

THE UNAPPRECIATED SEX? WOMEN'S CHANGING ROLE IN SPANISH SOCIETY

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Introduction

Historically, Spanish women's cultural identity has been deeply engrained in their traditional roles as mothers and wives. Because modern middle- and upper-class women's identities were formed and cemented by this rigid society, women who defied this role were sometimes seen as betraying their sex and their families. Despite initiatives by the Spanish government and progressive-minded citizens working to change attitudes, Spain lags in comparison to other European countries with respect to gender equality.

By hindering women's capacity to be prominent contributors to society, Spain is underutilizing its collective human capabilities and productivity potential. Although cultural attitudes do not change overnight, progressive strides will benefit Spanish women and the entire country. In order to achieve these necessary advances, Spain should take direction

from other European countries that have achieved a greater degree of gender equality. Spain therefore might shape its own gender legislation to be more in line with its neighbors' policies while also looking within to reform existing structures in Spanish society.

In this article I first examine women's traditional roles in Spain. I then look at the main problems women in Spanish society face today, as well as what the Spanish government is doing to rectify them. I suggest ways that Spain can become a more gender-equal society by looking to other countries with a greater degree of equality.

History of Women's Roles in Spain

Historically, the prescribed identities of Spanish women as mother and wife were so engrained that a woman's self-esteem was based on how well she performed these roles. According to Enders and Radcliff, in middle-

and upper-class families being a mother was seen as providing an invaluable and essential service to the community, for the mother was the dominant force in shaping the family character. (Enders and Radcliff, p. 27) Because men were the breadwinners and women their helpers, Spanish women were viewed as the “inferior sex.” These beliefs were strongly associated with traditional Catholic doctrine in Roman Catholic Spain. “Machismo,” or exaggerated masculine superiority, an attribute of Spanish culture present for centuries, also contributed to women’s subordinate social position. Although the intensity of these commonly held feelings about women has varied during different periods in Spanish history, the underlying idea of women’s inferiority has remained constant. (Enders and Radcliff, p. 28)

Prior to the beginning of Spain’s industrialization in the 1860s, there were few alternatives for women other than taking care of the home. Lower-class married women, however, were the exception and worked because their income was essential to their family’s survival. Despite the fact that a few career opportunities became an option in the early 1900s, middle- and upper-class women seldom worked. Furthermore, if middle-class women did want to work, they needed their father’s permission to hold a job. Even if a woman was given permission, she was labeled a betrayer by others who viewed any activity other than childrearing and house tending as inappropriate distractions from her duties to the family.

Starting with the Second Republic of the 1930s, ideas slowly began to change. The 1931 Constitution granted women the right to vote and to hold public office. Although men and women were becoming equal in theory, Spanish society was still far from egalitarian. (Galvanez, personal interview) During this time, wage work became common for single and widowed women. Many of these women immigrated to cities hoping to find wage work, which became increasingly available as a result of industrialization and economic development. As for married women, the stipulation was that if they did work, it could not interfere with home obligations. Spanish society was becoming more relaxed about women’s entrance into the workforce if they did not have any familial obliga-

tions. Despite this, five million of the approximately six million families in Spain continued to feature housework as the woman’s primary job. (Cobo)

During the 1930s, activist Spanish women emerged who were motivated to alter the status quo. These women set the precedent for the pre-Franco revival of the feminist movement. (Enders and Radcliff, pp. 28–35) One of the most noteworthy warriors for women’s rights was Dolores Ibarurri, known as “La Pasionaria.” Ibarurri was a Communist Party member, an activist, and a founder of the Organization of Anti-Fascist Women. (“Dolores Ibarurri”) The Organization of Anti-Fascist Women embodied the ideals that women’s public participation in reshaping society was fundamental to a successful gender revolution and essential to Spain’s ultimate survival. Ibarurri stressed that women needed to redefine their own priorities and status in society. Her views of female independence and the progression of political and social advancement were the foundation of the fight for women’s rights up into the 1980s when they shaped the ideals of modern Spanish feminists. (Patati)

During the Second Republic, a group of female anarchists called *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) also fought for women’s liberation along with the goal of establishing an anarchist government in Spain. They worked to empower women to become active contributors to society by not bowing to stereotypes that kept women from advancing politically and economically. However, the advances won by Ibarurri and the *Mujeres Libres* during the Second Republic were overturned by the rule of Francisco Franco beginning in 1939, although their thoughts and progress would later be re-solidified by the revival of Spanish feminism in the 1980s. (“*Mujeres Libres*”)

During his dictatorial reign, Francisco Franco held a strong grasp over the Spanish state. He believed that his intervention in the social and economic affairs of Spain was essential to retaining his rule and an orderly society, and he viewed women’s increasing autonomy as a threat to his rule. (Carrasco and Rodríguez) Shortly after his ascension to dictatorship, Franco institutionalized his feelings about women in 1938 with the promulgation of a law

called the *Fuero del Trabajo*. This law instructed employers to remove their women employees from the workforce and fill their positions with male employees. It also advocated women taking their traditional roles in the home and community and strongly emphasized women's participation in volunteer work. (Enders and Radcliff, pp. 58–59) As part of his master plan, Franco reorganized an existing group called the *Sección Feminina* that emphasized women's importance in the family. This group taught women how to perform their prescribed roles as mothers and wives in hopes that they would agree that they were most needed in those positions. (Kromayer)

Spanish Women and the Economy in the 21st Century

In the 1970s the Spanish economy began to grow rapidly. With Franco's death in 1975, Spain's opposition to women's independence decreased. After Franco, middle- and upper-class women began to gain the freedoms that the feminists of the 1930s fought for, and they increased their presence in public life. During the 1970s Spain's overall gross domestic product increased by eight percent a year, a large portion of which was due to women's participation in various sectors of the economy. (Iglesias and Riboud, pp. S201–S217) Spanish women's labor force participation rate (LFPR) has risen dramatically, from only 22.9 percent in 1964 to 40 percent in 2001. More women now than ever are making the decision to set aside or share their home duties in order to work. (Salido) Of Spanish working women, five percent work in agriculture, 15 percent in industry, and 80 percent in the service industry. ("Labor Force Structure") More women are also entering Spanish universities to prepare for careers that require additional education, thereby expanding their knowledge base and credentials for employment. (Carrasco and Rodríguez)

Despite the movement among middle- and upper-class women towards social and economic equality, Spain still lags far behind many of its neighboring countries in the area of women's issues. The LFPR of Spanish women in 2000 was still the lowest in the European

Union, five percentage points below the European Union average of 45 percent. (Woolls) By way of contrast, the LFPR of women in Sweden was 48 percent, in Portugal 44 percent, France 45 percent, and Italy 39 percent. ("The World Bank Group...")

Some positive effects of women in the labor force can already be seen. Spain's per capita GDP has been on the rise, especially from 2000–2004 when it increased 22 percent to \$22,000. Even though this number is still below the European Union's average of \$27,000, Spain is making dramatic movements towards a higher GDP per capita, which can be attributed to the ever-increasing number of women who are entering the Spanish workforce. These statistics demonstrate the positive effect that the increase in the number of women working in Spain has on the economy and on the country as a whole. ("Spain to 2004")

The Work/Mother Balancing Act

Even though the number of Spanish women in the workforce is growing, there are still many barriers that keep them from obtaining and keeping employment. One barrier is the Spanish mindset itself, especially in men and also in more conservative Spanish women who still strongly believe that a women's place is solely in the home with children. As a consequence, women who want to continue in the workforce throughout their lives have to make sacrifices, such as postponing or rejecting marriage and motherhood. (Iglesias and Riboud, pp. S201–S217)

Examining current labor force participation rates of women throughout their lives can shed light on this work/motherhood trade-off. Approximately 50 percent of women in their early-to-mid-twenties are working. At this time in their lives, women have few responsibilities but still need to support themselves, since many are not yet married. The number of working women decreases dramatically when women reach their thirties, which are common years for marriage and childbirth. The labor force participation rate drops to 29.6 percent at age 30, and it remains constant at 28.6 percent when women hit age 40. (Iglesias and Riboud) By tracking these rates, it is apparent that once

women become mothers, they usually sacrifice their working careers. ("Spanish Profile: Labor")

Employers also tend to reject women for jobs that require a great deal of intellect or time commitment. In general, employers justify not hiring women by claiming that men perform as well, if not better, than women. By hiring men, employers do not have to worry about the possibility of absence from work due to pregnancy. As a result, Spain's overall 14 percent female unemployment rate in 2004 is one of the highest in the EU. Among women with children, 40 percent are unemployed. Furthermore, if women are hired, they are often underemployed. Employers fear that if young women are hired and given large amounts of responsibility, they will later become pregnant and will no longer be able to work. ("Spain Suffers Worst Unemployment in All EU")

When women interview for a job, interviews are often conducted in a highly discriminatory fashion. Women tend to be interrogated more thoroughly about personal matters that are irrelevant to their qualifications for the job. For example, they are routinely questioned about their age and the number of children they have. If they do not have children, they are often forced to reveal if they plan to have children in the future. In Spain, asking such personal questions is illegal but is often ignored by employers. (Adam, pp. 301–23.)

If women do advance beyond the interview stage, they may be hired on a temporary contract basis. Thirty-four percent of Spanish women are hired under this type of agreement. Women have to renew their contract every year and each time must go through a review process. Although temporary employment contracts are common in Spain even among men, men are still more likely than women to receive permanent contracts. (Adam, pp. 301–23) Because employers are not allowed to fire women if they become pregnant, a temporary contract enables employers to control whether the woman is rehired annually. The whole system of temporary contracts makes the Spanish work system more unstable. It creates a distant relationship between employers and employees where employees feel less allegiance to their work and tend to work less efficiently. The temporary

contract system is particularly problematic for younger female workers who have no intention of starting a family but are still punished for the possibility. (Woolls)

Many Spanish women choose to leave work permanently after having children because they do not want to face the repercussions associated with maternity leave. Women who do take maternity leave often embark on a downward career spiral, mainly because men and non-pregnant women view them as "weak" for needing to take time off from work. In 2000, a pro-business think tank called the Business Cycle proposed an idea that would defray the costs that companies incur when employees are on maternity leave. According to this plan, women who want to continue to work after pregnancy would pay a fraction of the cost of their leave. The rationale for this proposal was that companies would be more likely to hire pregnant women who were financially accountable for their leaves. This proposal encountered massive opposition, however, and as a result never materialized.

Another plan which also involved placing the financial burden of pregnancy on the woman proposed that all women should deposit a portion of their pay into a fund to cover employee taxes paid by the employer during their maternity leaves. If a woman did not use the maternity-leave fund, she would be reimbursed when she became 53 years old. Although these ideas were never put into practice, they illustrate the attempts of various Spanish groups to limit women's reproductive choices. (Woolls)

Currently, paid maternity leave in Spain is 16 weeks long, much shorter than that given in many other countries in the European Union, some of which offer parents as much as a one-year break from work to take care of their children. Of these 16 weeks, six have to be taken by the mother immediately after the birth of the baby. The remaining ten weeks can be split between the mother and father as they please. After their maternity leave, both men and women are guaranteed the right to return to work with the same salary as when they left. Although this practice is law, it is often ignored by employers who refuse to pay women an identical post-child salary or who don't let women

take the full time off granted by law. (“Maternity Leave and Parental Rights in Spain”)

If women today decide to have children, it is difficult for them to stay in the workforce. The Spanish system is structured in a way that makes the work/child balance challenging. Working women tend to spend more hours at work than men, putting in on average 9 hours and 13 minutes a day compared to their male counterparts, who work an average of 7 hours and 58 minutes. (Carrasco and Rodríguez) Because women are also expected to tend to the household regardless of employment status, they have less personal time. On average, working women spend 7 hours and 30 minutes a week on household duties, whereas men help at home for only 1 hour and 30 minutes a week. (Carrasco and Rodríguez, pp. 45–57)

The official working hours of Spain also make it difficult for women to balance work and children. The typical Spanish workday begins at 8:00 in the morning and runs to 2:00 in the afternoon, followed by a 2-hour siesta or break. Work then resumes at 4:00 in the afternoon and may continue until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. These hours make it difficult for women to care for children, because they are not compatible with normal daycare center hours or children’s needs. Therefore, if women work, they often need to find extra childcare for after-daycare hours. (Carrasco and Rodríguez, pp. 45–57)

The work/family trade-off that Spanish women face can be further illustrated by examining the experience of Isabella,¹ a tax partner at a prestigious accounting firm in Spain. In a personal interview, Isabella commented on her long work hours and thus her choice not to have children. Although Isabella is married, she is in the minority because it is difficult for working women to find the time to devote to a relationship with the long Spanish working hours. Of 29 partners in the Madrid accounting firm Isabella works for, only three are women, and none of these women have children. Isabella says that childrearing and work are not compatible because society does not accept husbands taking care of the children, and it is difficult to find adequate childcare. She suggests that the Spanish government should provide

daycare, change working hours to be in line with those of regularly operating childcare facilities, or provide subsidies for childcare. She also feels that the home/work balance is important and asserts that it is essential for women to have time outside of work to explore other talents and hobbies. Isabella is saddened by the fact that Spain still must catch up to the rest of the world in terms of gender equality.

One of the main problems Isabella points out is that daycare in Spain is very difficult to find. Since public education starts at age three, many working families with children often ask their relatives to help with childcare. Often families hire immigrants as nannies, a less costly form of childcare, but worry about the influences of foreigners with different customs and languages. Even those Spanish women who can afford adequate childcare continue to face hardships when returning to work after maternity leave. Sometimes their responsibilities are reduced because employers believe that mothers will not be able to handle the same stresses they faced before the child was born. The few women who do hold jobs at the top of the corporate ladder are often demoted once their child is born. (“Employment Penalty after Motherhood in Spain”) If a woman decides to quit her job before having a baby, finding a new job afterwards is difficult. Many employers do not want to hire mothers because they believe the family will require too much of her energy. The employment rate of mothers after giving birth illustrates this, as only 35 percent of women who worked before having a child are employed within a year after. Often women who do want to return to work after giving birth seek part-time employment, which also is difficult to find because it is uncommon in Spain. The lack of part-time work, as well as the job penalty for being a mother, makes it difficult for mothers to resume their employment. (“Employment Penalty after Motherhood in Spain”)

Educational Hurdles

Receiving an adequate education that leads to a full range of job opportunities is another hurdle for Spanish women. Although women comprise 51 percent of the Spanish

¹Her name has been changed to protect her privacy.

population and around 60 percent of Spanish university enrollment, the fields in which they receive their education are narrow. ("Education") Most Spanish women study in traditionally female-dominated fields, such as humanities or health studies. Only a small percentage of women enroll in technical programs, whereas 90 percent of men in contrast pursue technical degrees. ("United Nations Committee...")

Although more women than men attend universities, what women learn in college is less often applied to their work. Because women's educational subjects are so narrow, they are either limited to working in very specific fields or they are improperly trained for their job. (Spain Presents 3rd, 4th Reports...) In the workplace, they are also unequally compensated in comparison to men with the same education level. On average, college educated men earn 1,500 euros a month, whereas women earn only 1,000, or 70 percent of what men earn with a similar education. (Miller)

Divorce

Another hurdle faced by Spanish women is obtaining a divorce when marital difficulties arise. Divorce in Spain did not become legal until 1981. Since then, the divorce rate has risen from 4.69 per 100 couples to 12.84 per 100 couples, with women seeking divorce more often than men. Because many Spaniards are Catholics and the Catholic Church does not allow divorce, many Spaniards continue to believe that divorce should not be permitted. (Carrasco and Rodríguez, pp. 45–57)

Despite being legal, it is still difficult to obtain a divorce. Because of the gender wage gap, women often cannot afford to get a divorce. They are usually financially dependent on men, especially if they have children. Therefore, women sometimes remain in marriages in which they are not happy or that may be abusive because they cannot afford any alternatives. The divorce law in Spain also has many stipulations which complicate and prolong the divorce process. In Spain a couple will usually wait two years or longer to obtain a divorce. Those wanting a divorce can get one in one of two ways. First, couples must establish that

they have been living apart for at least two years and that there was a mutually agreed-upon separation. If one partner opposes the separation, the couple must establish that they have been living apart for at least five years. Men and women can also obtain a divorce by providing a lawful reason as to why the marriage should be dissolved, such as adultery. The case will then be tried in court, and a divorce can be obtained in about a year. Often when couples divorce, the recommended alimony is not paid. In 1989, the courts approved a law which threatened to fine husbands if they did not pay alimony. Two years later the law was amended so that wives could take nonpaying husbands to court. Still, 80 percent of alimony goes unpaid, making it difficult for divorced women to support themselves. (Hooper, pp. 183–85)

Reform in Progress

Through government initiatives, Spain is making progress in helping women attain gender equality. Since 1987, the percentage of women working has increased greatly, and female university enrollment now exceeds male enrollment. (Whiteman) The election of March 2004 brought a more progressive liberal government to power. Spain's new Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, and his political party, the Socialists, have pledged to allocate 25 percent of its posts to women. (O'Grady) Zapatero has also appointed eight women to his cabinet and has promised to put women's issues at the top of his agenda. His goals include eradicating domestic violence, legalizing abortion, and streamlining divorce proceedings. Another objective Zapatero wishes to achieve during his time in office is to create a government and a society that can be compared favorably with Sweden, which has equal male-female representation in government and widely followed policies concerning gender equality. The election of a new, more liberal party to political power signaled that the present is an ideal time for sweeping changes to be made to advance women's status in Spanish society. (Socolovsky)

Legislative bodies to work on issues of gender equality have been created, including Spain's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),

which is a part of a greater United Nations body. The 23-person CEDAW was developed to bring about changes for women in Spanish society and to promote the provision in the Spanish Constitution of 1978 which states that all women and men are equal before the law. It has sought to create and endorse affirmative action policies to help women in underrepresented areas of the economy enter the workforce in greater numbers. CEDAW has also fought to purge school books of traces of “machismo” and to make educational materials more gender neutral and less demeaning to women. It has encouraged women to enter technical, male-dominated fields of education by providing them with grant money and financial assistance. Finally, CEDAW has been fighting for equal pay for women and advocates an increase in the availability of part-time work.

In 1983, the Instituto de la Mujer (Institute for Women’s Issues) was established by the Spanish government under the umbrella of the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women to push for equality among the sexes and encourage more female participation in the Spanish government and economy. The Institute for Women’s Issues soon became the main women’s policy organization at the national level. It conducts research and educational campaigns on women’s issues, especially those relating to employment and women’s rights in the workplace. The Institute has also developed incentives for employers to hire more women. (“Spain Presents 3rd, 4th Reports...”) It has also helped erect the plans to increase women’s participation in the public sphere. For example, the 1993–1995 Second Equal Opportunity Plan for Women focused primarily on women’s education and health issues. It also pushed for employers to promote women to higher positions of responsibility and hoped to bring about less discriminatory working conditions for women. The Third Plan was carried out from 1997 to 2000, and also sought to establish common European anti-discrimination policies that would promote gender equality. (“Equality Mechanisms and Policies...”)

Recommendations

Even though Spain is working towards the goal of advancing the status of women, impor-

tant aspects of this process are lacking. For Spain to achieve a greater degree of gender equality, it is beneficial to examine successful organizations and policies of other countries that achieved these goals as well as to suggest changes in certain aspects of Spanish society to achieve a greater degree of equal opportunity. In the past two decades, the Scandinavian countries have achieved great success in promoting gender equality. A good example is Sweden’s 1992 Equal Opportunity Act, which has helped many Swedish women enter the labor force. This legislation promoted equal rights and working conditions for men and women. It also attempted to improve the working environment for women by prohibiting job discrimination based on gender, pregnancy, or past family history. Also, Sweden has established the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman position to serve as an advocate for individuals in gender disputes, as well as to monitor employers’ efforts to become more gender neutral. The Ombudsman is also responsible for providing employers with equality training and information on how to maintain a gender neutral workplace. (Sweden. SE)

Sweden also encourages a healthy work/child balance, as well as an equal distribution of childrearing responsibilities with its flexible maternity leave schedule. Parents in Sweden are given a total of 480 days of childcare leave which can be divided in any way between the parents. Of these allotted days, each parent must take at least 60 days off to help with the care of the family. Also, the Swedish government allows fathers to take a 10-day leave with full pay once the baby is born. (Sweden. SE) The government encourages men to take time off from work to help their wives and to encourage the equal sharing of parental care responsibilities. (Adam) Sweden also allows parents of children under the age of eight to shorten their work day by two hours. Parents face a reduction in pay for this employment flexibility, but are able to devote more time to their children and the maintenance of their family. (Sweden. SE)

Like Sweden, Norway has adopted practices to help families with the work/child balance. Norway has instituted a program of government-sponsored childcare for working parents. Norway is also considering instituting

a direct cash subsidy for parents with children. This would allow parents to either send their children to daycare or provide them with income if they choose to stay at home and take care of their children. The subsidy could also be used by parents to hire au pairs or nannies. The Norwegian government is attempting to allow working parents a greater deal of flexibility in their work schedules as well as childcare options so that both parents are able to care for their children while remaining in the workforce. Because of Norwegian legislation aimed at achieving a work/family balance, over 70 percent of mothers are employed outside of the home. (Morkhagen)

The success of Swedish and Norwegian policies designed to promote gender equality leads to the belief that similar types of legislation elsewhere may bring about analogous results. Spain could benefit from instituting a more flexible maternity leave schedule or setting up an Equal Opportunity Ombudsman. Examining other countries' successful strategies and fine-tuning them to fit its own societal structure may greatly benefit Spain and allow it to become more gender neutral.

Although borrowing from other countries' successful policies can help Spanish women advance in society, Spain must also alter its pre-existing societal composition that makes it difficult for women to become equals in society and the workforce. Spain must first change the way that women are viewed in relation to the family. Because women have always been viewed as the family caregivers and men as the breadwinners, it has long been socially unacceptable for men to help with household duties. This notion must be dispelled. If men learn to understand the crucial nature of sharing household responsibilities and act accordingly, women would have more time to devote to work and education while men would also be able to have more involvement with the family.

Altering the Spanish childcare system is another way in which society could relieve some of women's burdens. First, Spain could change the hours of childcare facilities to become more consistent with working hours. If childcare facilities were open later, women would not need to worry about children's care

until after they returned home from work. The government could also help alleviate the childcare problem by providing subsidies to families to hire additional childcare help after care facilities are closed. Another way to deal with this issue is to have care facilities placed in offices. This would allow women to work and remain in contact with their children throughout the day. In Spain many families cannot afford childcare; therefore, the government must find a way to fund care starting before the age of three, which afterwards is subsidized by the Spanish government. One suggestion is that the Spanish government create childcare co-ops. A co-op could be composed of families who all take turns taking care of the children.

Spaniards also need to make some alterations to their work environment. Part-time work, especially for mothers, needs to become more available and more acceptable in the workplace. Part-time work allows women to be active contributors both to the economy as well as their families. Temporary contracts might be amended to allow both women and men to work with a company on a more permanent basis. By eradicating temporary contracts, women and men will feel more secure in their jobs, allowing them to invest more of themselves in their work. Although there are countless types of legislation and changes that can be proposed, Spaniards need to remember that achieving a positive cultural change takes time and cannot be brought about overnight.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Spain must move forward in the area of women's issues; if it does not, it will continue to underutilize its human capital. More policies to protect women's rights must be implemented. Spaniards also need to be more accepting and supportive of women pursuing education in fields that are not traditional for women, so that they may apply their education to their work. Spanish men need to share the childrearing and household responsibilities so women do not feel like they have to choose between having children and working. Divorce laws must be amended to make it easier to obtain a divorce and alimony laws must be enforced. Although the Spanish system contin-

ues to experience difficulties in the area of gender equality, it can look to other countries for guidance. There are countless types of legisla-

tion that can be proposed, but Spaniards still need to remember that cultural change takes time.

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