

The Role of Spanish Women in the Household and Craftwork in the First Years of the Regime of General Franco: The Women's Section

After the Civil War, Franco's Dictatorship in Spain revitalized the so called Women's Section, created in 1934 as the female section of the Falange political movement. It was an organisation similar to those in Germany or Italy, which promoted the role of women as mothers and wives in accordance with the ideology of the regime.

Losing the war in 1939 implied the end of the initiatives of the Republic to dignify women, promote their access to higher education and their participation in public social activities. Franco's regime made women go back to their homes, (mostly in the first decades) making fun of republican women considering them 'tomboys' or depraved persons who wanted to subvert the biological order of housebound women. It is in this historical and ideological framework that we analyse how the Women's Section was created and how they organised training courses for women as 'home managers'. These courses aimed to train women not only in daily matters such as cooking, childcare or domestic tasks, but also in the revival of popular craftworks, decoration and furnishing as well as manual arts.

Keywords: Spain, Francoism, women, interior design, craftwork

It is not necessary to describe, as it is well known, the minor role that women played during Franco's regime in Spain (1939–75), mostly in the first part of the regime. At that point, as Simone de Beauvoir described in 1949 a woman's life was always subject to her husband. Her role was that of a secondary gender reliant on the primary, leading agent of the historical transformation: the man.¹ First from the Falange with the Women's Section as the enforcer, and later on with the Opus Dei in the second half of the regime, they created a feminine ideal that implied the return of women to their homes. As Capel pointed out, several campaigns were developed during the 1940s from different perspectives (church and state) enhancing the prototype of the housewife as the agent responsible for the well-being of the family because of their dedication to domestic tasks.²

The hierarchical differences between men and women implied that females were not capable of having their own view of the world, which meant they embraced the sets of values and roles that the male gender established. However, that imposition was enforced subtly, so it seemed it actually came from the subject group, women. During Franco's Regime, especially in the first decades of the postwar period, women had a relevant position, as mothers to give birth to the children of the 'New Spain', to raise those children and educate the new society of the regime. Women were considered in charge of bringing up their families, as wives and mothers. The policy aimed at raising the birth rate provided extended families with several benefits, as long as women did not work out of the house. This promotion to raise the birth rate was not only based on ideological issues, but also on a national need, as in the first period of the regime it was necessary to counteract the demographic emptiness caused by the Civil War. Similarly, the discrimination of women in the labor market somehow alleviated the unemployment rate of the 1940s and 1950s in a country devastated by the war.³

- 1 Simone de Beauvoir, *El segundo sexo* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000). First edition in French *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949.
- 2 Rosa M^a Capel Martínez, *Mujer y trabajo en el siglo XX* (Madrid: Arco Libros, 1999), 47.
- 3 Gloria Nielfa Cristóbal, *Mujeres y hombres en la España franquista: Sociedad, política, economía y cultura* (Madrid: Instituto de investigaciones feministas, 2003), 31.

The ideological context regarding the role of women during Franco's Regime was based on two premises⁴: the bourgeois model of the housewife and the model promoted by Catholicism. In the first case, it is widely known that since the Industrial Revolution took place there was a process of separation between the productive sphere (work place) and the reproductive sphere, related to domestic matters. Men belonged to the first model, and non-working women to the second, except for those women of the high bourgeoisie who had domestic servants, thus joining the two spheres. Women were then considered the 'angel of the house' and the backbone of the family stability. On the other hand, the traditional catholic discourse promoted the idea that women should be linked to the family, taking care of the house and children's education. The female model of this catholic discourse was Virgin Mary, who was the ideal of purity, service, sacrifice and modesty. Moreover, as Jesuit Enrique Herrera Oría pointed out, they had to 'educate girls in what should be the basic ambition of every woman: make the home an extension of who you are'.⁵

Education for women of all ages was based on transferring a culture limited to the private and domestic sphere, and their training was focused on moral education, rather than intellectual training. Those values associated with femininity were developed from early childhood, in order to create perfect housewives, devoted wives and perfect managers of their homes, while men took care of the social and political management. However, even in this female role, the daily life of women was subject to their social condition. This distribution of gender roles was only possible in the urban middle class and the high society, where ruling the house or attending formal ceremonies were part of a bourgeois ritual. In most Spanish homes lived reality was a different situation. After the war, society in Spain was mainly rural, and that prototype of the woman staying at home and taking perfect care of the house and family was only a utopia. Rural women not only took care of the house, but also of the animals and gardens, and they collaborated with their husbands in cultivating the fields.⁶ Even in the technocratic age in the 1970s, with the exodus from rural areas to the cities, many low class women contributed to the household income carrying out all kinds of activities.

The Women's Section and the Female Ideal in the Fascist Discourse

The Women's Section was an institution that contributed to establish the ideological discourse of Spanish women during Franco's Regime. It was led by Pilar Primo de Rivera, and it was 'the only

legal political organization for women after the war'.⁷ It was created in 1934, a few months after the foundation of the Spanish Falange led by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, Pilar's brother. It was disbanded in 1977 after General Franco's death. It played an important institutional role as it controlled the training for women of all levels and ages. After the war, this organisation was in charge of education for girls and it had general control over women (very often in conflict with schools run by nuns, who saw the Women's Section as a rival), as opposed to the confrontations existing in the Falange. Discrepancies with the clergy were usual, in spite of their strong catholic orientation. For example, a controversial aspect was the incorporation of physical education into the academic curriculum. In order to join this type of physical activities, they created the 'pololos', a sort of baggy short trousers to be worn under the skirts, and which did not please the members of the Catholic Church.

We shall take into account that the participation of Falangist women during the war was very scarce, devoted to social and medical assistance to injured people, or to clothing, sewing uniforms and equipment that soldiers needed. However, during the Second Republic the political and social implication of women was seen as a threat, and that is why the Women's Section promoted an approach to domesticity, which implied the confinement of women in their 'natural' environment: the house, ignoring the different duties women carried out inside the family unit, especially in the rural areas. That domestic ideology actually entailed that women had to go back to the private sphere. Since the end of the Civil War, the training on which the Women's Section relied promised that soldiers coming back home would have 'such a pleasant family life, that they would find anything they may want inside their homes, so they would have no need to look for anything in taverns and casinos in their free time'.⁸

Its main role was instructing young women to be good mothers and wives. This type of pedagogy was disseminated among *Escuelas de Hogar* (Domestic Schools), *cátedras ambulantes* (Travelling Professorships) and the Social Service compulsory for women, which were, all in all, training courses on matters related to maternity and domestic subjects. As Álvarez Puga stated, most of the activities of the Women's Section had to do with household tasks, in line with all the fascist ideologies which relegated women to the domestic sphere.⁹ The 3 k's German slogan: 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' (children, kitchen, church) which encouraged women to embrace the traditional way of life, and which Hitler would later on take up, was imitated with the 3 c's 'casa, cocina, calceta' (house, kitchen, knitting).¹⁰ The Women's Section found a similar model in the *Fasci Femminili* in Italy or in the *Mocidade Feminina* in Portugal, which had identical propaganda lauding female reproductive roles and

4 Jordi Roca i Girona, "Esposa y madre a la vez. Construcción y negociación del modelo ideal de mujer bajo el (primer) franquismo," in Gloria Nielfa Cristóbal (ed), *Mujeres y hombres en la España franquista: Sociedad, economía, política, cultura* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 2003), 50–51.

5 Enrique Herrera Oría, "Educar en la niña a la mujer," *Atenas* (December 1938), 366.

6 Matilde Peinado Rodríguez, *Enseñando a señoritas y sirvientas: Formación femenina y clasismo en el Franquismo* (Madrid: Catarata, 2012), 44.

7 Lourdes Benería, *Mujer, economía y patriarcado durante la España franquista* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1977), 19.

8 "La gran concentración femenina de Medina del Campo," *Revista Y* (June 1939).

9 Eduardo Álvarez Puga, *Diccionario de la Falange* (Barcelona: Dopesa, 1977).

10 Victoria Sau, *Diccionario ideológico feminista* (Barcelona: Icaria Editorial, 1981), 165.



Fig. 1. Meeting of Pilar Primo de Rivera with the Nazi Women in 1941 in Berlin. Courtesy of Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1976-112-03A, October 1941.

showing women as mothers of the children of the nation and also sharing the same concerns about gymnastic activities.¹¹

The fascist component in the first years of Franco's Regime was obvious until the Second World War broke out. As in other authoritarian European regimes (Italian and German) the Spanish Government relied on a strong repression, using attractive rhetoric pretending to be the saviors of the civilization, and even showing a fake desire to encourage the masses to participate in the political decisions of the nation. Some gender issues also present great similarities among Italian Fascism, German Nazism and Francoism: policies aimed at raising the birth rate, patriarchal family structure, the promotion of the home and maternity, exclusion of women from the labor market.¹² Likewise, the three regimes had their own women's organizations, as the German *Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft* and *Deutsches Frauenwerk*, which were the model that the Women's Section followed in many aspects. We know of 16 trips by a delegation of the Women's Section to Germany, in addition to the stay in Spain of six groups of *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (Fig. 1).¹³ In September, 1941, the leader of the Women's Section Pilar Primo de Rivera travelled to Germany where she was welcomed by Adolf Hitler whom she gave a sword and a dagger elaborated by a craftsman in Toledo,¹⁴ at the request of Franco himself. Besides, there was an exchange of delegations with Italy, although it was less relevant than the one

11 Giuliana di Febo, "La condición de la mujer y el papel de la iglesia en la Italia fascista y en la España franquista: Ideologías, leyes y asociaciones femeninas," in *Ordenamiento jurídico y realidad social de las mujeres: Siglos XVI a XX* (Madrid: Seminario de Estudios de la mujer Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1986), 446.

12 Rosario Ruiz Franco, *¿Eternas menores? Las mujeres en el franquismo* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2007), 25.

13 Antonio Morant i Ariño, "Una importante expresión de amistad hispano-alemana: Les visites de Pilar Primo de Rivera a l'Alemanya nacionalsocialista, 1938-1943," in *l'Encuentro de Jóvenes Investigadores en Historia Contemporánea de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2008), 2.

14 During the visit to Germany she was received by different Nazi leaders to 'offer a clear vision of the attention that the Nazi policy has dedicated to the feminine'. *Revista Y* (Mai 1938).

with Germany. As in other contemporary regimes, Francoism aimed to instill the values and way of life that followed the model of a fascist society, which implied women were to serve their husbands, and become 'perfect maids' whose final goal was no other than 'improve the family life'.¹⁵

Domestic Activities and the Household for the Women's Section

The organisational structure of the Women's Section consisted of National Schools, Residence Halls, Farm Schools, craft workshops, Domestic Schools, lodgings, press and propaganda, publications (as the journals *Y*, *Teresa* or *Bazar*), Vocational Training Schools, Social services, Nursing Schools, etc.¹⁶ The Domestic Schools seemed to imitate German models and focused on the idea of the woman as the main element in the house and family and also on the need to receive theoretical and practical training for that purpose. Although back in 1941 there were fifty seven domestic schools throughout Spain, there were more than one thousand mixed schools that combined official education delivered by a teacher, and training on domestic aspects, with either one or more specific teachers.¹⁷ Single-sex education offered specific courses for young girls: 'Family and social education', 'Sewing' and 'Music and songs', in addition to 'Dressmaking', 'Domestic economy and social relationships', 'Postnatal care' or 'Cookery' in advanced courses (Fig. 2).

In 1942 the Rural Domestic Schools were created thanks to a consortium with the National Institute for Colonization, which belongs to the Ministry for Agriculture. Their purpose was to keep the training program of each city, without taking women away from their environment. Part of their activities had to do with the rural environment, like the *Escuela de Economía Doméstica Rural de Aranjuez*¹⁸ (Rural Domestic Economy School of Aranjuez), *cátedras ambulantes* (travelling professorships), farm



Fig. 2. Cooking classes, Barcelona, 1943. Courtesy of Merletti Collection/ IEFCA Ref. ACP-1-295.

15 M^a Teresa Gallego Méndez, *Mujer, Falange y Franquismo* (Madrid: Taurus, 1983), 198.

16 Carmen Alcalde, *Mujeres en el Franquismo. Exiliadas, nacionalistas y opositoras* (Barcelona: Flor del viento ediciones, 1996), 59.

17 Luis Suárez Fernández, *Crónica de la Sección Femenina y su tiempo* (Madrid: Asociación Nueva Andadura, 1993), 109.

18 The School of Aranjuez was created in 1950 for the training of rural instructors, and the following year it would become a collaborating school of the Ministry of Agriculture.

schools or rural homes in the colonial villages, in the rural areas. In addition to traditional songs and regional dances, cookery and sewing, women received training on how to be a truly good housewife, which, in a period of 45 days, included whitewashing walls, gardening arrangements, balconies, kitchen, etc.¹⁹ Moreover, there were advocates of the Women's Section who visited the homes to 'make improvements' and recommended that women 'make use of their old domestic utensils or clothes'.²⁰ For traditional Spanish women in the postwar period, the fact that their role as wives (or even as mothers) could be questioned, was used by the Regime as a control measure. It is fair to imagine that housewives could fear being called into question.

In all the places where the Women's Section developed their activities, they recommended women take extreme care of their hygiene and appearance in order to 'instill the desire to strive for perfection from the very beginning, and achieve a greater refinement, thus raising the cultural level in Spain'.²¹ It was also suggested that those places should have an austere decoration, to prevent those women 'from getting used to excessive luxury, as they could not keep up with it', but at the same time setting the example of the minimum living standards 'they should achieve in their own homes'. Likewise, women were advised to take up sewing and dressmaking as a usual activity, which also had a practical use. It seemed that sewing and dressmaking were intrinsic to females because 'every little girl loves sewing'. So from a very early age they should start sewing, firstly with a cloth to practice sewing stitches, backstitches, hems and buttonholes, being able after some to make table cloths or table linens and then practice pin stitching, laces, piping, embroidery or cross-stitching (Fig. 3).

Concerning domestic tasks, the Women's Section provided training on home cleaning and ventilation, the importance of the exposure of the house and the distribution of rooms, the furniture that was necessary for each room, natural and artificial lighting or the different heating systems (Fig. 4). There were even courses focused on Decoration, which dealt with the importance of the aesthetic of the home, decoration of walls and ceilings, distribution of rooms and how to use the available space, material and distribution of furniture, combination of fabrics and the use of decorative objects like vases, pictures or even indoor plants (Fig. 5). Interestingly, this training program included a section on how to have a little washroom inside the house to enjoy some privacy.²²

The publications linked to the Women's Section suggested austerity in decoration, in line with the economic status of the country after the civil war. On the one hand, women were encouraged to take care of the domestic economy focusing on their resources and planning their needs in advance,

19 Pilar Primo de Rivera, *La Enseñanza doméstica como contribución al bienestar de la familia española* (Madrid: Comercial Española de Ediciones, 1961), 24.

20 Primo de Rivera, *La Enseñanza doméstica*, 25.

21 Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS. Delegación Nacional de la Sección Femenina, *Plan de formación de las juventudes* (Madrid: Afrodisio Aguado S.A., 1946), 14.

22 Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS. Delegación Nacional de la Sección Femenina, *Plan de formación de las juventudes* (Madrid: Afrodisio Aguado S.A., 1946), 184 and 198.



Fig. 3. Sewing classes, Women's Section, 1942.

Courtesy of Fondo Santos Yubero, Archivo Regional de la Comunidad de Madrid (ARCM).



Fig. 4 Home Schools, 1940.

Courtesy of Fondo Santos Yubero, ARCM.



Fig. 5. Classes at the Home School, Madrid, 1942.

Courtesy of Fondo Santos Yubero, ARCM.



Fig. 6. The kitchen, *Medina Journal*, 1943.

especially in the kitchen, as it was considered to be a place of 'order and cleanliness, where all the family will gather and sing wonderful songs'.²³ On the other hand, women were also encouraged to use old furniture, as 'you may restore and rejuvenate your old-fashioned furniture yourself'²⁴ and also to make their own curtains, bed covers and tablecloths etc. which were explained on a regular basis in many women's magazines (Fig. 6). That strong orientation to take up recycling and be self-sufficient is parallel to the lack of a national industry able to fulfill the domestic needs at that time. Thus, women with all the instructions provided by the media and the training delivered by the Women's Section became decorators of their homes.

Craftwork in the Women's Section

It is worth mentioning how the Women's Section promoted Spanish craftwork. In general, a quite large Falangist faction believed that embracing modern trends meant losing their national identity, and thought they were antinational, cosmopolitan and capitalist. As Llorente has explained, craftwork has three main values for the Falange: social and economic, as a way to increase the income of a population impoverished by the war and by the lack of industrial fabric; ideological, overlapping the anti-capitalist discourse of the Falange, as the promotion of artisans was contrary to the foundations of capitalism, with an interesting religious connection, because the spiritual mission of craftwork

fostered an approach to God; and, finally, an aesthetic value, as it highlighted the beauty of craftwork pieces as opposed to the ugliness of the industrial production.²⁵ Moreover, as the press at the time showed, this craftwork revival aimed to 'embrace the Spanish style in our homes again'²⁶ by searching for national values in craftwork pieces and going back to traditional models. This desire to go back to craftwork showed some similarities with the beginning of Nazism, since Hitler's Regime presented women as 'the guardians of the German culture' and as the ones responsible for keeping the traditional songs, dances, dresses and craftwork typical of the country.²⁷ The interaction between the fascist ideology and the desire to go back to craftwork traditions would also be a permanent feature of the Italian fascism and until 1944 different trilateral events between Spain, Germany and Italy were common on Spanish soil.

The starting point of this revaluation of craftwork was the creation of the *Obra Sindical de Artesanía* ('Crafts Syndicate') in 1940, conceived as a local organization, aimed at providing assistance, and included in the corresponding 'vertical union'. Its activities went from the elaboration of a census containing occupations (385 occupations) and a local census of handicraft artisans, to some specific activities like craft markets, organization of exhibitions and contests, artisans' cooperatives or the awarding of loans. As most part of the artisanal activities was performed by women, the Women's Section got involved in their vitalization. In the same way that there had been a process to rescue Spanish popular music and dances through the *Coros y Danzas* ('Choirs and Dance') groups, presenting them as a combination of physical exercise and promotion of the national roots,²⁸ the training on craftsmanship monopolized the education of the young Spanish women.

It seems that the willingness of the Women's Section to promote craftwork started out in the last months of the civil war, as an activity that could provide additional resources to peasant families of the national faction. In May, 1939 there was a craft fair in Santander with Spanish products, which later on travelled to San Sebastián and Valencia in 1940. In the VI National Conference of the Women's Section held in Granada on January 2, 1942, it was agreed to collaborate with the *Obra Sindical de Artesanía*, in order to disseminate the craftwork production throughout the country and provide assistance in the organization of its activities. In October of the same year the first national craft fair was organized out of the country, with an itinerant exhibition that travelled to Lisbon, Berlin, Frankfurt-am Maine and Vienna. Moreover, a singular body of craftswomen was created and entrusted with the elaboration of a 'Census of Handicraft Artisans'.²⁹

25 Ángel Llorente, *Arte e ideología en el franquismo (1936-1951)* (Madrid: Visor, 1995), 56.

26 *ABC*, July 21, 1942, 16.

27 Jill Stephenson, *The Nazi Organización of Women* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

28 The great success of *Coros y Danzas* was due to their international tours and the success of the film *Ronda Española*, released in 1957 and directed by Ladislao Vajda.

29 Luis Suárez Fernández, *Crónica de la Sección Femenina y su tiempo* (Madrid: Asociación Nueva Andadura, 1993), 148.

23 *Medina*, December 5, 1943.

24 Juan (Brian) Basilio Gómez, *La decoración de la casa modesta* (Barcelona: Leda, ca.1950), 10.



Figs. 7 and 8. Inauguration of the craftwork courses organized by the Women's Section with a delegate of the Nazi delegation in Madrid, 1942. Courtesy of Fondo Santos Yubero, ARCM.

The so called 'apprenticeship training' delivered in the *Talleres-Escuela* ('Workshop-School') of the Women's Section, and whose objective was to provide training to ensure a better economic stability in a future life, included theoretical and practical training on art, Spanish craftwork and geographical situation of the Spanish craftwork, emphasising the details 'typical of a specific region'.³⁰ That is, the objective was not to achieve a deep knowledge about the Spanish craftwork tradition, but to get a general idea on a theoretical basis and to achieve a practical performance according to the characteristics of each region (Fig. 7). They organised workshops to learn how to make dolls, toys, carpets, laces, weaving, knitting, and how to work with straw, wicker and hemp. It is worth mentioning that in this same training program for woman under eighteen years of age, ten out of the twenty topics covered in their History of Art subject were the so called 'minor arts', maybe because these skills were considered better suited for their future life rather than, for example, painting skills. It must be taken into account that the range of techniques and models was huge because of the country's rich craft tradition and every territorial organisation identified the potential of each region in different crafts (Fig. 8).

The basic reason for this promotion of the craftwork performed by women was to alleviate the terrible economic situation of many families in the post war period, but there was also a deep underlying nationalistic feeling, with a strong wish to keep local tradition and national products. This shows

one of the contradictions of the Women's Section: in spite of the strong defense of the national catholic role of women, who were restrictively limited to the household, it favored self-employment and promoted entrepreneurship culture on a small-scale, in which even the husbands and children in the family collaborated.³¹

Conclusion

The Women's Section, as an organisation for women in the Francoist era, developed intense training activities aimed at a model of catholic bourgeois woman as the perfect housewife, who met the needs of her husband and of a traditional fascist society. From its creation in 1934, the Women's Section promoted the idea of the woman as mother and wife, keeping the house clean and neat, with no ambitions, always recycling and on a constant state of self-production. That way, women of the first period of Franco's Regime were decorators and producers at the same time, designers and decorators of their homes in the post-war period, which had no national industry or distribution channels, in a country devastated by the Civil War. In the same vein, the Women's Section promoted the recovery of craftwork in a national ideology that praised the popular values of the State. Women took part in this craft renovation as manufacturers and even entrepreneurs in charge of modest small companies.

³⁰ Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS. Delegación Nacional de la Sección Femenina: *Plan de formación de las juventudes* (Madrid: Afrodísio Aguado S.A., 1946), 214.

³¹ Alison Lever, "Capital, Gender and Skill: Women Homeworkers in Rural Spain," *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), 6.

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