

New Hope for Disempowered Women under Authoritarian Régimes: The Spanish Experience (1960-2000)

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Introduction

Detecting a glimmer of potentially valid extrapolations from a forty-year old essay has prompted me to re-issue it with this Introduction. The essay reproduced below was written in 1967 as a background paper for a number of women's Extramural Discussion Groups in rural New South Wales. It describes the disempowered status of Spanish women during the major part of the Franco dictatorship which followed the 1936-1939 Civil War. Also mentioned are a few emerging signs of small changes to a status quo supported and enforced by the dominant political and religious powers. What is not mentioned and could not be predicted by those who lived through that period of recent Spanish history (including journalists and social commentators) was the *speed* and *scope* of the political, social and economic transformations which would follow the death of General Franco **in 1975**.

The changes in the status and role of Spanish women over the past thirty to forty years are so profound that much of what is described in this 1967 survey is no longer true. Moreover, the present generation of Spaniards (of both sexes) will find some of the facts astonishing or exaggerated – which is why revisiting this subject at this difficult moment in history may prove to be a salutary and enlightening experience.

The Spain of 2007 is an affluent, vibrant European country which attracts many millions of world tourists every year and is the subject of intense media attention and fascination, especially for its special cultural phenomena. Like other developed countries it has its share of internationally known celebrities (notably in sports, cinema, music and fashion). Spain also has a *simpatico* and down to earth Royal Family.

Like their Western sisters, Spanish women enjoy varying degrees of freedom and equality with men, as can be glimpsed in the internationally popular films of Pedro Almodóvar, the acclaimed director and one-time enfant terrible. Spanish women of today are to be found in positions of high responsibility and authority in national and local politics, in the Public Service, the professions, management, commerce, health, medicine, law (including the police), education and the armed forces. These advances put them on a par with women in countries of similar contemporary status, where, forty years ago, the status of women was somewhat more advanced, as reformers and social commentators have recorded in their chronicles of the Feminist Movement of the 1960s.

The surprise of today's grown up grandchildren on learning of the conditions of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s from their grandmothers, from books or sociology courses is much greater in Spain than elsewhere precisely because the path has been longer and more tortuous, due to a series of historical and cultural factors. In this aspect as in many others, today's Spain is a different planet and its younger inhabitants are almost a different species.

What encouraged me to re-examine and re-offer these personal memories to a much

wider public was precisely that perceptuion of such an unthinkable change in the space of 50 years (1950-2000). In today's uneasy atmosphere of suspicion between ethnic groups and the fear of future clashes between populations predicted and so heavily promoted by the media and politicians, the reality of the socio-cultural abyss which separates Spanish women of 1940-1960 from their twenty first century descendants, and which was not forecast or even imagined by the media forty years ago, may encourage people to be slightly more optimistic about the development of human and international relations in the next forty years. In particular, long term media predictions about the continuing plight of Muslim women, which tend to present overwhelmingly negative scenarios, may well turn out to be based on false premises and expectations, for example, the central assumption that the power of authoritarian régimes and religions are immutable. This is surely an auspicious possibility for women in some of the countries where their current situation is as bad as or worse than that of their Spanish sisters of the mid-twentieth century.

The Status and Role of Women in Spain circa 1960

At the end of the Second World War, there was a wide gulf between the political, economic and social systems of English-speaking countries and those of post-Civil War Spain. Firstly, there was a much sharper contrast between conditions in urban and rural communities. Rural areas in Spain were more backward than towns and cities and preserve even today customs and attitudes which have disappeared from the urban areas. In subsequent references to Spanish women, I shall be referring mainly to those in urban areas, although many of the observations are also applicable to rural Spain.

Another profound difference between Spain and English-speaking countries was the product and legacy of authoritarian rule from two major religions: Islam and Roman Catholicism. Several centuries of Muslim domination of the territories which later became Spain left their mark not only on Spanish art, architecture and language but also on the sociocultural make-up of the people, since peaceful coexistence between conquerors and conquered led to free intermarriage between the two races. This explains why the Muslim attitude to women (i.e. that their purpose in life is to provide males with pleasure, relaxation and company) had a particularly strong influence on Spanish women, and on the attitudes and expectations of Spanish men, particularly in relation to the concept of 'honour'.

The orthodox Catholicism of Rome, which in Spain preceded and survived the domination of Islam, has contributed both to the unification of the country and to the nature of Spanish society and, in particular, to the status and role of Spanish women. One major symbolic influence is the cult of the Virgin Mary, who, in Spain, assumes an importance rivalling that of Christ. Most Spaniards, when they pray for a special favour, invoke one of the numerous names of the Virgin (e.g. of Sorrows, of Succour, of Miracles, of Protection, etc.). Also, in the devout religious processions of Holy Week the local image of the Virgin (not a crucified figure of Christ), carefully dressed and often lavishly bejewelled, is carried around the streets of the parish for the faithful to worship. Both in their prayers and their devotion to the Virgin Mary, Spaniards are recognising above all else, the Mother of Christ, the Mother figure, and in this recognition and worship they reflect their own veneration and respect for the Spanish woman as, above all else, a mother.

Status within a society will largely determine the upper limits of one's role in that society. An idea of the *official* view of the role of women in Spain can be obtained by referring to Article 22 of the brief *Fuero de los Españoles* (a Charter of Rights proclaimed in July 1945 by the present Franco régime). In it the State "recognises and protects the family unit as the basis of Spanish society". An official handbook on Spain is more explicit: "The

Spanish family is a unit ordered and directed by the male.” This “Christian family” is “preserved by the father’s authority and the mother’s constant presence in the home.”¹

This has draconian consequences for the legal rights of Spanish women. For instance, when she marries, her fortune automatically goes to her husband. Moreover, a wife has no power to open a bank account, apply for a passport, sell property, receive inheritances or to sign any legal documents unless her husband gives his permission. If she needs to draw up a legal document, it normally begins “I, Mrs X ..., in the presence of and with the permission of my husband ...”

There is a further piece of evidence that within marriage, legally at least, the Spanish wife is the inferior partner. All Spaniards have *two* surnames although in normal social intercourse only one is used. Let us assume that Miss Pérez Martínez marries Mr García Gómez. She may then be called either Senora (Mrs) de García or Senora /Doña² Carmen Pérez³ de García. In other words, in both cases she is referred to as something ‘of’ (*de*) García (her husband), as a sort of possession or chattel of his.

Another limitation is that, since the State upholds the Roman Catholic view that marriage is “one and indissoluble” (*Fuero de los Españoles*), a Spanish wife cannot obtain a divorce and is therefore always dependent on her husband. Although some husbands may not always treat their wives fairly, it is in the wife’s interest to make the marriage work or to endure treatment which we would consider unfair. Although married couples do separate in Spain, since neither partner may legally remarry unless the other partner dies, separations are rare.

Yet another tenet of the Catholic faith is that the prime object of marriage is the procreation of children. The average Spanish woman complies with this prescription, with the result that after a year or two of marriage, she usually devotes herself increasingly to her maternal role, whilst also attending to her husband’s needs. If a woman finds she is unable to conceive children, she feels frustrated and guilty for not achieving what she has been conditioned to believe to be her primary role in life. This view is shared by her family and friends who look at the childless wife with a mixture of pity and contempt.

Once she has borne children the Spanish wife dedicates herself to the home and the well-being of her family. She lavishes love and attention on the children and in return is respected and venerated⁴ within the home where she exerts considerable influence (although she cannot expect any help with the domestic chores from the male members of her family since this would be “unmanly”).

Moreover, in middle-class families at least, the wife has to take on most of the upbringing of the children since the husband spends very little time at home during the week, owing to the long working hours in offices and the common Spanish practice of holding down two jobs at the same time (one in the mornings and the other following lunch and a siesta) to earn enough to keep the family. This could be avoided if wives were allowed to go out to work but this is not considered to be their “duty” since their place is in the home. The

¹ *Spain*, published by *Servicio Informativo Español*, 1962.

² Like “Don”, a courtesy title prefixed to the person’s given name.

³ Although the woman retains one of her own surnames, it is always the first of the two, that is, her father’s family name; the mother’s surname disappears. The children of this particular marriage would be called (Juan/María) García Pérez and, if any of them were daughters, they too would retain the (male) García and lose the (female) Pérez on marrying.

⁴ So important and beloved is the mother that the most effective method of insulting a Spaniard is to utter obscene curses directed not against him but against his mother. In his well-known 1940? novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway’s rather literal translations of some of these sounded shocking to Westerners at the time.

writer of the official handbook on Spain previously referred to admits that “Only rarely – and then generally in large cities – does the married woman go out to work”.

The traditional position, then, is one of well-entrenched male domination outside the home and, legally, within the family unit. In his famous trilogy of plays written in the 1930s,⁵ the celebrated but ill-fated poet Federico García Lorca, offered a clear picture of this essential subservience of the Spanish woman to the male (while daringly highlighting the dangers inherent in such repression). However, in spite of the State’s view of the father as head of the household, within the family the wife and mother exerts considerable power. In Nina Epton’s book *Love and the Spanish*⁶, the author sums up the position thus: “The centre of the home ... is the mother; the mother is the pivot, affectionate and harsh in turn, generous of embraces and buffets [*sic*], alternatively tearful or excessively gay – woman, in fact, unstable, primeval, but warm, warm as the womb and irresistible.”

Such matriarchal responsibility and power in the home has not only offered the Spanish wife a consolation for her lack of position outside her four-walled kingdom but has prevented her from voicing her objections too loudly or taking other positive steps. For example, if she were to go out to work, her absence from the home would weaken her control over bringing up her children, as has already happened in other countries.

Are there, then, no rights for women in Spain, except those associated with motherhood? In theory, yes, but they are negligible. In 1933, Spanish women were given the vote but with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936 and the victory of General Franco in 1939, this right, along with that of free elections, lapsed. Since then, a small part of the Government has been “elected” periodically by “heads of families”. This has restricted the voting to married men, plus those few widows or unmarried mothers with children.

It was not until 1961 that, under pressure from the Women’s Section of the dominant *Falange*, (the official Phalange Party), a law was passed granting women equality in political and professional life. However, it was only six years later when the vote was extended to *married* women (in October 1966).⁷ Thus, some thirty-four years after they were given the right to vote under a left-wing government, a large number of Spanish women (i.e. all those who are of age but single) are still denied this right – even in restricted elections.

How Spanish women come to accept this basically domestic life and the dominance of the male without protest? The situation is not solely due to the dictatorial pressures of the State and the Church; the upbringing of Spanish girls is also involved in the process.

Since the Spanish mother has the larger share of bringing up the children, the domestication of girls is largely a self-perpetuating process. Not only does the mother instil in her daughter by her own example the virtues and duties of motherhood but the daughter is expected to help around the house as soon as she is able. Further, at school, especially at secondary level, which for middle class girls usually means a strict Convent school run by nuns, the girl is given a traditional education with an emphasis on practical (i.e. domestic) subjects like cooking and sewing. Generally speaking, the girls receive no sex education, so that when they come to marry they are ignorant about sex. This does not seem to be displeasing to the Spanish male who, on the whole, rates femininity, simplicity and modesty as the highest qualities in a prospective bride. For most Spanish males, intelligence comes very low on the list of attributes considered desirable in the ideal wife.

⁵ *Blood Wedding, The Childless Wife and The House of Bernarda Alba* (available in a Penguin translation)

⁶ Available in a Penguin edition.

⁷ This was for the recent much-publicised election on 10th October 1967 of 102 members of the new *Cortes* (Parliament).

On leaving school, the Spanish girl may do one of three things, depending on her intelligence and the economic position of her family. She may get a job, stay at home or, in a few cases, go to University. By the mid-1950s a further possibility had been added: going abroad to study a language, either on an “au pair” basis or independently. The resulting contact with other societies, is helping to bring about a change in the Spanish girl’s attitude to her traditional role in society.

Irrespective of her choice of career, with some notable exceptions amongst female University students, the girl’s main object is to find a *novio* (a hybrid form of ‘boyfriend’ and ‘fiancé’) and, often after a long courtship lasting several years, to get married and have children. Many of the girl students in Spain who can afford to go to University appear to have an eye on a possible “catch” rather than a genuine desire to study or gain a qualification.

During this period of working or studying, the girls will also be learning from their mothers and from a short compulsory period of Social Service (a form of extra training to be a housewife supplemented with Francoist political propaganda) more about domestic arts than is customary for Australian, English or American girls. They will also be preparing their trousseau or “bottom drawer”, some of it stitched by themselves.

Although the days of chaperones or *duennas* are over, the Spanish girl still has less freedom than girls in other Western countries. Even when she finds a *novio*, he will not normally be presented to the family until she and they have ascertained that his intentions are “serious”. Even more daring urban girls often have to avoid acquiring the reputation of being a “flirt” (that is, someone who changes boyfriends), since there exists a real difficulty that later a more serious *novio* will be hard to find because of the Spanish male’s preference for an innocent bride. Such ‘emancipation’ is therefore merely superficial and held firmly in check by more traditional attitudes.

Spanish girls who go out to work before marriage rarely return to work after their wedding. Instead they settle down into the predestined/preordained role of wife and mother. The period of work is seen as an interlude and a means to save money to get married. The same applies to many female University graduates who may take up a career but usually abandon it altogether once a wedding ring is placed on their finger.⁸

There are exceptions to the above rule. Some Spanish women pursue a professional career (especially in teaching) with great success. The existence of this minority of women, underlines the fact that Spanish women, when given the right education and training, are not incapable of demonstrating equal ability to that of the Spanish male. The pages of Spanish history also offer a sprinkling of exceptional women who have risen above their traditional status and made a significant contribution to their country’s cultural history: Saint Teresa, the sixteenth century mystic; Queen Isabel I (Isabella) who, together with her husband Fernando (Ferdinand), gave Spain unity and promoted the Arts as well as the discovery and colonisation of Hispanic America; the nineteenth century novelists, the Countess Pardo Bazán and “Fernán Caballero”;⁹ and the Galician poetess, Rosalía de Castro.

Since the end of the Civil War in 1939 there has been a significant increase in the number of Spanish women who have obtained literary success. Such women as Ana María Matute, Elena Quiroga and Carmen Laforet probably reflect the increasing participation of educated women in other fields – although there is something very traditional in the fact that the last-named writer retired from writing for a few years in order to devote herself to her young children.

⁸ Wedding rings are worn on the right hand in Spain; engagement rings on the left.

⁹ A male pseudonym adopted by Cecilia Böhl de Faber in order to prevent prejudice against female intellectuals from spoiling the chances of publication of her first novel.

Other women prominent in present-day Spain are Franco's wife Doña María del Carmen Polo *de* Franco (a notable patron of charities), the Duchess of Alba (also noted for her charitable works) and Doña Pilar Primo de Rivera, the daughter of the Spanish dictator of the 1920s and sister of the martyred leader of the Phalange party. In addition there are popular female idols of stage, screen and the mass media but the average Spaniard (male and female) draws a distinction between the members of this group, who remain essentially feminine and lead "normal" married lives, and most other professional women, who are regarded with suspicion and considered more or less as freaks for having stepped beyond the limits generally accepted by other females.

But what of those who do not marry? Many, of course, in a Catholic country become nuns. Society respects this as being another sort of marriage commitment. Nevertheless, since nuns are not allowed to bear children, they are judged by Spaniards to be unfulfilled. Other women who remain unmarried, whether to devote themselves to a career or for other reasons, are regarded as slightly abnormal, as people to be pitied because, in traditional Spanish terms they are denied – or have dared to reject – the fulfilment of womanhood. To be sure, thanks to the strength of the extended Spanish family, they can usually lavish their affections on nephews and nieces and see this affection reciprocated. Some, however, turn to the Church and find consolation and fulfilment in regular worship and in helping the poor. Unfortunately, some of this group, both in the towns and in the villages, turn into self-proclaimed protectors of public morality and exhibit such extreme prudishness at the acts of other people that they have earned for themselves the uncomplimentary Spanish epithet of *beatas* – interfering religious hypocrites.

In the country, economic needs produce a different pattern from that set out above since the woman, even after marriage, may well have to work for someone else, or help with the smallholding, the village shop or the café. Indeed, it is quite common to see women working in the fields of Spain, especially at the peak periods of planting and harvesting. However, even here the work seems to be regarded as a necessity, secondary to the woman's function as wife and mother.

In the towns, beginning also with those families whose economic circumstances overrule tradition, the working class wife very often goes out to work, for example, as a maid or a seller on a street stall.¹⁰ In the industrial cities there is also the possibility of factory work for some, although employers prefer young girls to older women.

At the other end of the social spectrum, aristocratic or wealthy women have privileges of their own due to financial independence, sophistication and cosmopolitan background. It is usual for women of this class to indulge in "part-time" occupations either of a charitable nature (for example, raising money for the poor) or serving on numerous committees, in other words entering into community life just like women in more emancipated societies.

Professional careers are possible for a small minority of Spanish women from wealthy families who are to be found in the ranks of journalists, writers, doctors, lawyers, University teachers and social workers, but very often the price of pursuance of these careers is to remain unmarried, which may shed further light on the dearth of Spanish women in top professional posts. Moreover, since opportunities at this level are very limited, the public (both male and female) is still relatively unaccustomed to seeing women in positions of authority and responsibility, it regards most Spanish professional women (as well as resident foreign ones) with some suspicion and disapproval. Doubtless with the demands of a changing society these numbers will increase and public opinion will change, but the battle for equality may well be harder than in other countries, in spite of the 1961 Law on Equal

¹⁰Usually the wares consist of a basket full of sweets, cigarettes and cheap toys and the 'stall' is any busy street corner or section of pavement.

Rights for Women mentioned earlier, because the average Spanish woman is conditioned into an acceptance of her present status.

To leave the subject there would be tantamount to ignoring the fact that Spain, like other countries where traditions have previously been rigid, is undergoing changes brought about by increasing industrialism and economic progress. Within the last ten years many new factors have come to affect the position of women in Spain and since signs of possible changes are already evident, they need to be outlined.

The sort of social evolution which is now taking place might well have occurred thirty years ago at the time of the Spanish Civil War. At that time there were signs on the Republican side that this national crisis – like the Second World War for other European countries – would give Spanish women a more equal footing in society. One woman, the Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri, (nicknamed the Passionflower), rose to political prominence, whilst many others enlisted in the army and fought beside the men. The Nationalists, on the other hand, like true Spanish traditionalists, would not allow anything like this to happen on their side and when they eventually won the war, Spanish women lost a valuable opportunity for emancipation.

Until the mid-1950s nothing much happened to alter the traditional status of Spanish Women. New factors began to appear: numbers of foreign tourists began to rise steadily; American aid and the resulting increase in national prosperity which allowed more Spaniards to travel abroad; the emigration of thousands of Spanish workers (women as well as men) to all parts of Europe and beyond. All these have helped to open Spaniards' eyes to the position of women in other parts of Europe.

The sight of women smoking and wearing trousers in public; driving their own (or their husband's) cars; wearing bikinis on Spanish beaches (previously a punishable offence); couples kissing in public: in short evidence of a less rigid code of behaviour and feminine independence of the male, has not been lost on many Spanish women and may even have converted some of the men. In the larger towns young couples already behave in a much freer way and they are showing a tendency to move away from the formal *novio-novia* relationship towards the more casual boyfriend-girlfriend variation of other European towns and cities. Similarly, middle-class girls are becoming more adventurous and are thinking in terms of higher education as a means to a career. They are also adopting the international habit of going abroad to work, learn a language or just to have a good time before settling down to married life. Moreover, amongst young married couples, it is no longer totally unknown for the husband to help with the dishes or with other household chores. When judged against the rigid traditional background outlined above, this domestic detail shows a measure of progress towards equality for Spanish women, even if it sounds trivial.

Naturally, there are many people in Spain, mainly the older ones, who do not like what is happening and who say so or write to the newspapers to rail against the "laxity of adolescent morals" and so on, but in spite of their protests it would seem that this is the thin end of the wedge, and although the process may be a slow one, the gradual upgrading of role and status of Spanish women seems destined to continue. [1967]

Postscript and reminder forty years later:

From the vantage point of 2007, it is surely not too far-fetched to imagine the medium or long term possibility of equally important and unexpected changes for women in other male-dominated societies (perhaps accelerated with the increased pace of modernity). Who can predict with certainty what will happen in the next 50 years, or 20?