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## **State Feminism and the Basque Women's Movement: Transforming Gender Relations in the Home**

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# **State Feminism and the Basque Women's Movement: Transforming Gender Relations in the Home**

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## **Abstract**

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This article explores the social and historical circumstances that contributed to the institutionalization of the Spanish Basque women's movement and in turn contributed to the development of a particular type of state feminism. In this context, state feminism is defined as the relationship between government political action directed at women through public institutions and the diffusion of the women's movement at the local level. State feminism is examined in relation to systems of gender relations and the division between the public and private domains. The day to day activities of the contemporary women's association, Mothers of Alava, illustrates the ways in which the women's movement interacts with the state.

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**Keywords:** state feminism, women's movements, Basque Country

# **El Feminismo de Estado y el Movimiento Vasco de Mujeres: La Transformación de las Relaciones de Género en el Hogar**

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## **Resumen**

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Este artículo explora las circunstancias sociales e históricas que han contribuido a la institucionalización del movimiento de mujeres vascas españolas y, a su vez han contribuido al desarrollo de un determinado tipo de feminismo estatal. En este contexto, el feminismo de estado se define como la relación entre la acción política gubernamental dirigida a las mujeres a través de las instituciones públicas y la difusión de los movimientos de mujeres a nivel local. El feminismo de Estado se examina en relación con los sistemas de relaciones de género y la división entre los ámbitos público y privado. El día a día las actividades de la asociación de mujeres contemporáneas, Madres de Álava, ilustra la forma en que el movimiento de mujeres interactúa con el Estado.

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**Palabras clave:** feminismo de estado, movimientos de mujeres, País Vasco

The death of Franco in 1975, unleashed a new era for Spanish citizens, and in particular women. However, the sociocultural changes that signaled the transition from Francoist Spain to the New Republic had slowly begun to evolve during the 1960's and 1970's as a result of an increasing consciousness of social and political oppression. The development of women's movements went hand and hand with these changes. Women's participation in the general process of political transformation, their capacity for mobilization, and the interest of the new government in the post-Franco elections advanced a democratic image before the people and the international community that contributed to significant changes in women's social roles (Solano, 2002).

What had been categorized as the private side of a woman was transformed into a collective public protest as expressed in the slogan "The personal is political" (del Valle, 1985). Women began to look toward women's movements in other countries when they began to create their own feminist theory and create plans of action to address gender-based inequalities. In the United States, the guiding force behind the women's movement found its form of expression in small groups of women, often grassroots in nature. The predominant feminist perspective at that time was that sexual politics were believed to encapsulate a system of interpersonal power by means of which individual men dominated individual women.<sup>1</sup> American feminists believed that they would only obtain equality in society by dismantling the patriarchal system.

This particular theoretical approach did not fit well with the demands of Spanish women. One reason why is that Spain is characterized by its strong regional distinctions with distinct ideological and political perspectives. Thus, there are significant differences within Spain in how "women's issues" have been addressed. Second, the larger Spanish women's movement remains rooted in motherhood and acknowledging that there are innate differences between men and women.<sup>2</sup> Rather than denying that these differences exist and that all people are inherently created equal, this perspective highlights the complementary role of gender within society. Thus, women began to demand legislative reform to support women's role as mothers and provide them with the social support in which to fulfill their biological role of reproducer.

By the late 1970’s, the Spanish women’s movement entered a period of dysfunction as these internal conflicts became difficult to conceal. Attempts were made to solidify the movement with the passing of the new Spanish Constitution in 1977 that underwrote that men and women were equal before the law; however, a series of tensions emerged between opposing conceptions of feminism activism. Some feminists supported institutional changes while others looked toward women’s movements that functioned outside of governmental structures.

Many of the problems that plagued the advancement of a consolidated Spanish women’s movement at the federal level were also apparent at the regional level. In the Basque Country, the women’s movement remained disconnected and weak as women were not able to ameliorate the tensions that existed within the Basque women’s movement. In order to initiate changes to promote gender equality within society, government initiatives were needed. While the new Spanish Constitution stated that all men and women were equal before the law, it suggested a formal equality and acknowledged that the conditions for real equality did not exist in reality. The Basque Country took a stronger stance in regards to acknowledging gender-based inequality. The Basque statutes gave the same rights and duties to all Basque citizens as those established by the Spanish Constitution. It also assumed the responsibility to promote conditions and remove obstacles to promote equality (Article 9.2) and it recognized that the feminine condition deserves special attention.

The second governmental initiative was to consolidate the Basque women’s movement through its institutionalization in government departments such as Emakunde (Bullen, 2003).<sup>3</sup> This institute is allocated money from the Basque Government to design and implement equal rights policies, for overseeing the application of women’s rights policies, and for consciousness raising activities through education projects and publications (Bullen, 2003).

Institutionalizing the women’s movement was criticized by some as they saw it as a weakening of the movement, yet it has allowed the channeling of public funds into particular women’s initiatives (Bullen, 2003). Feminists remaining on the margins of institutions were able to receive funds to create their own associations. These associations provided a space for women to find solidarity, reflection, and social services that were previously

inaccessible. It was through their incorporation into these associations that women developed a collective identity and greatly expanded their efforts in a plethora of mobilizing activities. Feminist theory has been important in the production of new associations and has served as the structural frame for many associations.

In short, the 1980's saw two new elements in the Basque women's movement: (1) the creation of 'feminism from above' through a rise in government political action directed at women through public institutions like Emakunde (2) the advancement of 'feminism from below' through the diffusion of the women's movement at the local level (Bullen, 2003; Hernes, 1987). These two social structural changes provided the framework for the construction of state feminism in the Spanish Basque Country.

In this article, I will examine the social and historical circumstances in the Spanish Basque Country that led to the institutionalization of the women's movement and in turn contributed to the development of a particular type of state feminism.<sup>4</sup> State feminism is explored in relation to cultural beliefs regarding gender relations and the division between the public and private domains. I will then provide an example of a woman's associations supported by the Basque government that illustrates the ways in which state feminism from 'above' and 'below' complement each other to promote gender equality (Hernes, 1987).

### **Historical and theoretical background**

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, women's associations began to organize around the category of feminism. As these associations developed under a variety of larger organizations, associations and individuals began espousing different theories of feminism and agendas for change based on their individual ideologies. Some functioned under the title of Catholic feminists while others defined themselves as socialist feminists or familial feminists. These associations that maintained different ideological perspectives created their own individual programs to address issues affecting women.

While many feminists looked toward socialist feminism or individualist feminism in constructing their arguments, many European feminists proposed a gender-based but egalitarian vision of social organization, which

is often referred to as relational feminism or equality feminism (Offen, 1988). These feminists supported the primacy of a companionate, nonhierarchical male-female couple as the basic unit of society (Offen, 1988). This theoretical perspective maintained a critical attitude of society and a concept of social change by advocating egalitarian social structures. This particular feminist approach strived to modify the domain of the home environment by providing women with social support to fulfill their role as caretakers. Thus, the social activism of relational feminism tended to focus on the private domain which in their opinion, subordinates women.

This perspective was in contrast to individualist feminists who emphasized more abstract concepts of individual human rights and posited that the individual, irrespective of sex or gender, was the basic unit of society. Relational feminists emphasized women’s rights as women (defined by their childbearing and nurturing capacities) in relation to men. They insisted upon women’s distinctive contributions in these roles to the broader society. Thus, associations that supported these ideals developed programs to protect the sanctity of the home by providing health education and other social services to low income women with the desire to decrease infant mortality and improve hygiene amongst poor factory workers.

In France, French feminists in the nineteenth century emphasized sexual difference, a sexual division of labor, motherhood, education for motherhood, and state subsidies but they also argued for legal, educational, and economic rights for women as well as the right to vote (Offen, 1988). French women’s associations argued for compulsory home economics and scientific care along with comprehensive maternity benefits (Offen, 1988). Conversely, they also argued for women’s right to work and supported labor laws that protected women. Since the twentieth century, French feminists have argued for programs that celebrate the uniqueness of womanhood, especially women’s role and rights as mothers. They also demanded radical sociopolitical reforms by the State that would transform the social institutions surrounding natality and therefore improve women’s status.

Within the Spanish context, equality feminism gained popularity amongst both Catalan and Basque nationalists in the early twentieth century. Basque and Catalan women, often from the middle-class who congregated behind the guise of cultural nationalism, developed their own associations to look at issues which specifically affected women. Often the family was the focus of

their intervention (Nash, 1996). Feminist thought both in Catalonia and the Basque Country was based on the recognition of gender difference and motherhood as the defining role of women, but is also sought the promotion of women's rights. Women's education was believed to be integral for not only women's development but for the development of the family as women were the primary educators of the young. Within Basque culture, women were respected not only for their role as biological reproducers, but also for their role as educators of the Basque language. Therefore, women were believed to be crucial agents in the construction of the Basque nation.

During the 1930's in the years of the Second Republic, women's associations developed rapidly with many of them taking the responsibility of providing health related education to families. Cultural representations of women centered on discourse which glorified the most frequent image of women, that as "angels of the home" (Nash, 1999). Basque nationalistic women's associations embraced the role of motherhood that came to be an identifier of Basque cultural identity. The nationalistic discourse of that time clearly describes women's role as educating the next generation to resist fascism. Women were expected to embrace their maternal instincts and raise children within an antifascist environment.

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Republican women's associations turned to reactionary measures to support the sanctity of the home. Women's associations continued to provide health related services to soldiers and in many cases orphaned children. As is true for other countries experiencing civil war, family life was disrupted. Women were left alone to care for children and in many cases, their husbands never returned. Even though gender relations shifted during the Spanish Civil War, women remained the primary caretakers of children and most health education was directed toward women.

With Franco's victory over the Republicans in 1939, a new wave of conservatism swept across the Iberian continent. As part of the construction of the Francoist State, a new vision was adopted which functioned to reinstate traditional gender relations. Franco believed that the significant changes that occurred between the genders during the Spanish Civil War were a threat to conservative social sectors. In order to implement a new order, Franco developed highly conservative family policies. To repopulate Spain after the significant casualties from the Spanish Civil War, Franco



supported a pronatalistic policy. Women were expected to embrace their reproductive role and turn in their “uniforms of war” for aprons.

Franco attempted to naturalize gender differences by reinforcing the distinction between the “public” and “private” domains. In Franco’s opinion, women’s social role should be securely centered in the realm of the private domain as their most important role as citizens was to reproduce the next generation of Spanish citizens. Women were not allowed to work outside of the home nor travel without their husband’s permission. Thus, this analytic distinction was commonly utilized to justify women’s unequal position in society during this era.

### **Contemporary social context: the women’s movement and state feminism**

Since Franco’s death in 1975, Spain experienced a rapid growth in its economy. The standard of living improved dramatically as individuals began to experience a lifestyle more comparable to other Western European countries. A new constitution was created in order to modernize the country that allowed individual regions to create their own semi-autonomous governments. Spanish citizens wanted to undo the years of Franco by supporting a plural democratic political system similar to the governments that had previously been established in Western Europe following World War II. While the women’s movement had been slow to develop in Spain, with the improvement in the standard of living, women had greater freedom to explore identities outside their roles as mothers and wives. Thus, we have seen significant improvements in women’s access to educational and employment opportunities since the 1980’s, which has contributed to gender equality within society.

However, the one area that women have had the most difficulty obtaining equality is within the home. The distribution of family responsibilities is one of the most significant areas affecting women. Caretaking remains one of the most basic components in the social construction of gender and has important consequences for the identity and activities of women (Comas d’Argemir, 2000). Compared to other European countries, the boundary between public and private domains is much more rigid. Thus, the family remains the principal institution for the delivery of caretaking activities.

One of the most commonly utilized explanations for why the Spanish welfare system remains relatively undeveloped compared to other European countries is that when the new Constitution was being created in the 1980's, left wing associations and political parties favored a rigid separation between the State and the family. During the years of Franco's reign, there was virtual no separation between the State and the family as Franco enforced paternalistic family policy, in order to create a national Catholic family. As a backlash to this governmental policy, the political forces during the 1980's did not want the family as the object of intervention. Instead, feminist associations collaborated with the Institute of the Woman to focus their interventions on promoting equality between men and women rather than rethinking family welfare policies. However, one of the unfortunate consequences of "protecting" the family is that the work of women often remains invisible (Comas d'Argemir, 2000).

In contrast, Scandinavian countries took a very different perspective in promoting social and gender equality. These countries made the family the focus of their intervention. They adopted progressive social welfare policies, such as parental leave and extensive public care services for children and the elderly in order to equalize care taking responsibilities and thus supported women's right to participate in all forms of citizenship. As a result, the boundary between the public and private domains, became fluid and open to renegotiation.

Family organization remains a vital aspect of cultural identity (McDonald, 2000). Because of the desire to maintain a Basque identity, the family remains a conservative institution that has been slow to change. Society tends to resist radical changes in gender relations. However, increased gender equity within the family can be a gradual process that does not threaten the integrity of the family (McDonald, 2000).

In the past ten years, the Spanish Basque Country has created programs to help equalize caretaking responsibilities within the home as well as providing financial support to families upon the birth of a first child. While this practice is typical in other European countries, it is not practiced throughout Spain. However, childcare is an issue that has not been adequately addressed.<sup>5</sup>

### **Relational feminism as a means to promote gender equality in the home**

In this section, I will present a woman’s associations which is supported by the Basque Women’s Institute that provides a good example of the ways in which ‘feminism from above’ and ‘feminism from below’ complement each other to promote gender equity. This association was created in order to promote women’s position within society by directing its plan of action within the home. Relational feminism believes that women’s source of oppression is rooted in the social relationships that exist between men and women. Although these relationships are marked by biological differences, it is society that perpetuates these differences and as a result positions women in an inferior position. Thus, it is not merely the division between public and private domains that contributes to women’s inequalities. Rather, social relationships between men and women contribute to inequality.

Madres de Alava was created 1998 by a group of mothers who wanted to change the environment between men and women within the home in order to equalize care giving responsibilities. This association is one of several associations supported by the local Basque Government that provides courses to promote equality between men and women. Relational activities that are typically associated with the private domains, such as care taking and emotional support, are often ignored as economic generating activities are more highly valued. Thus, this association was established with the goal to educate men to take a more active role in the home and to make the invisible activities of women more visible. By creating a more gender equitable environment within the home, the association believes that women will have an improved position within the home, which in their opinion is the fundamental environment in which gender inequities are carried out.

My research techniques focused on acquiring archival data and participant observation of the association. My archival data focused on the historical development of women’s associations as a collective unit and their relationship to the advancement to both the Basque nationalist movement and Basque women’s movements. Through archival data, I was able to develop a timeline that visually depicts significant social structural changes that influenced the development of women’s associations. The archival data was indexed and coded. Archival data was organized chronologically into five eras: the nineteenth century, early twentieth century, the Second

Republic and the Spanish Civil War, the years of Franco, and contemporary society. Archival data enriches the participant observation data obtained as it contextualizes the data within macro social variables.

The majority of my time in the field focused on observing the actual activities of the association Mothers of Alava that occurred over two months beginning in November of 2004 and ending in January of 2005. The courses were taught at the Civic Center located in the center of Vitoria, the capital of the Basque Country. The classes I attended were taught exclusively in Spanish; however, at other locations, the classes were also taught in Basque.

The data collection for this association included unstructured interviews of all of the teachers of the courses that occurred at the Civic Center. The interviews of the instructors focused on acquiring basic demographic data such as age, birth place, marital status, and reasons for participating with the association. Participant observation data of the educational courses offered by the association was also collected. Data collection included responses from teachers and the students as well as educational worksheets which were included as part of the curriculum of the association. All of the data were collected in the form of narrative field notes that were analyzed and coded with an inductively constructed period (see coding scheme).

The purpose of this association was to equalize care-taking responsibilities between men and women. Thus, the association focused their activities on (1) providing women with breast pumps so that men could be involved in feeding infants (2) teaching infant development classes so that men can be more involved in parenting their children. As family life continues to be an important part in Basque culture, becoming a parent is viewed as an important status change in the life cycle. Despite the reorganization of family roles, the structure of power and the larger division of labor in the family remains highly gendered. Childcare, care for the sick or disabled people, and help for the elderly are some of the tasks which fall upon women. The ideology of the course focuses on helping them develop the skills that are typically relegated to women.

The course curriculum focused on ten areas (1) food (2) bathing, dressing, and diapering (3) sleep (4) infant health (5) infant safety (6) development (7) toys, playing, and educational styles (8) maternity leave (9) family assistance (10) education. The courses were focused on the developmental stage from 0 to 3. Designated members of the association

with particular expertise regarding child development instructed the courses. The curriculum for the 2004-2005 years also included five additional courses in addition to the courses that I attended that focused on childcare. These additional courses were: (1) care for the elderly which was also directed toward men (2) exchange of domestic work between men and women which provides courses for women only, men only, and mixed-gender groups (3) public speaking for women (3) self-defense, only for women (5) automobile maintenance, only for women.

Women were not restricted from attending the courses as they could accompany their partners and single mothers were not excluded either. Despite the fact that the association catered to the male student population, the classes were typically co-educational as men generally did not attend the classes without their wives.

The association maintains traditional beliefs in regards to the Basque family unit; meaning, the social role of mother is highly regarded. Further, this association shares some similarities with other traditionally organized Basque women's associations in that the association remains profamily and pronatalist. Women's role as matriarchs and reproducers of the next generation of Basque citizens is important. Although parenting functions are believed to be a responsibility of the wider kin group, the relationship of the child to his or her biological parents, and the mother in particular, is highly valued.

While this association strives to support the Basque family, it has modified some of the traditional understandings of gender relations that were typical of the Basque Country. In the Basque Country, family life centered around the *basseri*<sup>6</sup> that was a self-sustaining economy. Men and women maintained complementary but equal roles within the home. Thus, certain tasks were assigned to women within and outside of the home. As the Basque Country has evolved into an industrialized region, agriculture is no longer the primary industry. Although economic relations have changed within the Basque Country, traditional understandings regarding gender structures have been difficult to alter.

This understanding of gender relations has clearly structured the activities of the association and their plans of action. In order to support women in their role as mothers, men need to appreciate and accept female identified behaviors in order to support women's role within the home. This

association operates within the current structure of society and does not seek to dismantle the existing patriarchal structure.

Maintaining the integrity of the family remains an important goal within contemporary Basque culture; thus, this association receives support in its project. While this association has a limited focus and the number of men who attend these courses in relation to the total population of men in the Basque region is small, this association could serve as a model for other associations. This association is unique in the sense that men are involved in its functioning and are the subjects of change within their project. Typically women's associations do not include men within their association focus as gender is often placed upon women. Thus, this association is revolutionary in that it attempts to "gender" men. In many cases, government funded programs allocate funds for family welfare to programs which are directed toward women. However, this association believes that programs that are directed as promoting women's access to the public domain will not combat inequalities that exist within the home. Rather, a new system of gender relations must be initiated within the home environment. By attacking subjective understandings regarding gender relations within the home, women will be able to achieve greater equality in all areas of life.

From this relatively simple basis for social change, this association was established and began to offer courses with the financial assistance provided by Emakunde. The association has grown over the years to include other projects, such as the breast pump rentals and other public protests such as the initiative that city buses have stroller accessible ramps.

The main focus of the association however was their child development courses. Each week, the instructor provided a brief introduction to the material. The students would then be allowed to introduce themselves and share the reasons why they came to the association as well as expressing anxieties about becoming new parents. Although individual instructors maintained their own styles in instructing students, the courses tended to be didactic with small group activities so to reinforce their material. Props would often be used for educational purposes. The students could then model tasks performed and in some cases they were asked to perform tasks such as diapering the doll to gain practical knowledge.

All of the instructors tended to teach from a previously constructed outline of course material to present along with worksheets that focused on

particular topics. Every instructor would present material and then ask for the students to reply. The students would also congregate in small groups to answer the worksheets. The worksheets typically were composed of cartoon characters depicting different scenes. For example, in the case of the child safety course, cartoon characters were displayed engaging in activities, which were dangerous for children. The students were then expected to comment on what was wrong with the pictures. This tactic encouraged the participants to talk about their own experiences with childcare. In addition to the material presented by the teachers, the students would contribute to the class content. The subject of discussion would remain within the parameters of the topic for the course however the students were allowed to participate. Differences in opinion were also open to discussion as people had different perceptions about how to parent children. Clearly people’s own experiences, meaning the ways in which they were parented, were discussed as the older generation often had distinct ideas compared to the younger generation about how to care for children.

Other issues that were addressed in the courses included the difficulty of completing household work while simultaneously caring for small children. In traditional households, women were expected not only to care for children but also perform all of the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and shopping for the household. All of the women who attended the courses were employed outside of the home as well as the teachers. Thus, some emphasis was placed on the need for men to assist with household chores along with care-taking responsibilities.

The instructors attempted to encourage social interaction between the expectant parents so that they could develop a larger support network. However, in general, most of the participants in the course lived in very close proximity to their parents and other family members and would rely upon kinship networks for support more than acquaintances which is a pattern typical for the Basque region. Unlike the United States where it is common for people to live far from their parents or siblings, in the Basque Country and in Spain in general, people tend to reside close to their parents. This trend also is reflective of practical considerations as day care is very expensive. Thus, the family provides in an informal manner, some of the transfers and services that are provided by the welfare state in other European countries.

## Conclusions

In the European context, we have seen significant variations in how the issue of gender equality has been addressed at both a political and cultural level. While feminism and women's movements began to develop in the 1970's in Northern Europe, women's movements in Southern Europe were slow to emerge. As a result, welfare states and gender friendly policies vary significantly between European countries. Further "state feminism" has been difficult to define as it has been used to describe very different concepts. While some have defined it as the relationship between the feminist movement and the state, other countries define it as policies that promote women's social and economic independence.

In the case of Scandinavia, state feminism is often associated with 'feminism from above' as it is associated with gender equality and the development of social policies directed at women (Leira, 1993). It is considered progressive as it makes radical demands such as quota systems or rules for positive discrimination in hiring (Hernes, 1987). It accomplishes many of its objectives by renegotiating the boundaries between the public and private domains. Thus, it lessens men's power over women and thus promotes women's economic independence and life choices. This type of state feminism emphasizes women's political agency; including their ability to mobilize and self-representation (Hernes, 1987).

In the Spanish Basque Country, there has been an effort to develop structures to support both 'feminism from above' and 'feminism from below.' With the creation of Emakunde, the Basque Government provided public funding to design and implement gender friendly policies and support women's special interest groups. At the local level, individual groups of women were able to create their own associations utilizing feminist theory to support gender equality projects. Family welfare policy has not attempted to intervene in the home by transferring caretaking responsibilities into the public domain through the creation of state funded childcare programs. Instead, programs seek to support a universal caregiver model by making women's life patterns the norm for both men and women (Borchorst & Siim, 2008).



In conclusion, this article illustrates the ways in state feminism is embedded within core social values. Thus, visions of state feminism have taken different forms in different social contexts. In the case of the Spanish Basque Country, supporting the primacy of the family as the basic unit of society as been the goal of gender equity programs. Feminists looked toward relational feminism in constructing their own interest groups and in turn, the Basque Government has supported equal rights policies and projects that provide women with social support to fulfill their role as caretakers.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This type of feminism has been referred to as independent feminism that is associated with the United States and Great Britain.

<sup>2</sup> This feminism has been called relational or feminism of equality.

<sup>3</sup> Emakunde was created on the 5th of February 1988 with objective to eliminate gender inequality in society. Eight areas of analysis were addressed in order to obtain gender equality: legal, cultural, education, community relations, employment, social security, health, and social welfare.

<sup>4</sup> State feminism is a difficult term to operationalize as it has been utilized in different contexts, periods, and political strategies. In this context, state feminism is as defined as 'feminism from above' in the form of gender equality, social policies, and the feminization of the welfare state. Also, this is combined with 'feminism from below' through the mobilization of women in political and cultural activities (Hernes, 1987). It does not refer to a particular type of feminism, nor a commitment to feminism or women's movements. Rather, it refers to the location, that is the state, of the official administration in which and from which a response to a feminist demands takes place (Threlfall, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Within the European context, Spain dedicates a very small percentage of their state funds to family support. In addition, countries like Denmark, Holland, and Germany provide tax reductions for childcare expenses while this practice does not exist in Spain.

<sup>6</sup> The *basseri* system in the Pyrenees is a system in which all propertied families were recognized as household units comprising individuals with different roles and status, cohabiting in one house, all descending from the same family.

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