

Free Women of Spain

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Conditions for the vast majority of people in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s were appalling. For women they were especially bad. There were extreme gender divisions. Most women were economically dependent on men. Household chores and childcare were exclusively women's domain. In both countryside and city women's wages were lower than men's. For example the average daily wage of a male agricultural labourer was 3 pesetas while a women got just half this, for working from dawn to dusk.

Men and women led completely separate lives. "Most women's social circles consisted of other women: family members, neighbours, fellow workers, or those they met at the market place. Men, conversely, tended to operate in a largely male world, whether in the factory, at union meetings, or in local bars."¹

Women's personal freedom was severely restricted. Single women could not go out without a chaperone and they could often be "given away" in arranged marriages.

Due to the traditional role of women in Spain and the small number of them working outside the home, only a minority of women were involved in unions or other political organisations. Although the CNT² had a clearly defined egalitarian position³, in practice the CNT failed to attract large numbers of women to its ranks and there was little discussion of women's issues.

In response to the pressing need to address women's situation, in the two years before the 1936 revolution, two groups of anarchist women in Barcelona and Madrid had begun organising. In preparation for the revolution, they built up a network of women activists which would soon merge to form the Mujeres Libres (Free Women) organisation.

Revolution

The military coup that took place on the 17th of July 1936 sparked off the much awaited social revolution. Anarchist organisations had long been expecting the military revolt. In the week before the coup large numbers of CNT activists had been sleeping in their union halls in preparation for a call to arms. As soon as the coup occurred people took to the streets and stormed the armories in search of guns which the government had refused to give them. For the first few days many women worked at building barricades and in each barrio (neighbourhood) they took care of provisions to make sure there would be enough food.

"The most important thing women did - aside, of course, from the heroic things they did along with everyone else - was to go up to the roofs of the buildings, with paper loudspeakers, and call out to the soldiers to come to our side, to take off their uniforms and join the people."⁴

The military coup was quelled in Barcelona and other areas of Spain where anarchists had a strong influence. Immediately, workers' militias were organised and set out to wherever the frontline against fascism was. Women fought alongside men as full and equal members of the

¹ 'Free Women of Spain. Anarchism and the struggle for the emancipation of women', Martha A. Ackelsberg, p.43/44

² CNT (Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo), an anarchist-syndicalist trade union founded in 1911.

³ At its Zaragoza Congress of May 1936 the CNT stated that in an anarchist society "the two sexes will be equal, both in rights and in obligations".

⁴ Soledad Estorach quoted in 'Free Women of Spain', p69

militias until November 1936 when the republican government 'militarised' the militias and ordered women away from the frontline.⁵

Women in the collectives

Immediately after the failed coup, industrial and agricultural collectives sprang up throughout the area of Spain controlled by the anti-fascists. The collectives were inspired largely by the ideas of the anarchist trade union, the CNT, and involved as many as five million people. In the first few months activists in the CNT or the FAI⁶ would travel the countryside, encouraging people to collectivise. In the words of one activist, Soledad Estorach,

"When we got to a village, we'd go to the provisional committee of the village and call a general assembly of the entire village. We'd explain our paradise with great enthusiasm... And then there would be a debate - campesino style - questions, discussion, etc. By the next day, they'd begin expropriating land, setting up work groups, etc."⁷

The collectives were, in general, very successful and living conditions for those who participated improved dramatically. However in the rural collectives there was no significant change in the traditional sexual division of labour. Although single women worked outside the family home, usually in collective workshops or in branches of the distribution co-operatives, married women still held the responsibility for childcare. Domestic chores fell automatically to women.

Although some collectives (such as those of Monzón and Miramel) paid men and women equally regardless of what type of work was done, in general the work women did was undervalued. Often when wages were paid to each individual women received less than men. Some collectives paid a family wage, however it was paid to the man who was assumed to be the head of the family.

In the cities there had traditionally been a high proportion of women working in the textile industries. Many women had done 'piece work' from home. This was abolished during the revolution and an increasing number of women flooded into the new collectivised factory jobs. For example, in Madrid and Barcelona women ran much of the public transport system. The move into factory jobs generally meant improved hours and wages for women.

However very often wage differentials continued to exist between men and women. Much like today, women had the multiple role of working outside the home and then after work coming home to take care of children and housework. This meant that for many it was difficult to attend union meetings and with such little participation in union leadership, issues of particular concern to women were often not prioritised.

This was not the case in the few areas where there had been a history of organised activity by women in their union (such as the CNT textile workers union in Terrassa). In such places women had succeeded in getting the union to adopt equal pay for equal work and paid maternity leave.

⁵ The militarisation was resisted by several columns - the Iron Column and the Durruti Column amongst others.

⁶ FAI (Federacion Anarquista Iberica) - Loose federation of anarchist groups formed in 1927.

⁷ 'Free Women of Spain', p77

Mujeres libres

Many people were acutely aware of the problems that existed for women specifically, at that time. In September 1936 a women's anarchist organisation was established which, during its short two year existence, came to number 30,000 women.

Mujeres Libres had two main strategies. The first was what was called "capacitacion" which aimed at preparing women so that they could realise their full potential and participate as equals in the new society that was being built. The second strategy was "captacion" - which meant the active incorporation of women into the anarchist movement.

Mujeres Libres from the start made great efforts to involve more women in union activities. Many women had difficulties going to union meetings because of their childcare responsibilities so one of the first activities Mujeres Libres engaged in was to set up "flying day-care centres", primarily for women who were interested in serving as union delegates.

Education was an important part of the work done by Mujeres Libres. They wanted particularly to tackle the problem of illiteracy which was widespread in Spain at that time. They set up the Casa de la Dona which was taking 600-800 women per day by December 1938. The courses ranged from elementary reading, writing and maths to professional classes in mechanics, agriculture, and also classes in union organisation, sociology and economics.

Mujeres Libres believed that education and consciousness raising would empower women to "free her (self) from her triple enslavement: her enslavement to ignorance, her enslavement as a producer, and her enslavement as a women. To prepare her for a new, more just social order."⁸ This would enable women to take a more active role in the revolution and thus help win the war.

Mujeres Libres co-operated with unions in running numerous employment and apprenticeship programs in order to facilitate women's entry to the workplace. As well as technical training they urged trainees to fight for full equality within the workplace.

In order to spread their message Mujeres Libres had their own magazine and also published numerous articles in the libertarian press. Members of the organisation travelled the countryside on propaganda tours to talk to the women there and also to help establish rural collectives. Pepita Carpena spoke of her experiences:

"We would call the women together and explain to them... that there is a clearly defined role for women, that women should not lose their independence, but that a woman can be a mother and a companera at the same time... Young women would come over to me and say, "This is very interesting. What you're saying we've never heard before. It's something that we've felt, but we didn't know" ...The ideas that grabbed them the most? Talk about the power men exercised over women.. There would be a kind of uproar when you would say to them, "We cannot permit men to think themselves superior to women, that they have a right to rule over them". I think that Spanish women were waiting anxiously for that call."⁹

It is important to take into consideration the context of 1930s Spain to fully appreciate the achievements of Mujeres Libres during the social revolution. As well as overcoming their own social conditioning they had to challenge the assumptions of what women's role should be. Many

⁸ Ibid, p118

⁹ Ibid, p121

articles written in anarchist newspapers and magazines complained that often male comrades, despite their political beliefs, would still expect to be 'masters' in their own home and had fixed views on women's proper place in society.

"All these companeros, however radical they may be in cafes, unions, and even affinity groups, seem to drop their costumes as lovers of female liberation at the doors of their homes."¹⁰ In public contexts within the libertarian movement women generally found that they were not taken seriously and were not respected.

For these reasons Mujeres Libres always insisted on organisational autonomy. They believed that women needed a separate organisation whose main focus would be issues of particular concern to women. They argued that only through their own self-directed action would women become confident and capable, able to participate as equals in the anarchist movement.

However Mujeres Libres refused to separate the struggle for women's emancipation from class struggle. They rejected mainstream feminism whose only ambition was "to give to women of a particular class the opportunity to participate more fully in the existing system of privilege".¹¹ Instead, they treated women's subordination as part of a larger system of hierarchies.

Revolutions bring about dramatic social changes. Old expectations, assumptions and ways of behaving begin to be questioned. Mujeres Libres was a vital organisation for raising issues which would never have been brought forward by other left-wing organisations at the time. The social revolution was made by people, like the women in Mujeres Libres, who pushed forward for radical changes in a very conservative society.

The fate of Mujeres Libres was tied to the fate of the entire social revolution. When the republican government, including the CNT leadership, concentrated on a 'popular front' against Franco's fascists the social revolution and the changes brought by Mujeres Libres were pushed aside. Nothing was to be done that would frighten the 'anti-fascist' section of the ruling class nor antagonise the 'Western democracies'. The war was not to be for a new Spain, just for parliamentary rulers rather than military ones. When this happened the revolution died, and the war against Franco was lost.

¹⁰ Ibid, p87

¹¹ Federica Montseny quoted in 'Free Women of Spain', p90/91.

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