

Solidarity Playbook



Articulación Feminista de Nicaragua

The role of women's
movements in building
solidarity against closing
civic space in Nicaragua



International
Civil Society Centre

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The **Articulación Feminista de Nicaragua** is a network of over 100 organisations and individuals that works in pursuit of democracy, and the exercise of full citizenship by the Nicaraguan population. The movement is involved in processes to find peaceful solutions to Nicaragua's current crisis, ensuring that women's rights are central to any potential solutions.

Overview

The Articulación has worked alongside new and emerging youth-led movements born out of the April 2018 protests and resulting national crisis. It has brought the feminist agenda into the public debate, strengthened digital activism, and deepened collaborations between different organisations focusing on democracy, justice and rights. The Articulación has contributed to enabling some youth movements and women's movements in the interior of the country to connect to national networks and has worked to protect activists from attack in a context of severely closed civic space and repression.



What launched the movement?

Context

The women's movement in Nicaragua has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, when civil war and the Sandinista Revolution took women out of their traditional roles, equipping them with the organising skills and networks which, post-revolution, would give them the agency to advocate for change. Since the war ended in 1990, a national network of feminist support, made up of movements, networks, organisations and individuals, has worked to defend human rights, labour rights and women's rights.

A brief history of the women's movement in Nicaragua and closing civic space

The women's movement for equality in Nicaragua began during the struggle to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970s, when women were integral to the Sandinista popular revolution. The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN – National Liberation Sandinista Front) came to power in 1979, after defeating the long-standing family dictatorship that had ruled the country since 1934.

Some fairly progressive legislation on gender rights was drafted and enacted by the new government, but the implementation of these was felt to be insufficient. Many women left the FSLN to set up new feminist organisations, movements and networks through which to advocate for their rights, working on issues ranging from gender-based violence through to the empowerment of local communities, alongside reproductive rights.

In 1990, the FSLN party lost the election, but in 2006 Sandinista MPs made an agreement with Evangelist and Catholic voters, passing a law that restricted access to abortion. In part, thanks to this pact, Daniel Ortega became the president (again). Ortega's government also began to persecute members of the feminist movement, using threats and physical attacks. This persecution gradually extended to all voices that were critical of the President and government, creating an increasingly hostile environment for civil society.

Trigger

In April 2018, demonstrations were held in response to changes made to Nicaragua's social system. However, what started as a protest against a relatively narrow issue concerning tax increases and pension reform, soon turned into a **popular uprising** against President Ortega and his government. This was because police and pro-government forces used **excessive force and violence** to crush the demonstrations, killing protesters, who at that point were largely students.

The crackdown left over 300 people dead and over 2,000 injured. Hundreds were arbitrarily arrested, prosecuted (many on terrorism charges) and abused. The killings sent shockwaves through the country and **mobilised a much broader protest movement**.

In addition to enforced disappearances, abuses and torture, the crackdown policy yielded new counter-terrorism legislation, enacted in July 2018 to enable the continuing arrests and convictions of protesters, activists and civil society actors. Authorities and armed pro-government groups also harassed and attacked journalists and bloggers who reported on the protests, and foreign reporters were detained and deported.

While students played a leading role in the initial demonstrations, **women's movements and feminist organisations joined these protests**. They took part in marches demanding "Peace and Justice", defined as an end to the government-ordered killings and violence and the resignation of Ortega. This involvement has resulted in more backlash, including the shutting down of several women's organisations or those organisations directed by prominent women, which were stripped of their legal status.

The events of 2018 triggered the creation of new networks and organisations, mobilising to resist the corruption and authoritarianism. These new groups **connected with the existing women's rights movements**, sharing the common goals of justice and democracy.

How does it work?

There is **no hierarchical management** of the Articulación, and the structure is informal in nature. The work is coordinated via **working groups**, who focus on actions ranging from demands for freedom for female political prisoners, to challenging impunity in the face of femicide. There is a **group that coordinates** activities and motivates member participation, made up of members from the main women's networks in the country. There is also a main assembly, which calls for meetings when important decisions are required. **Consultations** are organised to enable members to participate in key decision-making processes.

Membership is informal, but participants are known to each other and can participate in face-to-face meetings. These meetings have been limited by the pandemic, but also by the fact that police often surround the offices or physical spaces where meetings are held. Where possible, meetings are held every month or two, in the capital or other cities.

The Articulación has **no fixed funding**, and is not a registered organisation with a structure to enable receipt of funds. The vast majority of the work carried out by members is **voluntary and**

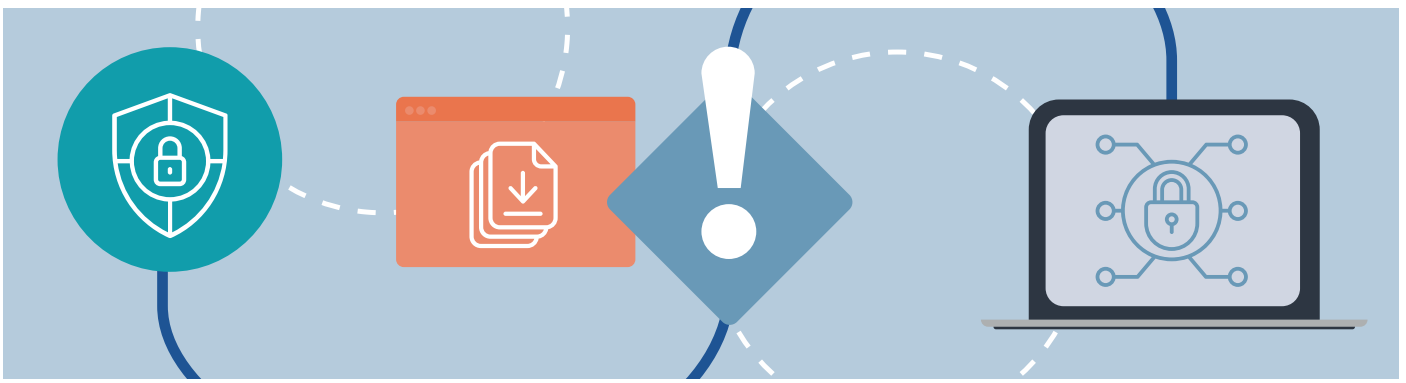
self-financed. Some member organisations do receive international support though, and the Articulación itself is recognised by international civil society organisations as an important space for feminist dialogue. When **regional or international spaces** open up for dialogue with civil society organisations (CSOs), the Articulación engages to highlight the current context and ongoing violations in Nicaragua. These spaces include sessions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Universal Periodic Review processes, engagement with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights or with the Organisation of American States.

At the national level, members of the Articulación, and the Articulación as a whole, have formed relationships of **cooperation and mutual support with youth movements** made up of students and young feminists. There are close links with some universities, and actions have been coordinated with these institutions as spaces for the exchange of knowledge and research. Universities that played a key role in the 2018 protests have, together with feminist organisations, defended the student community against government repression.

Who are the members?

The Articulación has a **diverse membership**, ranging from large networks of women's organisations to small collectives and individual activists. These include:

- Long-established national networks and women's organisations, such as the Women's Network against Violence and the Autonomous Women's Movement, the 8 de Marzo Collective, La Corriente, and Cisas.
- Local rural organisations such as Grupo Venancia, the Women's Movement of Chinandega, and Axayacalt.
- Organisations representing those of African descent, such as Voces Caribeñas.
- Faith groups such as Catholics for the right to decide.
- Individual activists from different territories across the country.
- Youth collectives have also become **allies** of the Articulación.



Movement in action

Members of the Articulación participated in protests from April 2018 onwards, but they have also supported vulnerable individuals and communities through various protection-focused actions, such as:

- Organising **psychological support** for victims of abuse, and advocating against abuse in prisons.
- Conducting **training on digital security**, so that people can organise safely.
- Conducting **risk analysis**, and developing physical security plans for activists at risk.
- **Documentation** of violations of human rights.
- **Legal support** for women human rights defenders (WHRDs) at risk of imprisonment.
- **Promoting awareness** of the context amongst international networks supporting feminists, and advocacy in other spaces in the international arena.

These activities build on a **long history of capacity-building and empowerment work** carried out by Articulación members with local communities, designed to develop people's understanding of their human rights, and their ability to advocate for their own rights. **Protection is now a fundamental, cross-cutting element** of the movement's work, applied to any action that is developed, and the protection strategies used are best summarized by the phrase 'If they touch one, we all respond'.

Counter-narrative work

Members of the Articulación have also continued to promote their core message – a **counter-narrative to the concept of violent revolution**.

After many years of civil war and revolution, the concept of 'dying for one's country' has become ingrained in the psyche of many citizens. The government intended to maintain a discourse of war, even infiltrating student movements and encouraging them to take up arms during the protests in 2018 (attempts which failed, as the protests remained peaceful).

The women's movement has tried to replace this ideal with a different concept of fighting for freedom, underscored by the idea that you have a right to a country where you can live and be free. This **framing around justice and freedom**, as opposed to violence and martyrdom, has been an important influence on the consensus that has been building towards a **new social contract** since 2018. Women's organisations have continued to promote a message of peace, prioritising this in all communications.

Given the traditional 'machismo' that runs through the country's culture, women's groups have had to resist the violence of both the state and of those organising for reform, where the idea of violence against women has been normalised. Thus, women's rights groups have played a fundamental role in shaping this broader agenda, by **placing justice, democracy and women's rights at the centre of demands for social change**.

Outcomes

Women's groups are operating in a dictatorship where they are seen as enemies of the state, and so their continued existence and activities are a positive outcome in this context. They are a **successful and effective movement just by virtue of continuing to operate**.

Specific outcomes include:

- ✓ **Influencing the narrative** and therefore the agenda. The movement has initiated a now institutionalised phrase 'Free country to live' to replace the long-promoted slogan of 'Free country or die'. Feminists now have a much more visible role in terms of political participation and proposals for social change, and national media has picked up this analysis.
- ✓ **The support of vulnerable communities** through continuous work that includes supporting women victims of violence, and supporting humanitarian activities across the country.
- ✓ **Securing international solidarity**, through awareness-raising, preparation of reports to human rights bodies, promoting coordination of advocacy efforts with feminists in exile, and promoting solidarity for those activists who go into exile. As the movement highlights: *"every text message, article, demonstration, every message of love and energy has given us strength to continue this fight for justice and the democratization of our Nicaragua."*
- ✓ **The protection of activists**, through legal support, security protocols, training on the international human rights system and the use of its mechanisms, and on the safe handling of information and communication technologies.



CHALLENGES

Risk of physical harm

By protesting and organising, members of the Articulación risk imprisonment, where they are often subjected to violence and sexual abuse. Movement leaders face threats from the police and paramilitary groups, and as a result many have had to flee, seeking refuge in countries such as Costa Rica or Spain, an exodus resulting in significant 'brain drain' across the movement as the civic space has closed. Members of the Articulación have continued to protest and organise despite these risks.

Legal threats

Some feminist organisations were closed in 2018, and most groups are now under pressure because the government is constantly enacting new legislation targeting CSOs, including several recently approved repressive laws. These include the Law for Regulation of Foreign Agents, used to repress those CSOs receiving resources from international sources; a law on cybercrime, which seeks to censor digital media; and a law on hate crimes that introduces life imprisonment for political dissent, without a clear definition for what acts amount to dissent.

Pervasive machismo

By trying to alter the narrative and the 'macho' culture that is so pervasive throughout the country, women's groups and feminists find confrontation not just from the state, but from their own families and communities. Sexual assault has become part of the repression experienced by activists and women, and the impunity around this must be addressed.

Sustaining coordination and engagement

Sustaining internal coordination and alliances with other movements and spaces is particularly challenging given the complexities of the context and the risks involved. The Articulación's lack of structure or formality also makes engagement with international groups difficult, as such cooperation often requires quite rigid standards and models that do not easily accommodate social movements. It is also difficult to dedicate time to advocacy strategies vis-à-vis international feminist movements, as the Articulación is occupied with more immediate defensive and protective work. Maintaining the movement's existence without resources or permanent support from international allies is very challenging.

LESSONS LEARNED

Collaboration

Youth groups have their own dynamics, and it is important to take these into account and respect their ways of working, when collaborating. Young women's groups need their own space. The Articulación underlines the importance of strengthening other organisations and movements, rather than overriding or replacing them through the neglect of their particular objectives. They also stress the importance of engaging in dialogue with groups where there is agreement on aspects related to democracy and justice, even if these groups do not entirely align with the Articulación's agenda. In these mixed political spaces, feminists contribute by defending the exercise of full citizenship rights, promoting the role of women as political actors.

Seizing opportunities

Narrative and cultural change take time, but movements can also take advantage of key national moments. Feminist movements were able to use the crisis to highlight the nature of the dictatorship and its detrimental effects on the country and center the narrative of peaceful protest and freedom, as opposed to one of violence and war. Young people have taken up this civic struggle, and do not see war as a way out of the political crisis.

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