Spanish women in the 19th century

For most of the 19th century, Spain was a country in which political participation was restricted to a social minority by means of electoral role, in which the electoral practice was characterized by the adulteration of elections and in which the main political agent was the army by means of different “military raisings”.

The first political examples of feminism tended to aim mostly to social demands rather than political claims.

The acknowledgement of women’s social roles, maternity and care for the family, and the attainment of civil rights were sought rather than the attainment of the right to vote.

Concepción Arenal (1820-1893) and Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) are two examples of this pioneer feminism.

In “La España Moderna” (Modern Spain, 1890) Emilia Pardo Bazán denounced that cultural and political improvements attained throughout the 19th century only increased the distance between the sexes.

The expert in criminal law Concepción Arenal insisted in her writings in the importance of the role of mother and wife for women, claiming that the experience of feminine life was not exclusively centered in the exercise of these roles.

There was little effort to promote women’s educational development throughout the 19th century. In some areas of the country 70% of women could not read and write at the turning of the century.

Women, considered as “home angel”, had as almost exclusive social function home chores and the care of the family.

In Spain we have to wait until the 20th century to be able to speak properly of a collective movement of women’s emancipation.

Spanish Women’s History in the 20th century

Women were basically on a subordinate position to men. This was due to a discriminatory legislation based on the 1870 Penal Code, the 1885 Commerce Code and the 1889 Civil Code.

Spanish women needed the authorization of their husband to carry economic activities, to sign contracts and to purchase other goods than those devoted to domestic consumption. They didn’t have full legal capacity to control their own salary.

The Penal Code established strong sanctions for wives who did not follow husbands’ instructions. It also established that if the husband killed or attacked the adulterous wife or her lover on the spot, he would only be exiled for a short period of time. The penalty for a woman in the same situation was severer.

Women were under a strong social control. The stereotype that women had to be “home angels”, the “diligent mother” and the “sweet wife” imposed a strict behaviour code. Any purpose of leaving this role was strongly reprimanded by both
Spanish feminism had a smaller entity as a social movement than in most European countries. It was always more centred in demands of a social kind such as the right to education or to work, rather than on demands of political equality.

In the beginning of the century, the only feminine organizations are made up by women belonging to the high class, strongly influenced by Catholicism. They don’t support feminine suffrage. The feminism of Catholic inspiration had María de Echarri as its main representative.

The debates about the electoral reform in the Parliament hardly lead to the question of women’s vote. Very few MPs supported women’s right to vote.

In 1912 appeared the Feminine Socialist Group. The development of feminism in the socialist movement will be a slow one. Margarita Nelken, one of the most outstanding socialists, very often complained about the passivity of the women who joined the PSOE (Socialist Party) and the lack of interest with which many affiliates and leaders dealt with the feminine question.

1918 is a key moment in Spanish feminism evolution. The 20th of October a group of middle class women, teachers, writers, university students and wives of professionals created the National Association of Spanish Women (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Españolas, ANME). Among them we can pinpoint María Espinosa, Benita Asas Manterola, Clara Campoamor or Victoria Kent. This organization clearly demanded women’s right to vote, as well as other social demands: the reform of the discriminatory articles of the Civil Code, equality of salaries or the extension of feminine education. ANME didn’t claim the right to divorce and such questions as birth control or abortion were not even considered. ANME meant the first try of creating a feminist and sufragette association which aims for women’s rights with no dependence of political traditional parties.

That very year (1918) the Spanish Women Union (Unión de Mujeres de España UME) was born, with a more leftish character. Its great leader was María Lejárraga.

The following years see the blossom of feminine organizations: the Feminine Youth of the University (1920), the Crusade of Spanish Women (1921).

At the same time, the Catholic Church reacted creating in 1919 the Women Catholic Action (Mujeres de Acción Católica), which intends to oppose the new vision of women which feminist organizations try to develop.
The Second Republic: The conquire of women’s vote

Women’s vote was given in the context of the reforms introduced in the legislation of the Spanish Second Republic (1931-1936). The political coherence of politicians self-called “democratic” forced a revision of discriminatory laws and the concession of women’s right to vote.

The process was a complex one. It was common ground for both left and right wing parties that most women, with the strong influence of the Catholic Church, were deeply conservative.

Some important feminists such as Margarita Nelken (on the left) and the radical socialist Victoria Kent (on the right), who had been elected MPs for the Constitutive Parliament of 1931, rejected the concession of women’s right to vote. They thought women were not yet ready to assume the right to vote and if given, their vote would be in the benefit of the most conservative forces.

Clara Campoamor

Clara Campoamor, also MP of the Radical Party, assumed a passionate defense of feminine vote. She argued at the Parliament that individual rights required an equal treatment for both men and women and democratic principles had to ensure the writing of a republican Constitution based on equality and on the elimination of any discrimination based on sex.

According to a decree passed by the provisional republican government in May 1931 men over 23 were given the right to vote. Women and priests had no right to vote, but could be elected to Parliament. Clara Campoamor and Victoria Kent were the only elected MPs among 465 members in the Parliament. Margarita Nelken entered Parliament by the end of that year.

The debate in the Republican Parliament

The debate which took place in the Republican Constitutive Parliament regarding women’s vote is one of the most interesting of the period, due to the alteration of the classic division between right and left.

Left wing republicans, radical socialists and radicals were the political groups which opposed most to the concession of women’s right to vote. The central idea of their perspective was the belief that women’s vote would be a conservative one. However, within the debate some droll arguments slipped in: that women’s vote could turn into a source of disagreement for couples; that women were not capable of voting as they were mainly dominated by emotion and not reflections; women lacked intelligence and drive etc.

To avoid these women’s incapability some MPs proposed to limit the right to vote to women over 45, or it was even considered to pass an election law that allowed women’s vote provisionally – it was discovered that women’s vote was mainly for the most conservative parties women’s vote would be suppressed again!
Despite the absence of a powerful feminist movement, the Republic was placing Spain in legal aspects at the same level of the most evolved countries concerning equality between the sexes. In this aspect, the 1936 military rising and the Civil War put an end to this evolution. The division of Spain in two opposing and belligerent societies had an immediate reflex in women conditions.

Socialists voted for women’s right to vote in coherence with their ideological principles, with some relevant exception as Indalecio Prieto who even stated that women’s vote was a ‘tab against the Republic’. Some small republican groups and the right wing parties also voted for women’s right to vote. The right wing parties did it not out of ideological beliefs but led by the idea -later proved to be wrong- that women’s vote would be massively conservative. The fact that in the 1933 elections, the first ones in which women could vote, the parties of the right won made many state the feminine natural tendency towards voting conservative. The 1936 victory of the Popular Front came to deny such ideas.

The 1931 Constitution meant an enormous advance in the fight for women’s rights. Not only did it include in its text women’s right to vote but everything related to the family was legislated from a perspective of freedom and equality: marriage based on equality between husband and wife, right to vote, parents’ duties with their siblings...

The Divorce Law (1932) also meant a milestone in the attainment of women’s rights. Very advanced for the time the law was passed after a great controversy in which the Church threatened not to administer the sacraments to the divorced who remarried.

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Women in the Civil War 1936-1939

REPUBLICAN SPAIN

The outburst of Spanish Civil War and the division of the country in two belligerent zones had an immediate impact in the situation of women. The two social and political models that were fighting in the front were mirrored in two visions of women and their social role.

If we think of women in our Civil War there is an image that comes into our mind: the “milicianas” (militia-women) who mobilised in July 1936 against the military coup d'état lead by Franco. These socialist, communist or anarchist militantes of the first days of war represented the best example of transgression of a historical role to which women had been traditionally relegated: the best example of defiance of women’s traditional role was adopting the role of warrior, a historical monopoly of men.

The 1931 Constitution meant an enormous advance in the fight for women’s rights.
Women at war. REPUBLICAN SPAIN

The social mobilization of working women was a process that derived from the republican period. Workers’ Trade Unions had succeeded in enrolling a growing number of woman workers.

After the first war moments of euphoria and chaos, women’s work was redirected towards functions which more adapted to the classical feminine role. The image of the militiawomen was substituted by that of the heroine of the rearguard. Women’s support in the war came to be represented by voluntary work in all kinds of social services, services of assistance and support for combatants. The motto was from then onwards: “Men to the front, women to the rearguard”.

In order to substitute the mobilised men, women entered the work force massively. Paid feminine work increased from 1937. Some women have personified these social changes. The anarchist Federica Montseny, first woman minister in the history of Spain, was the Minister for Health Social Assistance in the Largo Caballero’s government from November 1936 to May 1937. Some revolutionary measures were adopted: the Catalanian Generalitat passed the legalization of abortion and some campaigns against prostitution were started. However, we cannot properly speak of feminist activities. All these initiatives are integrated in the war situation and the political struggle that is tearing the country apart.

Another woman who acquired world recognition was Dolores Ibarruri, “La Pasionaria”. The defence of Madrid allowed her to show her charisma with which she tried to personify the image of the combatant working class mothers. In the atmosphere of the social effervescence proper of a war and a revolution, different women organizations were developed. With La Pasionaria as a great leader, the Antifascist Women Group (Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas, AMA) joined together socialist, communist and republican women. The other great feminine organization was the Free Women (Mujeres Libres, ML), of an anarchist inspiration. Much less important was the Feminine Secretariat of the POUM. These organizations always functioned more like feminist sections of the parties or Trade Unions than like feminist organizations with an independent political project.

These organizations were little by little leaving aside their feminist claims. The rhythm of the war, the fight against the advance of Franco’s army, the struggle to stop fascism monopolised all their efforts.
Women at war. NATIONAL SPAIN

The policy that the new National Spain started in the feminine field was a true reaction against all the reforms and the advances of the republican period. It was a real instauration of a feminine model of submission absolutely impregnated of the ideas of the Catholic Church. The role of “woman-wife-mother” turned to be one of the key elements of the new ideology of the regime which will be called National-Catholicism.

The legislative activity within the war is absolutely coherent with this project. In September 1936 a Decree on the moralization of traditions by means of the suppression of coeducation. The Work Legislation (Fuero del Trabajo) of 1938 proclaimed that the new Spain “will free the married woman from the workshop and the enterprise” and acknowledged the “family as primary and natural cell, foundation of society (...) moral institution with the inalienable right and superior to all positive laws”. That very year the civil marriage law was abolished and also the divorce law. Different legislative measures in the first years of Franco regime confirm this way back towards feminine subordination in all the aspects referred to civil and penal legislation.

The Feminine Section in the Spain of Franco

The main organization in the Spain of Franco was the Feminine Section of Falange Española y de las JONS. Created by José Antonio Primo de Rivera in December 1934, the Section aimed at “awakening in Spaniards, through its affiliates, the conscience of what it means to be a Spaniard” and proclaimed that women were the bearer of values specifically “feminine” in modern life. It was necessary to be “feminine not feminist”. In practice, the falangists devoted themselves to assisting to party members in prison or to the families of those killed in street violence.

Under the leadership of Pilar Primo de Rivera, the Feminine Section grew spectacularly during the Civil War. In April 1937, against Pilar Primo’s opinion, Franco’s Decree of Unification changed the organization of the Feminine Section. With more than 250,000 members the organization concentrated on the care for orphans, the organization of textile workshops, warehouses, washing centres for the combatant’s clothes and nursery.

Pilar Primo de Rivera proclaimed before 10,000 members of the Falange Feminine Section in May 1939, gathered to celebrate the war victory that “the only mission that the mother country assigns to women is home care”.

In accordance with this mentality, a birth increase policy was set forth by means of the concession of familial subsidies, advantages to large families and prizes for high birth rate. To complete this traditional vision of the family, discriminatory laws against women in the labour world were enacted: leaving the job on marrying, the additional sum of money to be given to the head of the family was retired, it was forbidden to exert liberal professions such as state lawyers, notaries, judges...

The Welfare Service and Women’s Social Service

Imitating the nazi Winterhilfe, the Welfare Service (“Auxilio Social”) was created, directed by Mercedes Sanz Bachiller, to deal with the assistance of orphans and mothers. After some problems between Sanz Bachiller and Pilar Primo, the Welfare Service was definitely under the control of the Feminine Section. The Welfare Service had a great increase during the conflict and in the hard after war period.

Finally, Women’s Social Service was created by a Decree of October 1937. All the women between 17 and 35 years had to service for a period of six months. That was the feminine version of the masculine military service. This institution, which survived until the end of Franco regime, was definitely ascribed to the Falange Feminine Section on ending the war.
Spanish women within the Franco Dictatorship 1939-1975
The long after-war period: Women’s conditions in the forties and early fifties

The victory of the National side in the Civil war meant a true counter-revolution in everything concerning the social, political and legislative condition of women. The backward steps initiated during the civil war continued and increased in the long after war years.

The abolition of the Republican reformist legislation—law of Civil marriage and divorce law—and the coming back to the 1889 Civil Code were the juridical reflect of the return to a model of patriarchal society in which women had to be limited to their domestic role, to their historical role of “woman-wife-mother”.

Franco legislation, as corresponding to the “National Catholicism” which inspired ideologically the regime, was a birth promoting one. Birth prizes, family subsidies, advantages of large families were measures that intended the increase of the birth rate in a country that had suffered severe demographic loses during the war and after war periods, a country in which it was hard work for families to maintain their siblings.

This birth-promoting policy was produced under a traditional vision of the family. It was intended to force women to leave their jobs on marrying and it was forbidden by law that women could have certain qualified jobs (judges, diplomacy posts, notaries...). The married woman working would have no right to receive the family subsidies or benefits. Only the father of the family had the right to receive them.

Franco’s model was completed by the strong penalization of abortion and the reform of the 1994 Penal Code by which discriminatory articles regarding adultery, cohabilitation and passionate crimes are reintroduced in the Penal Code.

The Feminine Section

The Feminine Section, an integral part of the Movement, remained as the main feminine organization of the country. The vision of the woman that it proclaimed was crystal clear in the concentration in ho age to Franco which took place in Medina del Campo just after the war. There it was proclaimed that “the only mission that the mother country assigns to women is home care”.

The organization presided by Pilar Primo de Rivera intended to exert control over Spanish women in different ways. The Social Service, created during the war, and obligatory for all single women between 17 and 35 years, was the most evident means. There was more or less direct control of the Feminine Section on the educational system. Primary education school teachers had to belong to the falangist organization, in secondary education it was created a mandatory subject “Home Affaires”, aimed at forming women in their role as “mother-wives”, finally, at University the few female students in their classrooms had to study the subject “Building of the National Spirit” (Formación del Espíritu Nacional).

For the Feminine Section, “the only mission that the mother country assigns to women is home care”

The influence of the Catholic Church

However, the Catholic Church was the key institution on shaping the model of woman sought by the first Franco regime. According to Pious XII it was necessary to re-Christianize a society which had been corrupted during the republican period and the civil war.

The best example was the suppression of civil marriage. Suddenly, many couples which had been united through a civil marriage in the republican period had to go to church to legalize a canonical marriage. It was no question of principles, it meant not to be excluded from family subsidies or, later on, of the benefits of Social Security.

The work from the pulpits and that of organizations such as the Catholic Action turned many women in essential elements in the task of re-Christianizing the Spanish society. The traditional influence of the Church in women was stressed by the high level of feminine illiteracy. In 1940 a 23% of Spanish women could not read or write.
The economic development, the modernization of the country and the feminine condition.

The economic development initiated at the end of the fifties and the subsequent modernization and opening of the country also influenced meaningfully the life of Spanish women.

The educational level increased in an important way. Some data clearly show that evolution. The illiteracy rate descended from 23% in 1940 to 12% in 1970. The sixties contemplate the generalization of women in the educational system: 45% of secondary students and 26% of university students were women.

However, some discriminatory examples of the past were kept, the most meaningful being the peculiar subject of “Home Affairs”, the improvement of the educational level and the massive migration to cities brought about a spectacular change in the situation of women.

Responding to the demands of the new developed economy of the country, the dictatorship had to corner little by little woman’s traditional model. The massive access to work, even considering all its limitations (low occupation rate in comparison to other European countries, salary differences, return home of many women to their home when having children...)

The last years of Franco

Together with the growing movement of protest and having a closer look to the American and European feminist experience of the sixties and seventies, the last years of Franco see the birth of the women movement. As presumed, feminism appears deeply linked to the political opposition to Franco’s regime and the fight for democracy.

Different trends intermingle at this time: the liberal one, represented by the Woman’s Sociological Studies Seminar, entity linked to progressivist Catholicism and to the journal “Cuadernos para el Diálogo”; the socialist one, represented in such examples as María Aurelia Capmany; and the most powerful at the time, the communist one represented in the Women Democratic Movement. All of them, however, coincide in a series of basic demands: women access to work (kindergarten schools to ease this access; same work, same salary) greater access to education; birth control and legal equality. The death of the dictator in 1975 exerted a strong impulse in the attainment of most of these demands.

As in many other aspects, the history of the latest years of the Franco regime in what concerns women is the history of a growing mismatch between social reality and the legislation of the dictatorship. At the end of the seventies, the man continued to be the woman’s legal representative in many cases. Women kept on needing the husband’s authorization to work in commerce, sell goods, be a tutor and even to work for a boss.

The last years of Franco see the birth of the women movement with their demands: access to work and education, birth control and legal equality.

Carmen Martín Gaite, writer, helped to prepare the change

Carmen Laforet wrote about gender violence in her novel “Nada” (1944)
The end of the dictatorship and the return to a democratic system meant the blossoming of the feminist movement and the fast attainment of legal advances which placed Spanish women in a level similar to the rest of the Western world.

Taking advantage of the celebration of the Woman’s International Year, established by the UN, few months after the dictator’s death the feminist movement comes to the public scene. In December 1975 the First Days for the Liberation of Women take place in Madrid, which will be followed in May 1976 by the Jornades Catalanes per la Dona (Catalan Days of the Women).

It could be noticed soon that this feminism born after the silent dictatorship had basically two types of associations: the feminine sections of the left wing parties and autonomous feminist groups among which we can pinpoint the Feminist Collectivity of the writer and lawyer Lidia Falcón.

Few months after the dictator’s death an important legal change had taken place: the abolition of different articles of the Civil Code which stated the role of the male as head of the family and impeded the capacity of married women to freely make use of their goods prior to their marrying, accepting heirs, signing contracts or appearing in trials.

Although the socialist government presented a moderate bill, which was criticized in feminist media, the debate was acid and controversial. The Catholic Church qualified the law as a “gravest violation of the moral order”. Once passed the law in 1983, the Popular Group stoke a claim of unconstitutionality which was not sorted out until two years later.

The controversy of abortion continued to be a topic which separated radically feminist organizations from conservative opinion. However, at that particular time the feminist movement had clearly started to lose strength. The full or partial attainment of most of their demands was the main cause for its decadence. This phenomenon can be appreciated not only in Spain, but in all the Western world. This does not mean that the equality between the sexes has been attained. In spite of the fact that women have growingly become part of the work force or that there are more women than men in the educational system, there are still elements of inequality which keep on feeding public controversy.
First years of the 21st century

Spain continues to be a country with a small active feminine work force when compared to the countries around us; salary inequality is a rule in many economic sectors and feminine representatives in the top scaled posts are smaller than that of men. However, in the first years of the 21st century there has been a topic which, due to its social importance, has been put forward in the public sphere: gender violence. Spanish society has seen fearlessly how tens of women were mistreated and assassinated by their husbands or partners.

The 2004 PSOE victory has permitted a new wave of reforms. For the first time in the history of the country there is a woman vice-president and equal number of male and female ministers. A new reform of the Civil Code, the so called by the press Law of “Express” Divorce has been set by the government. Its objective is to reduce the time for the attainment of divorce and solving in a balanced way, in this case in favour of the male, the problem of the custody of siblings.

Measures against gender violence

However, the great legislative achievement of these first years of the new century is, doubtlessly, the General Law of Measures for the Integral Protection against Gender Violence which was voted unanimously and, thus, passed in October 2004 in Parliament.

The main task of this law is “acting against violence which, as an example of the discrimination, the situation of inequality and the relationships between men and women, is exerted over women by their present or previous partners or by those who are or have been linked to them by similar affective relationships, even with no living together.” This is a legal regulation which established the right of mistreated women to an integral protection. With this aim the law establishes different social, educational, penal and labour measures which intend to put an end to this inadmissible social mischief in an advanced and democratic society.

Abuse against women is ranked as one of the country’s most serious problems

2004: Spain’s new leader appoints 8 women to cabinet

On the election held three days after terrorists blew up commuter trains in Madrid on March 11, 2004 the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party scored a stunning upset over the right-wing Popular Party government of Jose Maria Aznar. The new prime minister has made history by assigning half of his cabinet seats to women and backing legislation to fight domestic violence and legalize abortion, illegal in Spain except in cases of rape and severe birth defects.

The milestone shows how far Spain has come in the 29 years since the end of the arch-conservative dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, when a man had a legal right to "discipline" his wife by beating her and holding hands in public was prohibited.

Female ministers of Zapatero’s cabinet
Chronology

- 1912 — The Socialist Feminist Group is born

- 1918 — National Association of Spanish Women (Asociación de Mujeres Españolas –ANME) founded in Madrid

- 1921 — First suffragist demonstration in Madrid, organised by the Crusade of Spanish Women

- 1924 — The statute of local authority passed in Primo de Rivera’s Dictatorship acknowledges partially women’s right to vote. This right to vote had no relevance in the context of a military dictatorship.

- 1931 — Clara Campoamor, Victoria Kent and Margarita Nelken are elected MPs to the Constitutive Courts of the Second Republic.

- 1932 — Divorce Law passed.

- 1934 — Creation of the Feminine Section in the “Falange”

- 1936 — Federica Montseny, minister for Health and Social Assistance of Largo Caballero Republican government. First woman minister in Spanish history.

- 1937 — Women’s National Service is established in Franco’s Spain. In 1940 will be ruled over and will extend throughout Franco’s dictatorship.

- 1939 — Pilar Primo de Rivera proclaims that “the only mission that the mother country assigns to women is home care”

- 1944 — Discriminatory articles regarding adultery, cohabitation and passionate crimes are reintroduced in the Penal Code

- 1965 — The clandestine Democratic Movement of Women is created, linked to the Communist Party.

- 1975 — Abolition of different articles of the Civil Code which stated the role of the male as head of the family and limited the capacity of married women. Celebrated in Madrid the First Days for the Liberation of Women

- 1981 — Spanish Constitution passed establishing in its article 14 the end of any discrimination due to sex. Divorce Law.

- 1983 — Law of Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (Abortion Law). Once passed the law the Popular Party set a previous claim of unconstitutionality which was not solved until two years later.

- 1988 — The PSOE (Socialist Party) establishes a quota of 25% of women in its voting lists. Later on Izquierda Unida raises the quota to 35%

- 2004 — After the socialist victory a new government is in office whose Prime Minister is José L. Rodríguez Zapatero. For the first time in the history of the country there is a woman vice-president and equal number of male and female ministers. General Law of Measures of Integral Protection against Gender Violence
THE EVOLUTION OF EUROPEAN WOMEN THROUGH THE CENTURIES

IES RIA DEL CARMEN
MURIEDAS, CANTABRIA
SPAIN
2006-2007

1931
Women were given the right to vote

1936, militia women

Madrid, 1934
Women marching

Madrid, 1939
Civil War, National Spain

Madrid, 1949
Women during the Holy Week

Members of the Feminine Section

Madrid, 1978
Women marching for abortion

2004-2007

Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega and the other female ministers are serving in Spain's fifth government since the country's transition to democracy in the late 1970s.

1992 swimmer at the Olympics

García de la Vega, vice prime minister

8 female ministers make history