

WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN FRANCOIST SPAIN:
HOW TO BE AN ACTOR FOR THE STATE

by

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ABSTRACT

Gen. Francisco Franco began his dictatorship in Spain immediately following the Spanish Civil War in 1939. He remained in power until his death in November 1975. The ideology of his regime essentially stripped women of their citizenship; however, the regime also noted that women could be useful actors for the state – by fiercely maintaining their private space so that their husbands and sons could uphold their public patriotic duties to Franco. Thus, women were educated on exactly how they could serve the state. This indoctrination was done in three primary ways: the use of historical figures, domesticity training, and the institution of a Catholic curriculum. Women were educated in numbers higher than ever before in Francoist Spain, a fact seemingly contrary to the regime's values, but they were also prohibited from aspiring outside of the home. My project focuses on this paradox and how it was implemented.

1. Introduction

After studying abroad in Seville, Spain, in the spring of 2016, I came to recognize that Gen. Francisco Franco had left a lasting impact on the country. The dictator, who led the country for 36 years, profoundly affected his citizens' lives — to the point where the mother of my host mom in Seville would not even speak about the years she spent living under his regime. She simply prefers to pretend that it never happened. Hearing her story inspired me to learn more about how women lived under the strict conservative, Catholic regime. In narrowing down the topic further, I chose to focus on education, due to the contentious nature of women gaining access to it over the course of humankind. Women have not always been allowed in schools, so how were women educated in the Francoist state? The paradoxical nature of the subject surprised me greatly. While the ideology of the Franco regime prohibited women in almost every aspect of life, education enabled women to be useful actors for the state. This paper begins with an overview of the historical background, explains the educational system of Francoist Spain, and concludes with three ways in which women were taught to be actors for Franco.

2. Historical Background

The Spanish Civil War broke out in the summer of 1936 after a group of right-leaning officers in the Spanish Republican Armed Forces called for the overthrow of the elected, left-leaning government called the Second Republic. These officers, including General Francisco Franco, attempted a military coup on July 17-18 but failed to take over the entire country. Thus, a civil war began that would last for three years. The insurgents, called the Nationalists, had a few goals: to reinstate the Catholic Church, to bring an elitist order back to the country, and to destroy “democracy, which, in the words of one prelate, was ‘godless’” (Carr 253-54). From the Nationalist point of view, the war was a struggle between communist anarchists and Christian

civilization. They intended to prevent a leftist revolution that would catapult Spain away from tradition (Payne 231). The Nationalists had the support of the Catholic Church, the monarchist conservative group called the Carlists, and a fascist political party called the *Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista*. On the other side of the conflict were the Republicans, a democratic, leftist group loyal to the Second Republic. From the Republican point of view, the war was a struggle between fascist tyranny and democratic freedom. They wanted to save Spain from a right-leaning counterrevolution (Payne 231). Although subscribing to differing ideologies, what is true is that both sides committed horrible atrocities. The Republicans frequently targeted church officials – “over 4,000 priests, more than 2,600 monks and nuns, [and] thirteen bishops were murdered; churches were looted or burnt down” (Carr 257). On the other side, the Nationalists had a method of killing described as “official, systematic, and calculated” (Carr 257). Their soldiers “massacred thousands of captured Republican soldiers, government officials, and known Republican supporters, trade-unionists, and freemasons, men and women, following a deliberate policy of sowing terror to overcome resistance” (Carr 257). All in all, an estimated 500,000 people lost their lives, and almost as many fled the country in order to escape the violence. Finally, on April 1, 1939, the plainly superior Nationalist Army defeated the Republican Army, and Franco took power over Spain, a position he would hold until his death in November 1975.

Franco and his regime put forth a campaign that the Civil War had “[cleansed] the nation of un-Spanish elements” (Harvey 279). The biggest enemies of the Francoist state were democracy, atheism, and capitalism. His “‘official truth’ depicted Spain as a glorious empire with roots in the mythified past of the fifteenth century” (Harvey 279). The fifteenth century was the era in which Spain was reunited after centuries under Islamic rule and when the Spanish navy

was a global conquering force. Franco believed that he could return Spain to these traditional roots. Helping him in this mission were all the stakeholders that comprised his regime. Among them were the Catholic Church, his military generals, the Falangist political party, and the Carlists. Despite the fact that Franco had “totalitarian tendencies, [he was] kept on a leash” by these groups (Carr 265). He maintained control of his power, then, “by repeatedly shifting the balance of influence within the regime according to internal and external pressures” (Carr 265). Thus, the policy that came out of the time was mostly a collaboration amongst all these actors. This policy included a strict, traditional view of gender roles. Women were effectively stripped of their citizenship in Franco’s Spain and were “legally at the mercy of their parents or husbands when seeking to travel, get a job, or gain custody of their own children” (Harvey 292). They had no legal standing, and any involvement outside of the home required permission from the men in their lives (Ramírez-Macías 1518). Whereas the Second Republic had even allowed women to vote – a huge measure in declaring their equal citizenship – Franco initially prevented women from appearing in the public sphere. In fact, one of the regime’s biggest goals for women was to reverse the post-World War I trend of women leaving the home and becoming actors in the public. Remaining in private, Franco believed, was better suited for women, and so promoted the idea that it was un-Spanish and even heretical for a woman to stray from the home (Canales 375). The Franco regime also upheld traditional, Catholic values, whereby a woman’s only job was to be a dutiful wife and mother. For the regime and the Catholic Church, “gender constituted the very essence of selfhood; gender differences provided stability and social order to the nation and clarity of purpose to the individual” (Morcillo 78). There was no question that men and women were inherently different and that women needed to remain in their place. This mindset severely influenced the way in which women were educated.

3. The Educational System

From the mid-19th century onwards, the Spanish government adopted a principle later-known as “inclusion through oversight”, whereby women were not prevented from attending school but were neither necessarily encouraged. In fact, there were “no specific provisions governing academic secondary education for girls”, so it was up to the individual woman and her family to determine whether or not she would go to school (Canales 376). Women, if they had the luxury to continue schooling, therefore had two educational pathways from which to choose after primary school. One was primary teacher training, which became co-educational under the Second Republic. This track was “deemed sufficient to satisfy the cultural aspirations of young ladies, even those who did not intend to enter teaching” (Canales 376). The other was an academic track called *bachillerato*, which, for a small number of women, could lead to university. This latter option became more popular for women after a decree in 1910 “abolished any special requirements for girls to access secondary education and universities” (Canales 377). Co-education was a principal tenet of the Second Republic, one that did not align with Catholic and conservative ideology. Thus, during the Spanish Civil War, Nationalist-controlled zones prohibited it and created girls-only secondary schools, in which girls were taught the exact academic curriculum of their male counterparts, but in separate environments (Canales 378, 384). The Nationalists also re-segregated primary teacher-training colleges and restored their traditional level as a “less demanding alternative” to the *bachillerato* (Canales 384). When the war was over, all the stakeholders in Franco’s regime attempted to create plans specifically outlining an appropriate plan for schooling girls, but their conflicting interests prevented any legislation from becoming law (Canales 382). In fact, a Nationalist 1938 law on secondary education included no mention of women (Canales 378). The regime later acknowledged that it

was not possible to prevent women's access to schools (Canales 380). Thus, "inclusion through oversight" once again became the norm regarding women's education. However, the legal text at the time "created a scholar identity intrinsically the opposite of Spanish femininity" (Morcillo 84). For example, the University Regulatory Law of 1943 clearly "established the state Catholic version of femininity that stressed asexuality, exalting either virginity or motherhood, and called for different forms of subordinate behavior" (Morcillo 79). Even the director of higher education José Pemartín said the following of women in higher education: "It is necessary to guide women students by preventing them from the feminist pedantry of becoming university women, which should be the exception, [and lead] them to their own magnificent female being. That [being] is developed in the home" (Morcillo 85). So, although women were not prohibited from completing higher education, the language of the government made it clear that it was not encouraged either.

Despite this principle, women kept going to school, although they were mostly wealthy, upper-class women. At the end of the 1950s, forty percent of students enrolled in the *bachillerato* programs were women, up from just fifteen percent in 1930. Additionally, nearly twenty-five percent of university students were women by 1960 (Canales 386). However, secondary education in particular became "highly elitist", and it is for this reason that "of each 100 women who are over 60 years old, only five managed to receive secondary education, and in fact, only one in 200 reached university. More than half of the women this age are barely literate or did not complete primary education" (Harvey 277). The state shuttered nearly fifty percent of its public schools, leaving the educational system to private schools, mostly run by the Catholic Church (Canales 387). This meant that only families from the upper and upper-middle classes could afford to send their daughters to school. Therefore, the reality was that many lower-class

women, especially those from former Republican families, had to work to support their families. This situation was only tolerated by the regime if the husband was “unable” to support the family – a case likely in the wake of a civil war that maimed and killed thousands (Hudson-Richards 91). For those women who did go to school, “education served the forces of unity and uniformity. It was the process by which the individual related to the concept of nation” (Morcillo 78). Therefore, Franco’s regime acknowledged that education was the mechanism in which it could promote its ideals. A school was the best place for instructing women on how to make themselves useful for Franco.

Following the Civil War, the number of girls in school grew steadily, but “the type of education they were to receive was severely limited by the plan that the Regime had outlined for them: to become ideal housewives and mothers” (Harvey 278). In this way, women could serve the state and raise the next generation of good Spanish children. Girls were taught that the “job” of motherhood was absolutely central to the success of the Spanish state (Hudson-Richards 89). Their children would be the future of Spain, and if they wanted the country to succeed, they would have to bring up sons and daughters who would conform to their patriotic duties. Simply put, “becoming first wives and then mothers constituted women’s contribution to the national endeavor” (Morcillo 80). The classroom became the “principal site of promoting and disseminating the beliefs of the new state”, namely, that girls were to be “religious, moral, a lover of the home, and vigilant mothers to their children” (Harvey 278, 280). Their teachings emphasized that their aim should be their “future role as dutiful wife and mother” and that this was far more important than any other aspirations they might harbor (Harvey 282). Girls were taught that, in subscribing to this ideology, they were serving Spain. By creating a government-sponsored curriculum for girls, Franco “clearly evidenced the state’s desire to perpetuate true

Catholic womanhood. All Spanish ladies had to conform to this norm for the good of the fatherland as much as men had to become half monks and half soldiers” (Morcillo 95). The regime also believed that the home was a miniature version of the state, and so a woman had to ensure that her family’s private space was in order so that her husbands and sons could venture into the public space and do good for the country (Hudson-Richards 92). The overall “best contribution women could make in the construction of the new Spain was excelling in their motherly (private or social) duties” (Morcillo 85). Women’s work became entirely domestic, and “the regime’s discourse endowed it with a new social value” (Hudson-Richards 87). One source went so far as to describe the situation as such: “Franco’s state viewed women as its indispensable complement in nation building” (Morcillo 80). Simply put, without women keeping the private space in order, Spain could not achieve the goals that Franco had laid out postwar. Therefore, the curriculum for girls in school in early Francoist Spain centered around this idea of service, primarily through the use of historical figures, domesticity training, and a Catholic-centered curriculum.

4. Francoist Indoctrination

The Francoist educational system frequently manipulated Spanish historical figures to force its narratives onto girls, especially in primary school. Franco’s regime “felt it was a matter of great importance to redesign primary education in accordance with this supposed national character and heritage, and each individual child’s personality had to become contiguous with the goals and designs of the nation-state” (Harvey 280). Further, the *Law of Elementary Education* of 15 July 1945 stated that “[e]lementary education for girls must prepare them for the home, the arts, and crafts” (Morcillo 92). The regime needed to ensure that the educational system would “create an official culture or ‘official truth’, which, in the eyes of the Regime,

would be loyal to Spain's authentic character and heritage" (Harvey 279). Even at such a young age, children were expected to "appear highly motivated in the service of an idealized leader and nation, and turn the minutiae of daily life into an act of service for the mother nation" (Harvey 280). Drawing on the concept that children learn well through stories, Spanish primary schools decided that their students needed role models from Spanish history who emulated these ideals and from whom the children could draw inspiration. Thus, required reading for girls in school included biographical collections illustrating illustrious Spanish heroines, all of whom had made great sacrifices in the name of the Spanish state. The "aim was to inspire national regeneration and allegiance to the nation whilst educating girls within the ideology of virtue and domestic femininity" (Harvey 281). These icons were, namely, royal queens, good Catholic women, and warrior wives. Pilar Primo de Rivera, the leader of the *Falange Sección Feminina* (Women's Section), further stated that this education intended to "shape the girl and the woman in all her dimensions and incorporate her, actively and politically, into the service of the nation" (Harvey 289-90). These texts showed girls that their contributions inside the home were comparable to any other action undertaken in the name of Spain. Even the writers of these collections "participated in the Regime's project to anticipate, remark on, and control the development of girls" (Harvey 286). One example is Queen Isabel of Castile (1451-1504), famous for the unification of Spain after centuries under Islamic rule and the expulsion of Jews and Arabs living in the country. She is one of the most powerful queens in Spanish history – a perfect role model for girls expected to make sacrifices for the country – and yet, a textbook for girls by Antonio Onieva still describes her as such: "without losing her sense of queenship, she was also a domestic woman. She wove, knitted, and sewed" (Harvey 287). The book goes on to promote her as a devoted housewife, even as she fulfills her royal duties and serves her country. Another

encyclopedia by the same author refers to Queen Isabel as the ““queen of thrift”” who ““herself wove the cloth with which she made her husband’s shirts”” (Harvey 285). The use of the needle to trivialize powerful women in these biographical collections was common. While the textbooks aimed to inspire nationalism in girls, they also wanted to ensure that the students knew their place in society, as there is ““nothing more beautiful than to see a needle in the hands of a little girl”” (Harvey 289). The domestication of historical women was one tool that the Franco regime used to manipulate girls.

On the other side of the spectrum, “a handful of feisty sword-wielding women, some of whom are in full body [armor]” also populated these biographical texts (Harvey 289). This surprising inclusion fully demonstrates the Francoist regime’s commitment to indoctrinating girls to become actors for the state. Not only were domestic characteristics important, but role models with strong nationalist characteristics were crucial as well. The curriculum “used national heroines to push the boundaries of girls’ and women’s participation from the domestic sphere to the national sphere by linking them to the building of the Spanish empire or the [defense] of Spain against foreign invasion” (Harvey 290). The women represented, of course, only took arms “because their husbands, or other male figures, [were] either absent, wounded, or recently dead” (Harvey 290). For example, a heroine named María Pita, a common figure in these biographical collections, took on a campaign of revenge against the English after her husband was murdered defending a town in Galicia. One author of her story, Fernández Rodríguez, encouraged students to consider what happens when a woman goes “against nature” and how she should react in the case of a nation in danger (Harvey 291). The goal was to “encourage girls to absorb the regime’s nationalist ideology” and show these girls that they could have the “capacity to rally Spanish

men to fight united and resist foreign powers” (Harvey 292). Women were clearly expected to uphold strong nationalist values in addition to their strong domestic values.

Furthermore, the educational policy of early Francoist Spain in regard to women’s education was extremely oriented on domesticity (Morcillo 84). After a 1940 regulation stated that “it is vital for girls to receive instruction in domestic disciplines”, the regime entrusted the *Sección Feminina* to ensure that girls were getting the proper training (Canales 378). Further, the law of 17 November 1943 legally regulated women’s professional orientation, and successive decrees and laws “limited women’s access to knowledge to domestic training” (Morcillo 85). The Secondary Education Regulatory Law of 1953 made it clear that “the study of domestic matters was essential to girls’ training in their patriotic duty to the fatherland” (Morcillo 94). The regime intended to “recast women’s work in the home as skilled, domestic labor as important and productive for the state as the work done outside the home by their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons” (Hudson-Richards 92). The *Sección Feminina* acknowledged that it took skill and education to become a housewife, in line with a 1943 article in the magazine *Medina* that laid out ten jobs for a woman managing a home: “[c]ook, maid, seamstress, embroiderer, mender, ironer, nurse, accountant, economist, teacher, [and] hygienist” (Hudson-Richards 95). One mechanism for institutionalizing domestic work was the creation of *Escuelas del Hogar*, schools solely focused on domesticity, that became affiliated with girls’ academic schools. Therefore, on top of the co-ed curriculum in which girls were already being instructed, an additional domestic curriculum was imposed. In order to obtain their secondary school diplomas, girls were required to pass these home economics classes, a feat not compulsory for boys (Morcillo 93). These schools essentially shaped “Spanish womanhood through social service” and through subjects such as cooking, infant care, sewing, political indoctrination, and physical

exercise (Harvey 281). The lessons were so in-depth that lectures on household cleaning were divided into three sections: daily cleaning, weekly cleaning, and monthly cleaning (Morcillo 95). There were also several lessons devoted to “order”, meaning “the arrangement and tidiness of both the household (the bathroom, the living room, the kitchen) and the immediate physical environment of the student in the classroom: her desk, her books, her notes” (Morcillo 95). A lesson in cooking would have centered around “the importance of milk” and would have been followed by a “practical exercise such as making rice pudding” (Morcillo 95). Ironing and laundry were also given special focus. Above all, “women’s visible contribution to the national endeavor resided in their building harmonious homes”, including creating a strict budget for the family to follow (Morcillo 95). In addition to physical lessons, textbooks included quotes such as “this service to the family [is] how the woman serves her Patria, [and her] history” and focused on the idea that “the home should be happy, economical, orderly, and beautiful” (Hudson-Richards 93). This domestic curriculum in girls’ academic schools prepared the students for a lifetime of serving their families in the name of Francisco Franco.

A special domesticity-oriented program created by the *Sección Feminina* was called *Servicio Social*. It was a required program for women who wanted to obtain a passport or a driver’s license, or who wanted to study at the *bachillerato* and university levels (Hudson-Richards 93). The *Sección Feminina* declared that it was necessary “because it provided ‘patriotic and social labor’ for those in need, as well as education for a young woman’s future in the home” (Hudson-Richards 93-4). The program contributed heavily to class disparities, as rural women who had no need for official documents or higher education could avoid serving in the *Servicio Social*. To hold any of these social privileges, however, the program was to be completed, contributing to the notion that it was a highly elitist program. There were two phases

of this six-to-nine month program: “instruction, which entailed political indoctrination and home economics; and service, which normally involved working in an office, a nursery, or a shelter” (Morcillo 85). The home economics courses included subjects such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Political lessons were given as well, because when it came time, the women needed to be able to educate and indoctrinate their children with appropriate Falangist ideals. The “training made it clear to the women that it was their duty to fulfill their motherly destiny” (Morcillo 85). To fail in domesticity and motherhood would mean a failure before the Francoist state. A textbook used in the program, entitled the *Enciclopedia Escolar*, declared the following: ““Young women do not give to Spain military service, but like good daughters of the mother Patria, they have to do, at eighteen years old, a series of free jobs for the Patria. These jobs receive the name Servicio Social. The daughter of the *Caudillo* [Franco] did it too”” (Hudson-Richards 94). This rhetoric elevates the *Servicio Social* to the level of the Spanish military and affirms that even women had an important place in the rebuilding of Spain. In addition, the inclusion of Franco’s daughter, Carmen, into the *Servicio Social* promotes the ideal that this program should be for *everyone*, not just those for whom it was absolutely necessary (Hudson-Richards 94). The *Servicio Social* is another clear example of the national agenda to politicize the domesticity of women.

From another perspective, one finds that the regime’s official culture of “National-Catholicism” meant that females were educated to be good, pious women of the state (Harvey 380). Chapter Four of the aforementioned Secondary Education Regulatory Law of 1953 legalized the fact that “church authority lay in all things connected to the teaching of religion, the orthodoxy of doctrine, and moral customs” (Morcillo 93). Thus, girls were educated on habits that “composed the essence of the Catholic ideal woman”, among them, “piety, circumspection,

order, and hygiene” (Morcillo 95). Some important questions that the women studied centered around the idea of “silence as a virtue” and when it was appropriate to speak in social settings. Others included: “Is laughter good? When may a lady sneeze? What is the importance of overcoming pain? What should a lady never touch? What would people think of a cheeky girl?” (Morcillo 95). Additionally, entire lessons were devoted to overcoming arrogance and instead displaying the most important “feminine virtues: being kind, submissive, tidy, clean, and quiet” (Morcillo 95). The girls were encouraged to avoid acquiring a vast knowledge of culture and politics because, according to the Jesuit I. Errandonea, a champion of religious education, the “one area where they ought to acquire a profound knowledge and, given their destinies, add to where they can, is the study of religion and morals” (Canales 382). The subject of virginity was also common, as the Church “defended the chastity and purity of women to surprising limits” (Ramírez-Macías 1519). By incorporating all these subjects into women’s curriculum, the regime made clear its desire “to perpetuate true Catholic womanhood” (Morcillo 95). Further, the religious nature of girls’ education promoted the ideal of the “perfect wife”, creating a “national ideal of femininity” to which all Catholic women should aspire (Harvey 283). An article in a weekly comic called *Mis chicas* went so far as to say that there should “not be any age or class barrier in place to prevent Spanish girls aspiring to such perfection” (Harvey 284). The regime expected that, from the time they were born, girls were to be continually striving to be the perfect wife. The inclusion of the state-sponsored religion in the curriculum underlines the way in which Franco expected women to be actors for the state.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of women’s education in Francoist Spain reveals a paradox. Although women were second-class citizens during Franco’s regime, the state recognized that they had

value, and that in order to make use of that value, they were to be educated. It was their patriotic duty to become good mothers and wives. It was essential that they rigidly kept their family's private space so that their husbands and sons could fulfil their own patriotic duties. The primary ways in which they received this education was through historical teachings, domesticity training, and the implementation of a severe Catholic curriculum. It must be noted, however, that these ideals applied mostly to upper and upper-middle class women who had the means to undertake and continue schooling. The reality was that there were many women who never received an education, and for them, living in Franco's Spain meant that they could not even have the freedom to attend school. It is for this reason that women such as my host mom's mother prefer not to speak about their lives under his regime. Without an education, their ability to make a life for themselves was completely negated. They had no chance to be independent and were always subjected to the will of the men in their lives. Today, however, the situation in Spain is vastly different. In the years following Franco's death in November 1975, a democratic government was established, and the citizenship of women was reinstated. The Constitution of 1978 further acknowledged women in an equality principle, which stated that all Spanish people are equal under the law. The conservative laws of the Francoist era were completely abolished, and interestingly, Spain has become one of the most liberal countries in terms of abandoning tradition and religion. Divorce became a civil right in 1981. In 2005, the country legalized same-sex marriage, about a decade before the United States did. Additionally, in 2015, about forty-four percent of total births in the country were out of wedlock, a huge percentage for a country that used to heavily stress the sanctity of marriage ("Los Nacimientos..."). These facts would not have been true in Franco's Spain.

In conclusion, women were educated in numbers higher than ever before, but the educational system placed them further away from equality. A woman in Franco's Spain had one plan outlined for her: being a good wife and a good mother. In this way, she was to serve the state – not her own essence and dignity – and her education ensured that the patriarchal goal was accomplished.

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