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**WOMEN, TRANSITION AND SOCIAL CHANGES. THE CASE OF SPAIN,  
1976-1986**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the transition to democracy in Spain from a gender perspective, analyzing women’s roles and leadership during a twenty-year period. It reveals the crucial element they provided in both broad social changes and in the construction of a new woman’s identity in contemporary Spain. It intends to be an invitation to reflection, keeping in mind that the central categories of experience differ from one society to another and the weight of cultural, economic and political factors vary in each democratic transformation.

After the Dictator Franco’s death in 1975, the establishment of a Parliamentary Monarchy constitutes the “The Spanish Transition.” Until recently, most analyses have focused on changes in political structure and representation. However, gender was at the center of transition, as well women engaged in direct struggles for broad social change. Yet they also drove forward a new concept of women, socially and politically, speaking out successfully against the strongly discriminatory policies of the Franco regime.

Under General Franco, women were excluded from public areas and forums of discussion, and were essentially subjects of their husbands. For example, a woman

could not drive without her husband's permission. Their fundamental responsibility was to bear children, transmit traditional moral values and educate children.

I review the more recent literature that has emerged on this activism, and add to that literature material gathered in my previous studies on the post-Civil War period. These prove that female led programs had begun to emerge before the Civil War.

This research proves the disastrous consequences, for women, of the victory of the Franco regime. After the dictatorship, women realized that without their involvement in politics and their active participation in all of the processes, the goals of gender and a democratic society would not be achieved.

The Transition did not simply "grant" new rights to women, instead they won them. The very sudden vigorous activity of women in the Transition strongly suggests that this thread of gendered struggle had never been entirely cut and that women were not only ready for the transition, but critical to its realization.

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## **P A P E R:**

### *Preface*

There is a wide diversity of opinions regarding the dates that mark the Spanish Transition. While there is no doubt about the exact day for the beginning; November 20<sup>th</sup> 1975, when General Franco died. Some authors agree on its end in 1977, when general elections took place, leading to the first democratic government, or in 1978 when the New Spanish Constitution was proclaimed. However, other scholars set the end of this period in 1986, with the country's entry into the European Economic Community. This is the date that I am choosing for this paper.

### *Historical Introduction: Women in Spain in the early years of the 20th Century*

Spain has a long history as a nation and very little of it has been democratic. Its political history has been tumultuous and full of extraordinary changes. In the last two centuries twice proclaimed republics between periods of the Monarchy. The first one fell in 1873 before a Constitution was written and the second republic was very

weak. It was toppled by deep rooted social conflicts, surviving for only for five years before breaking down into the infamous Spanish Civil War of 1936'39.

Traditionally, women were under strong social control, encompassing a strict behavior code. As wives and mothers they were expected to provide all welfare and care for their families. Very few women worked outside of the home and the ones that did so, were subordinated to men as unqualified workers in industry, agriculture or as domestic servants.

However, the seed of a collective feminist movement took root at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Upper-class female organizations, that were strongly influenced by Catholicism and deeply conservative, dealt with women's issues, such as literacy and child welfare, but did not support female suffrage or complete equality. The Feminine Socialist organization in 1912 and in 1918 and the Association of Spanish Women, had larger demands. They demanded women's right to vote, among other social reforms. The same year, another association, the still more radical Spanish Women's Union, was born. In 1931, the Republican left wing government eliminated discrimination in such areas as divorce law, taking positions more advanced than other European countries. In 1933, women gained the right to vote, as well as general social equality with men, including equal educational opportunities.

The military uprising in 1936 put an end to this evolution. Women played an important role in the war, indeed on both sides, but especially in defense of the Republic. *The Militia-Women* famously engaged in armed conflict, fighting on the front lines, creating a chronicle of bravery often celebrated in literature and film.

The civil war ended after 3 years of fight with the rebels' victory. Their leader, General Franco, set up a traditional dictatorship dominated by fascist policy and supported by the Church. This led to an abrupt reversal of conditions for women, and a new conservative repression that was to last until his death in 1975— nearly forty years as a right-wing totalitarian dictatorship.

### *The first years under the Dictatorship*

In a country torn apart by the war, reaction against all of the reforms, and all of the advances won for women, led to the imposition of a discriminatory model in

which women were again clearly subordinate to men. The ones who had fought for social changes in the early 30's were exiled, repressed, jailed or disappeared.

The military, and especially the Catholic Church, were instrumental in this new repression. It was the key institution in shaping the model of women under the Franco Regime. Both public laws and church regulations enforced a set of social structures aimed at preserving the traditional role of the family, distant and formal relations between the sexes, and controls over expression of alternative views of women in the press, film, the mass media, and other important social institutions.

During this period, high levels of illiteracy continued. In 1940, 37.72% of Spanish women could not read or write, which made it even harder for them to escape the extreme control. Among men illiteracy was a bit lower, 29.66 %. In 1950, the difference still existed: 24.38% for men and 31.08% for women<sup>1</sup>.

Without her husband's or father's approval, referred to as the "*permiso marital*" (marital permission), a daughter or a wife was prohibited from almost all economic activities, including employment, ownership of property, or even travel away from home. Women couldn't even have their own bank accounts without male permission, as the accounts were registered under a husband's or father's name. It was intended to force women to leave jobs upon marrying. New legislation offered cash premiums for reproduction, promoting large families, and attempting to reverse the demographic losses of the war.

State laws with the total support of the Church prohibited divorce and abortion. Marriages had to be ecclesiastical and could hardly be dissolved. Female adultery incurred a serious penalty, while concubinage, or male adultery, also criminal, received lesser punishment.

In the aftermath of the World War II, most countries boycotted Spain, isolating it from modern influences. However, in the 1950s, the United States invested in Spain in exchange for military bases. As a result of American and other new contacts, the Franco regime introduced new policies, including a more open market. This led to significant social and economic changes in the 1960's and 1970s, including substantial economic growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: *Spanish population Census*.

*The Last Years of the Francoism<sup>2</sup>.*

The economic development initiated at the end of the fifties and the subsequent modernization of the country influenced the life of Spanish women, as their educational level and general affluence increased significantly.

In the sixties, new values took root with increasing industrialization, the rise of consumerism, and the beginning of tourism. Migration from the countryside to cities broadened women's consciousness of their status and possibilities. Moreover, mass emigration of Spaniards, though mainly men, to northern European countries inevitably led to knowledge of women's more equal status elsewhere.

Even the Church had begun to move away from its more conservative positions by the latter part of the decade. It still had a leading role in education, but under the Second Vatican Council<sup>3</sup> some young bishops and priests in charge of schools started to question the social and political situation, condemning various aspects of the Franco regime and calling for reforms.

The government responded haltingly to these challenges with new cabinet appointments and somewhat softer restrictions on the media. In 1966, a new press law abolished censorship, a great step forward to recognize the right of freedom of expression in the press. After Franco's death, a new, free Spanish press strongly supported democratic ideals.

In the early seventies, the opposition to the regime became more open although the women's movement was still clandestine. Traditionally, women were active in Catholic action groups as well as housewives associations, some women began to work openly with the opposition, illegal trade unions and feminist networks. Many of the pioneers of the feminist movement during the Franco period were associated with the Communist or Socialist Party. This idea of double militancy (feminism and politics) among left feminists is crucial for understanding women's role in Spanish politics.

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<sup>2</sup> *Francoism* was not an ideology but a personal system of government based on the groups that formed the victorious coalition during the civil war and centered on their commanding general Francisco Franco. Although Francoism had no ideologue, the system borrowed from Germany and Italy some policies.

<sup>3</sup> From 1962 to 1965. It became ideally known for its renewal of the Catholic doctrine in a modern timeline and perspective. Being one of the most palpable changes the stress on the dignity of the human person and respect for personal liberty.

*The years of the Transition, 1976-1986.*

In the mid-seventies, Groundbreaking texts on second-wave feminism from the United States and Europe reached Spain at a time when the Women's Movement as such had yet to emerge. At that time, Spain was just beginning to surface from decades of dictatorship. Women still had very few rights, but due to the international historic context along with the rising of strong international women's movements, led them for the first time to influence policy. Together with the growing movement of protest and having a closer look to the American and European feminist experience of the sixties and seventies. The first milestone for contemporary feminism came in 1975, when International Women's Year took place. Politics had an influence, but affluence, new consumer habits, work force participation and other secular changes gave birth to a new model of woman, further and further away from the ideals of the Catholic Church. Women saw themselves as a renovating force.

In the context of deep social changes stands out the incursion of women as social featured actors. Their participation and commitment helped modify Spain's contemporary political culture and influenced the development of gender party politics. Virtually all activists for women's rights held left-wing views, exhibiting the double militancy first noted just before the Transition.

The advances in the field of women's rights went hand in hand with the democratic advance in the transition process. They made a decisive contribution to the consolidation of democracy and the spread of egalitarian discourses and ethics in Spain. Social values were changing faster than the laws, inevitably creating tension between legal codes and reality. Still, most feminists believed that without a complete overhaul and renewal of the political system, sex discrimination would not be eradicated.

Following the basic theories of Feminism, women claimed the right to education and equal opportunities. And above all, they asked for the basic principles of equality of women's political rights and equal pay for equal work.

Perhaps the most significant shift, was related to the family. Many young women no longer saw the home as their natural base, and started to pursue careers outside the home. The participation rate in the labor force has been steadily growing during *The Transition*, with a rate of 30.20 in 1975, 34.71 in 1982, and 41.20 in

1986<sup>4</sup>. This increase in participation was mainly due to structural factors that shifted female earnings potential, in particular to the increase in higher education and the decrease in birth rates.

A year after Franco's death in 1975, a law for a Political Reform paved the way for the legal abolition of the Francoist institutions, and the transition to democratic state began with the drafting of a new Constitution. Significant reforms had begun. *The permiso marital* was abolished in 1975; laws against adultery were cancelled in 1978; and divorce was legalized in 1981.

The new Constitution of 1978 made an enormous advance in the fight for women's rights, since it recognizes and respects the rights of women: "*The Spanish Constitution proclaims the right to equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of sex and in turn, ratifies public authorities' obligation to further conditions that will ensure that individuals, and the groups of which they form part, enjoy a real and effective equality.*"<sup>5</sup>

In 1977 (46 years since the last chance), 1979, and 1982, there were elections to a democratic government. This was the first opportunity to vote for the young and middle-aged women that were raised under the dictatorship. The result was the formation of the first democratic government with 27 women and 570 men in the Spanish Parliament.

In 1983, the national agency for gender equality, the *Woman's Institute*, was created. From that moment, the starting point for Spanish state feminism and public policies on the issue, gender equality policies and the institutional framework created around them have developed very quickly in Spain both at the national and regional levels, with the creation of gender equality agencies in the Spanish Autonomous Communities and the consolidation of the national equality machinery. The main factor for the creation of the Woman's Institute was the initiative of the Socialist Party in the government at the time, and the activism of women<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> **O. Bover**, and **M. Arellano**,: "Female Labour Force Participation in the 1980's. The case of Spain". *Investigaciones Economicas*. Vol XIX, May 1995, pp 171-194. Madrid, Spain.

<sup>5</sup> Article 14 and Article 9.2 of the Spanish Constitution.

<sup>6</sup> **E. Lombardo**, *La europeización de la política española de igualdad de género*. Valencia: Tirant Lo Blanch, Spain, 2004.

*New women in the new century.*

Nowadays, we can say that the Spanish Transition is totally complete. It was a period of great struggle, but one in which women eventually played a major role, not simply in politics but also in the labor market.

Although Spain is still a nominally Roman-Catholic country in a catholic environment, abortion is accessible. The impact of the changes for women are most dramatically revealed in fertility rates. In 1930, Spanish women had on average 3.68 children in 1964, the average was 3.0, and just 1.20 in 2010, meaning Spain is not being overpopulated<sup>7</sup>. Low levels of marriage, and also the fact that women and men are waiting longer to marry and therefore have fewer children. Family patterns also changed, an increase of single-parent families and same sex marriage became legal in 2005, and rules restricting divorce were loosened.

Illiteracy among women was over a 13% in 1970, and it was rare to see women even reach secondary schools. Literacy is now near universal, and, given the same educational opportunities and choices, women now represent over half of Spain's university students. Official figures demonstrate that they do better academically, as they do in nearly all advanced societies<sup>8</sup>. Still, their concentration in the Humanities (80%), rather than Science and Technology (15%), suggest less remunerative occupations after graduation. Women educated under the Francoist regime are much less likely to work outside the home than their daughters who account for more than 35% of the workforce. A new generation of young women in business and technical fields are on the very top as the chief executives of Spain's IBM, Microsoft and Google operations. Women working in mass media have increased significantly since the death of Franco. In magazines and journals, very influential female editors and journalists create opinions with their articles and have countless followers. Women's Studies at the university level, women's leagues in business, and associations of professional women have all arisen. The same is true of women's editorials and bookshops, which are very active and have always supported the feminist movement.

The institutional framework around gender equality policies at the national level was progressively strengthened with the creation of the Equality Policies General

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<sup>7</sup> Data collected from the CIA World Factbook, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Data collected from the Spanish Ministry of Education, Madrid, 2013.

Secretariat in 2004, which is of a higher rank than the Woman's Institute, and the establishment of the Ministry of Equality in 2008.

Women's political affiliations are in favor of informal or local activism rather than a Party affiliation, and very few would describe themselves as feminist. Today, Spain has more women in government positions than the United States. When the Socialist government came to power in 2004 it promised to shed Spain's reputation as an ultraconservative and male-dominated society, which had a considerable impact on gender policies bringing further change to the equality machinery and legislation. It developed a strategy to promote gender equality based on equal opportunities through a parity government and an increase in women's political representation. Equal numbers of men and women were appointed to the Minister's cabinet, this is called the "parity measures", which need to be implemented in all the governmental departments and civil society organizations.

For the first time in the history of the country, a women was elected vice-president. The current Spanish parliament in 2014 boasts a female vice-minister, four women ministers—in the former government there were eight. This increased involvement in politics would not have been possible without women's activism in the seventies.

Spain has moved, in approximately three decades, from being a 'latecomer' to being a 'pioneer' in gender equality policies. During this time it has consolidated its institutional machinery on gender equality policies. It has also adopted plans and laws as policy instruments. Comprehensive laws against gender discrimination have been approved. This includes framing gender discrimination as a public matter of high political priority, an issue of Human Rights, and an equality law that covers a broad range of issues, from paternity leave to a more gender-balanced political representation. Also, political attention is focusing on problems of reconciliation of work and family life, framed as policies necessary for improving women's employability in the labor market. This subject is now on the political agenda of all political parties. All of these measures show some progress towards the achievement of a greater gender equality.

## Conclusion

*The Transition* in Spain saw a dictatorship transformed into a pluralistic, liberal parliamentary democracy without a civil war or revolutionary upheaval. It not only transformed itself from dictatorship to democracy from the inside out, but it did this through a remarkably acquiescent process of reform, none of which would have been possible without women's engagement.

The rise of Feminism and women's integration into the labor market were the key factors to the development of gender party politics during the seventies and eighties. At that time, women were increasingly involved in politics. Their pressure and repeated calls for positive action are now official party policy. They have even succeeded in persuading political parties to take up issues of women's representation and to adopt a number of far-reaching policies to enhance it. Spanish Women still do suffer discrimination, as they do in other countries. Despite Spain having consolidated its institutional framework around gender equality policies, developed political strategies of equal opportunities and positive actions and gender mainstreaming, many challenges still lie ahead for policy on gender equality, including a greater participation of women's organizations in policymaking.

I have synthesized the keys of the Spanish Transition process, in which women were deeply involved and played an important role. I am hoping this will be a case of study for Armenian women that are also currently undergoing transition. One crucial difference is that Spain did not have to go from a planned economy to a free market-oriented economy, in this case the post-communist economic transition was much more difficult. Also, the economic and cultural groundwork was laid before the dictatorship ended, by contrast the post-communist states needed to dissolve and build new systems, never imagined before because capitalism did not exist. Education and literacy are also the key factors of the process.

In conclusion I would like to say, "*Without women there is no Democracy*".

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