performance. The central point here

being that, different as these approaches are, they are all centered on one single structural fact: the global subordination of women to men.

Beyond equality and difference

As I have initially indicated, my essay obviously feeds into what is often referred to as the equality/difference debate, consisting of an enormously rich literature pertaining to numerous disciplines or moving freely across them, exploring social relations which have to do with sex, gender and sexual difference. The equality position could read something like "…but for her sex, a woman is a man…" (Gatens 1991), whereas the difference position "…began from the premise that women are different and that their special needs justify special regulatory interventions…" (Rhode 1992). In a feminist context, both positions build up to claims of equal opportunities and worth for men and women, but the concrete demands and strategies tend to vary and often conflict with each other.

The strategy of equality followed by the Norwegian authorities, more than representing a solution, may constitute part of the problem. At the same time, I have observed that the Nicaraguan emphasis on gender difference, while allowing Nicaraguan women to create spaces of leadership, it simultaneously ensures the reproduction of male domination. The rhetoric at work in the two countries represent again a binary opposition, one of equality, the other of difference, but both representing a case of male dominance. As my material suggests, neither equality nor difference provides us with a strategy to break male domination. It would seem that the dichotomy equality/difference constitutes an unsolvable dilemma, a false choice. As Scott points out, the hold of this binary construction is strengthened through the tendency to write the history of feminism as a story of oscillation between demands for equality and affirmations of difference, where in fact the actual arguments of feminists mostly do not fall

into these neat compartments. She calls for an end to the historians' contribution towards the longevity of this binary construction, which we might add, is profoundly grounded in a western dualistic way of thinking (Scott 1990: 145).

If the dilemma stems from the ways in which we construct and understand reality, much is to be gained from looking into these ways. Scott (1990) draws upon the concept of discourse as elaborated by Foucault to indicate a possibility of thinking differently about the ways in which "equality" and "difference" have become organizing principles for political actions. Thus we could reveal that what seemed to be sharply different arguments are built upon shared assumptions which we need to go beyond. In keeping with this, following Derrida, Scott suggests we deconstruct the binary opposition of equality-versus-difference, to disclose the processes embodied in it. Scott, thus, advocates an equality which does not imply sameness or identity, but one which rests on differences - "…differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition…" (Scott 1990: 146).

Whereas Scott opts for equality and difference, there are also inspirations to move beyond this dichotomy. Flax (1992) also addresses the problem of the dualistic western way of thinking, and the usefulness of drawing on the work of Foucault and Derrida. As we shall see, however, she develops her discussion of equality in another direction. She points out that the appeal of equality rests on the premises of modern liberal political thought as being a response to and rejection of the rule of unequal statuses. The claim of equality so central to liberal thought is grounded in a rejection of authority built on difference, claiming there exists a fundamental human sameness (natural right, reason) which could override the differences. Difference is thus taken to be inseparable from dominance, and the appeal of equality becomes apparent. Flax expresses doubts, however, that we could imagine equality without some

measure of sameness. And, as she indicates, no measures offered so far have been gender neutral in nature or implication. Thus, feminists have begun to question whether equality could mean anything but assimilation to a pre-existing and problematic "male" norm. The material presented here on the experience of female leaders in Norway, seems to be a case in point. What is spoken of as gender neutral, turns out to be modeled on a male body, an exercise rendered feasible through the disembodied discourse of modern liberal thought.

It further appears my discussion here questions the blessings of modernity. Seen from within, the art of social engineering in Norway would seem to need just a bit of fine-tuning to reach perfection. When contrasted with the Nicaraguan experience, a little more modesty is called for, particularly when we take into account my present analysis, indicating that the main problem to be corrected is the very central principle of equality/sameness. Another important point to be made is the question of agency. Where agency tends to be blurred by the abstract, impersonal systems of the Norwegian equality machinery, it is accentuated in the context of particularistic, personal relations as in the Nicaraguan case. Thus, even if the strategy of Nicaraguan female leaders is seen to reproduce the male domination from which it is creating a space of maneuver, the emphasis on agency demonstrated constitutes a valuable lesson. Let us bring this experience into Flax' discussion of justice further below.

Neither equality nor difference thus seems to constitute a satisfactory approach, so let us rewind to what the problem is. Clearly, the problem with gender as it is currently constituted, is its being a relation of dominance. The obvious agenda would therefore be not to do away with gender, femininity or difference, but to end domination. "…The issue as I understand it is ... how and why gender is a relation of domination - and how to end such domination…" (Flax 1992: 194). Flax goes on to argue for justice as a more potentially useful concept than equality. Justice is a concept which requires the existence of a self, of a subjectivity. As my

analysis of the Nicaraguan strategy indicates, this constitutes a vital issue. It reminds us of the importance of agency, which tends to be played down under the Equality Machinery, although it is in itself obviously a result of the struggle of thousands of women.

My material, moreover, suggests that the ways in which gender is a relation of domination will vary between societies, and that women living in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts will opt for different strategies and maybe even different aims. A global theoretical aim, like substituting the "equality/difference" trap with aims of agency and justice, may thus have limited value. It might, however, serve as a point of reference to support localized, contextualized research and as ammunition for actual struggles taking place. The experiences gained by Nicaraguan women in this context certainly stand out as a valuable inspiration.

PONER AQUI APPENDIX CON CUADROS

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NOTES

[1] The category **"leader"** in this essay refers to a position in the workplace **predominantly dedicated to administrative, executive and managerial work, responsible for leading other employees** (see comments to tables 2 and 3). The statistical sources on which I rely and the tables which I have constructed based on this information are presented in the Appendix, where the respective definitions of "leader" are also quoted.
[2] Nicaragua is about half the size of Norway. The population of both countries today is about 4-5 mill. Norway had the same population in the early seventies, when Nicaragua had about 2.7 mill.
[3] Hagemann (1990) points out, however, that even if these laws emphasized equal rights for women and men, the legislators did not express any wish to actually employ a number of women in the public posts to which they in principle had access. Interesting to our theme here is the view expressed in the preparatory documents for the 1912 law, that among the tasks for which women were particularly unsuited, were leadership positions, as women were seen to lack authority and could easily be influenced by their personal feelings.
[4] Interview, February 17, 1992.
[5] Interview, February 17, 1992.
[6] Interview, February 26, 1992.
[7] Interviews, fall 1991 and spring 1992.
[8] Interview, March 20, 1992.
[9] Interview, Don Carlos, March 10, 1992.

[10] Personal observation, Nicaragua Jan-Feb 1996, also shared by my students doing fieldwork for a dissertation on gender relations in Nicaragua. This view is also supported by several men in Nicaragua in informal interviews during the same period. However, the female tasks are not believed to convert men into women, but into *cochones* (male passive homosexual).

[11] According to a publication from *Likestillingsrådet* (The Council of Equality, a governmental instance) from 1991, the prerequisites for female leadership are better than ever:

. 70 percent of the women aged 25-66 are economically active

. More than 50 percent of the students in higher education are women

. About 35 percent of parliamentary representatives are women

. Out of 19 members of government, 9 are women

[12] Personal communication, 22.1.96, Comandante Aminta Granera, guerrilla fighter during the Sandinista Revolution, Secretary General of the Nicaraguan National Police and founder of the Women's Commissariat in the National Police.

[13] See note 11. People less inclined to support the fight for liberation, would criticize the women who actually went into the mountains to be *libertinas* (women of doubtful sexual reputation). This might have enhanced the need to couch the language in safe terms of female sacrifice.

[14] My translation from Norwegian.

[15] The term "Equality Machinery" is utilized in the report published by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1994.