

# FEMINISM AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN SPAIN\*

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*Le féminisme demande la transformation de la société ainsi que la fin de l'oppression des femmes. L'auteur analyse le lien historique entre le féminisme et l'Etat en Espagne, en insistant sur le passage de la dictature franquiste à la démocratie du gouvernement actuel. Elle évalue les récentes réformes législatives et lance un appel urgent pour un activisme plus militant.*

## Feminism and Democracy

Feminism is a proposal for social transformation as well as a movement that strives to end the oppression of women. In this double aspect, feminism has always existed as part of the historical societies in which it has developed: it has been influenced by the specific social, economic and political traits of its society. As a movement, feminism has a long history of rebellion, more or less organized, but always expressing opposition to the social institutions that made possible the inferiority of women. This opposition has not been isolated from other forms of social struggle and this relationship has influenced both the ideology and the organization of the movement.

Today's feminism is the continuation of the nineteenth century movement, but expresses the problems and contradictions of today's society. In many respects, the political goals of contemporary feminism deal with the crisis of democracy, and propose a more radical approach to democratic institutions. This was also true of suffragism; granting the vote to women became, in the long run, a way of establishing both elections and democracy as a way of negotiating interests and conflicts.

Many authors have analyzed the cultural elements of Iberian societies, indicating that they are strongly patriarchal and that they have produced a social situation in which women are more discriminated against than in Anglo-Saxon societies. For some, this is a consequence of the authority of the Catholic Church, for which the ideal of "femininity" implies a greater subordination of women to masculine order. However, if we accept that there has been a historical relationship between feminism and the development of the modern democratic state, it can also be pointed out that Spain has had problems in its modernization process.

## Spanish Feminism: Historical Perspective

In Spain, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the social and economic forces that shaped the European countries did not appear; thus Spain did not share European reality, i.e., capitalist in its economic organization and liberal in its political system. Instead, the traditional nobility, the social groups linked to a corrupt and inefficient state apparatus, and the clergy continued to be the dominant classes. The impoverished masses of peasants and a small bourgeois, liberal sector fought for changes that did not take place.

Because State and Church were never politically separated, this relationship promoted a legal situation in which women were absolutely subordinate to men. However, during the nineteenth century several women's groups were created that demanded equality in education

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and challenged the Catholic ideal of femininity. The vote never became an important goal of these groups. In 1981 these groups united in a National Organization of Spanish Women (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Españolas, ANME). They developed international relations, and links with the political groups that were demanding the end of Monarchy and its replacement by a Republic.

The creation of the Republic in 1932, and the support of the Republican and the Socialist parties gave women the vote and several other rights: education, work, divorce, changes in the family legal system, etc. The vote was granted with little struggle from women. Clara Campoamor, a radical member of Parliament (women could be elected but they could not vote) supported the cause in an almost lonely effort; the right of women to vote was approved with 161 votes in favour and 121 against. Her support forced the progressive parties to accept her demand but it

cost her her political career: she had to quit her party and was not admitted to any other.

These legal changes did not greatly affect the daily life of Spanish women, nor did they produce too many changes in the participation of women during the Republic. However, the Civil War in 1936 produced an important transformation of their situation. They had to take over the tasks of men who were enlisted in the armies. They participated in production, they collaborated with the Army (some even in the military front), they took over education and health jobs, and they controlled commerce. Many different training courses for women were developed and women attended them enthusiastically.

At the political level, women participated in the political organizations of both parties of the war and were strongly mobilized. On the Republican side there existed two main groups: those who organized around the Anarchist movement and those who organized with the political parties that had supported the Republican government. On the National side, they constituted the Feminine Section of the Spanish Falange. On both sides they performed the same tasks: participation in production, health, commerce, logistical support of the armies, and taking care of the children and the old people.

When the war was over, the traditional Catholic model of femininity was restored. The new legislation prohibited married women's work, reinstated the supremacy of the father and the husband, forbade divorce, co-education and the use of contraception, and severe sanctions were put on women's adultery. Children born out of marriage had no rights whatsoever. Strong ideological campaigns against what was called the "horrible image of women created by the Republic and feminism" were developed. The Feminine Section of the Falange was in charge of this new ideological reorientation of women.

In order to take care of these tasks, the Feminine Section was given educational functions in women's schools where they taught domestic education, sports and physical education. Its main effort, however, was ideological: to eliminate any remnants of the feminism of the previous time. The regime's model of womanhood remained dominant during the forties and the fifties, but in the sixties it changed slowly due to economic development and tourism. The need for a women's labour force smoothed the laws

concerning women's work and eliminated some of the prohibitions. Tourism, one of the most important sources of economic development, brought more liberal ideas and daily customs. Thus the dominant ideology concerning women and the family began to change.

In spite of the repression, political parties that were in opposition to the dictatorship were secretly reorganized. In the sixties many organizations supporting the democratization of Spain were created. The membership were students, women, neighbours' organizations and trade-unions. Many of them were legal, and members of the clandestine political parties belonged to them. The more important women's organizations were the Federation of Housewives, created in 1963, and the Democratic Women's Movement, in 1965. Other smaller groups were created in the universities and in the professional and intellectual groups, like the Spanish Association of University Women, and the Sociological Studies Women's Seminar. By the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies these last two organizations generated the first feminist groups.

Before 1975 several small feminist groups discussed the main writings and ideas of European feminism, and debated about the situation of Spanish women and what should be done. Many seminars and discussion groups were created and the ideas of feminism expanded. In 1975 these groups participated in the forums sponsored by the International Women's Year both in Spain and outside. The press coverage of the International Year and the meetings and lectures organized mobilized many women who then joined the existing feminist groups.

### Spain's Democratic Transition

By the end of the year Franco's death opened the way to the democratic process that permitted the establishment of a new constitution and of a parliamentary monarchy as the form of organization of the state. This transition from dictatorship to democracy was not what Franco himself had designed for his succession.

The existence of a wide political consensus that demanded democracy, of political organizations and of social ones which supported the process made it possible. The clandestine political parties, trade-unions and social organizations had become a way of channeling political opposition during the last years of the

regime. This made possible a minimum consensus of all these groups, from the left to the moderate right in terms of short run and middle-range goals. All social and economic groups that have been created in opposition to the dictatorship collaborated in the process to consolidate democracy.

This political process of transition from a dictatorship to a democratic regime provides the background of the organization and growth of the Spanish feminist movement. In December 1975, some weeks after Franco died, the First Conference on Women's Liberation took place. More than five hundred women attended it, in spite of its semi-clandestine nature. The central debate was between the feminist groups and the political women's groups that belonged to the leftist parties. The feminist groups affirmed that feminism in itself was a political option and that women should struggle for their liberation. Women from the leftist parties

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opposed this position, claiming that the most important goal for women, as for the rest of the political groups, was the struggle for democracy. The two positions were strongly opposed to each other and there was no possibility of an agreement.

Five months later, in May 1976, the first Catalan Women's Conference took place. This time more than five thousand women attended. Catalonia had the most important feminist groups with the larger participation. Even if the debate was once again centered on the issue of feminism vs. democracy, by this time there was a consensus of the legitimacy of feminism and its goals. For some women, belonging to the movement could be combined with belonging to a political party – what was called "double militancy;" for others, feminism was the only cause which feminists should support. But the feminist movement had become a *mass* movement.

In the years that followed feminism grew. Feminist organizations, feminist editorials, feminist book-stores and femin-

ist bars soon appeared. Women's organizations that had existed before, related to the democratic opposition to Franco, declared themselves feminist. The political parties accepted the existence of a feminist movement which should be listened to and perceived as representing Spanish women.

The first task that the movement had to face was the organization of Family Planning Centers. Under Franco contraception was illegal: women could go to jail for its use. This was changed, but there were very few family Planning Centers created and there was a great demand for them. The movement organized several, and in some cases got the support of the local governments that were in the hands of leftist parties. Abortion was one of the most important issues. Trips to London were organized so that women who needed abortions could obtain them.

Thus, control over reproduction was the first demand of Spanish women. Lack of sex education and of contraception had lead women to have big problems. The movement, however, could not deal with the increasing demand. With respect to abortion, committees demanding legalization were created. The parties of the left assumed to a greater or minor extent the women's movement demands. But a strong anti-abortion movement was also organized.

Ideological debates about feminism and its theoretical development characterized the movement. Several conferences were organized in which the main issues of contemporary feminist theory were discussed. Seminars and discussions groups were created. Consciousness-raising groups were organized. A National Coordinating Committee of all feminist groups was established, along with local coordinating committees. The different tendencies of the movement, as they have existed in Europe and the U.S.A., were also present in Spain.

Finally, women's seminars were created in the universities. They are not as strong as in European countries, but seminars and organized conferences are taking place.

By the eighties, however, the movement faced a crisis. Many groups disappeared, while others had less appeal than they had had before. Apart from the ones dealing with the problem of abortion, the coordinating committees almost disappeared. But even if organized feminism was not too visible, its impact on public opinion and on the progressive political



Barcelona graffiti: "Woman is beautiful and marvellous – Lesbians' Committee."  
Credit: Clara Valverde

parties was quite important. Thus when the Socialist party won the election in 1982, a government Women's Institute was created. It does not quite meet the European standards, but it has been an improvement when compared with what the previous government had done. Organizations of this sort have been created at the local government levels.

In order to analyze the impact of feminism on politics, several factors must be stated.

- There did not exist a suffragette tradition in Spain, for the suffragette movement was rather small and did not have the support of many women. The vote was granted because it was a legitimate *international* cause which the progressive parties could not ignore.
- The years in which the movement was strong were the years in which there existed an important mobilization of the population and of political groups demanding democracy. They were the years in which the political democratic transition was taking place.
- The social situation of women, measured by any standards, is marked by stronger discrimination. Women participate less in economic, social, cultural and political activities. Women have not had a

tradition of struggling for their individual rights.

This means that the situation of women in Spain was not similar to the one in the countries where feminism had been strong. In this sense, the main issues and goals discussed in the movement dealt more with the "personal is political" aspect than with concrete political demands. The women's movement did not become an organized pressure group that could negotiate benefits for women during the transition. In spite of this, the constitution and the new laws did incorporate demands for women's participation. The constitution establishes that there can be no discrimination on the basis of sex. The most discriminatory laws were repealed. But all these laws can remain only theoretical unless a strong women's movement is developed.

The second problem that feminism is facing today is its relationship with women and with the rest of society. The movement has to have an important organization and ways of influencing public opinion. The movement, however, has not built this organization. Its emphasis on non-organization, which has been common to the movement elsewhere, has not proved to be efficient in the Spanish context

where important political changes are taking place – changes which will design the state institutions that will probably last for several decades. But the movement never developed a political strategy to deal with these issues. Thus the Spanish feminist movement has not built a political theory and strategy of its own, and has not created mechanisms that will allow for negotiations in favour of women.

This has become specially noticeable since the socialist government has been in office. In principle, they do support women's issues more than the previous center-right government did. Recently an anti-feminist wave, generated by women from the rightist parties, threatens to set back the women's cause. If there is no pressure from women themselves, no concrete measures to improve our status will be taken. In the field of salaried work this is very important, given the economic crisis striking the country.

If feminism is a proposal for democratization, it has to develop its own strategy during the following years so that the institutions that are being created will permit this process to develop. The modern state has an important influence in civil society, especially in a situation like the Spanish, where forty years of dictatorship have destroyed the social organization. Nothing can be taken for granted. Unless the feminist movement develops a new strategy in this direction, it will probably lose force.

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## APRIL SUN

With the first spring furrow  
the warm brown earth  
turns over on its back  
and like a heavy cat resting,  
basks lazily  
in the morning sun.

Florence Tormey  
Montreal, Quebec