
CHAPTER 6. INTO, INSIDE AND OUT OF THE MOVEMENT. TRAJECTORIES

Within this mixture of continuity and discontinuity in the gender regime of the neighborhood movement, there are always complex sets of circumstances that shape the individual stories. To illustrate some of these complexities, I have chosen to present a few such stories.

First, let us look at the explanations, motivations and political trajectories of three women, who were exceptional as to self-assurance and as to the degree of commitment and activity, but who were representative of different tendencies among active women. Then, I present two cases of women who are likewise unusually energetic and who believe equally in the potential of the neighborhood movement and have experienced it as beneficial for them personally, but who have nevertheless decided to quit.

These women moved, like all the women activists, from the "home" to the "street" in the shape of neighborhood associations and often other contexts of similarly local and woman-friendly character, such as parent-teachers-associations (PTAs). But their movement continued. They went from timid beginnings to leadership positions in their barrio association, then on to the federation of their town and perhaps to other movements or party politics. The barrio association was a mediator, similar to the barrio as such, in that it was an intermediate place close to the home from which it was possible to continue "learning", as they all expressed it. All the women in this chapter were successful, and their stories spoke of success, but they did so in humble words that I interpret as sincere. They knew they came from a dark place, they could not pretend to be enlightened from the start. But I know them enough to be able to say that they were all courageous, resourceful and formidable in political battles, in a way that is not reflected in their humble-sounding stories.

Trajectories into and inside the movement

The first set of women was of different ages (30 something, 40 something and just over 50) and had been in the movement for different lengths of time. But all three had taken – with different amounts of hesitation – the step from barrio work to positions higher up in the organizational pyramid. And one reason this had been possible was that their husbands supported them, both in domestic chores and in the movement. All three husbands were also active in the movement. All three women were well known in their towns.¹

The first one, whom I will call Mary Luz, started out from a combination of class-consciousness, strong personality and radical Christian beliefs. In this she was similar to Carmen in chapter 4. However, after a few years in the movement, Mary Luz reached a reformist position on most issues. The second one, whom I will call Nuria, started out as a sociable but arrived later at reformist positions similar to those of Mary Luz. Where Mary Luz seemed to be moving away from very radical positions in a direction of more caution, Nuria had grown more radical.

Nuria had a growing feminist consciousness, Mary Luz was more typically ambiguous, but both of them attributed their desire for gender justice to their not-so-positive experiences of practical work in mixed gender contexts. Laura, the third woman, had also become interested in women's issues along the way, but she expressed herself in more ideological language, stressing the need to "get women out of the home."

The majority of the women who had been active for a long time were more ambitious or "conscious" than the average movement woman. This was true for both Mary Luz and Nuria. Mary Luz had even begun to strive for a career inside a political party. And Laura, unlike most women,

¹ If anyone from any of the six places I studied should happen to read this and think they know who these women are, they should be advised of two things. First, even though they are exceptional, there are many similar women leaders in the movement. Second, I have changed details in their stories to safeguard their anonymity. It is therefore impossible for a reader to ascertain their identity.
had never rejected the idea of work in a party or a union. Driven by a strong temper and a strong
will to change things, she had been willing to work in whatever context she could find, and she had
tried several, but at the time of the interview she seemed to have found her platform in the
neighborhood federation of her town, and she made it very clear that she was not planning to switch
to party work.

Mary Luz

Mary Luz was a woman in her early forties. She was very active, and sociable and talkative, too, so
it was not hard to persuade her to tell me the story of her movement activism.

When she got married and moved to her present barrio in 1977, there was already a neigh-
borhood association there, she said. "A group of people who saw the needs of the barrio." Many of
them belonged to underground political parties, both PC and MC, but there were also many inde-
pendents.

One night some neighbors came to the house where she lived with her husband in order to
tell them that the association had been legalized. "They were looking for people who wanted to be-
come members. And since I already had that feeling of wanting to do something... We began at-
tending the meetings, my husband and I." There was so much that needed doing in the barrio. There
was hardly any street lighting, "just a light bulb or two, far apart....", the streets were not asphalted,
there were no sewers... Schools were lacking, too, not to speak of parks and health services. "We
had nothing."

The association grew big in a very short time. "We had huge assemblies."

Mary Luz was active until her first child was born. When he was two years old, the neigh-
borhood association set up a child care center, and she started to take him there. Town Hall paid the
rent and the infrastructure, such as water and electricity. At first the two teachers were paid with
whatever could be collected from the parents of the children. Later, the association decided the
teachers ought to have social security and managed to get Town Hall to pay for that, too.2

Mary Luz participated in this venture as a mother, mainly, but also helped a little bit with
the organization. She felt "identified" with the whole idea of having a child care center and of it
being associational, not a private business. "My husband was also active in the association. He
helped with whatever he could, he liked to make posters and things like that." Since his job was a
manual one, he was good at practical things. Later he became a regular board member. But Mary
Luz described herself as the more revolutionary-minded of the couple.

One of the issues that lasted for years and required a lot of struggle in the barrio was "the bombs". There were several factories nearby that manufactured inflammable products. "It was like a
siege, four or five of those factories all around us, like bombs waiting to explode." There were tanks
of flammable liquids and there was transportation of them by truck and rail. There were a few
minor accidents and fires. The neighbors wanted the factories to be moved to the industrial areas
that were being constructed on the outskirts of the town. Most of them were moved in the early
1980s but the last one only in 1988. "You see, that one was to close down, but then they let the
workers take it over, so we did not want to be too strict with them, they had a hard time making a
go of it, so we gave them one deadline after another, until they finally moved, too. By that time
there had been technical improvements, anyway, so it was not as dangerous anymore. But it was a
nuisance, there were bad smells and noise."

The association in this barrio had its ups and downs, but it never closed down altogether.
There were times when there was very little activity. "What happened was the typical thing, the
leaders left for the political parties. But some of us independents were still active. And there was
still plenty to do in the barrio. I remember there was a period when there were only four of us ac-

2 This is how people in Spain often look at social security: as a kind of state insurance that you can have or not. And
that is how it is, in practice. For instance, in this case the employment situation was quite aboveground and indirectly
but clearly connected to the Town Hall. But technically it was a black market situation, since according to the law an
employer is required to register all employees for social security. This type of situation is very common, and its
frequency contributes to its legitimacy. But people on the left do criticize it. What happened in this case was a common
pattern in the neighborhood movement: it is felt that an employee should have social security – when and if it can be
afforded.
tive. We had to start anew to bring it back to life. And we did! We worked terribly hard to keep it going." But many inhabitants of the barrio were disenchanted when the "politicians" left. "They could see that they were people who had worked hard for the barrio, and then they left, for something else." Did they see it as treason? "Not really. People realized that they might be working still, in something else. But it caused a bad impression, very bad."

Some of those who left to work in political parties later returned. For a while the association was mostly festive, not very reivindicativa, but it was changing again in 1995. "There is something like a new awakening," said Mary Luz. "For a while we went mostly after well-being, social policies. Education and things like that. Fewer reivindicaciones. And of course with the democratic town hall it was not as necessary. The neighbors could go directly to town hall and solve their problems there. But now they are coming back to the neighborhood association, telling us, look, this thing is happening to me... can you help me... they told me... and I don't know where to turn..." Mary Luz thought this was a good sign that people realized the potentials of the movement. But personally, she felt pessimistic. "I feel some apathy lately. I am tired." She felt that there were many "municipal things" that were "not said out loud" in the federation, and she told me the story of how she had worked for the federation, as an employed secretary for a while. "I was in charge of all the paperwork, and there was so much to do that after a while they liberated me." She had traveled to meetings at the regional and state level. But she did not like it, she had seen so much manipulation, she had felt deep disgust.

We talked about the advantages and disadvantages of being an independent. Party people have channels of information, they know more about what is going on, they have comrades to defend them if something happens, but they have to obey their party. "I think at first they liberated me in order to make me shut up! I was uncomfortable; I always spoke my mind, no matter what the party line was. () For example, there was one thing at a (regional) federation meeting that I did not want to vote for, because we had not discussed it in our home federation. So I did not vote. God almighty, what a scandal! What pressures on me!"

Many women become active in a PTA as a first step towards a non-domestic life. Mary Luz, too, had worked for a PTA, but she reversed the usual order, she was active first in the neighborhood association and only later in the PTA. She had two children, they were now 14 and 16 and going to school.

"And I am going to school, too!" she exclaimed suddenly, proudly. She had only been to school for six years when young, and she had worked in a factory for most of her life. But it was no longer necessary for her to have a job. Her husband had a steady job, a legal one with social security, and he had been with the same company for many years, and the children would soon finish school. "So there is basic security, sort of." So Mary Luz had decided to take correspondence courses to prepare for a university entrance examination. She would like to become a psychologist or perhaps a social worker.

There was a women's committee in her barrio, but it was a vocalía, not independent. It might be developed into a women's association later on, they had talked about that. But Mary Luz was not very enthusiastic. "Sure, women's issues... but I can't really see why we need a special association for that..." I said that women talk more freely when there are no men around, especially about women's issues. May Luz said, "Yes, of course. But women in this town, they don't have enough sensitivity." I think she meant consciousness. I asked if having a women's association might not be a good way to develop that "sensitivity". Mary Luz kept her face of doubt and skepticism. "Yes, but no, one can talk in other ways, too, in other places... why not..."

After all her angry criticism of the way the PSOE party had acted inside the movement, I was surprised when she finished the interview exclaiming that although she was an independent, and planned to remain one, "my sympathies are with the PSOE, more than with any other party!"

When we met again in 2002 she had joined the PSOE party, but she said she felt she belonged to the critical wing of it. She had joined because she now felt that to have any real political influence one has to belong to a party.

Coming from the movement, she felt she had a lot of valuable experience that the party organizers ought to appreciate and rush to capitalize on. But so far her experience had been the oppo-

---

3 This is the usual phrase in political contexts in Spain; to be "liberated" by an organization is to be paid a salary so that you do not have to work somewhere else for a living.
site. "They are afraid of me. They know that I am well known through the neighborhood movement, and that most people respect the movement a lot more than the party, so they think I am going to use that to my personal advantage within the party. That I will out-compete them. So they do what they can to stop me, and to make me understand that I am new in the party and should not expect a high place on the electoral list right away."

She had forgiven the people in the federation who had hurt her. "One can't keep old wounds open, one must go on working. But maybe some day I will tell them what it really felt like." Perhaps that day would come when or if she was elected to some municipal post. "And then I will leave the movement. One cannot sit on both sides of the table at the same time."

Nuria

Nuria was in her mid thirties when I interviewed her. She had high school studies, as most women of her age have nowadays, but she worked cleaning an office. "Only three hours a day, but I would like to work more, it is just that I can't find any more work."

She did not identify herself as a housewife. She filled her days with associational activities. As a matter of fact both she and her husband spent most of their non-working time in the association premises in their barrio. They often even had dinner there (bringing wrapped sandwiches), and their children played there every afternoon. "They feel more at home here than in their back yard."

This was possible for Nuria, because her husband shared domestic duties almost equally with her, and they made them as "rational" and minimal as possible. For instance, they never ironed their clothes.

She was neither ashamed nor proud of her life style, she just considered it "normal". What was not so normal, she realized, was her intense associational life. For her, working for money as well as doing domestic chores were just parentheses in a daily life structured by movement tasks.

She had only been active for four years. Perhaps, she mused, she would grow tired after a few more years of this hectic tempo, but she did not really believe that would happen. She remembered the time before she joined as a period of boredom and ignorance she was glad to have escaped. She also said she had changed a lot as a person.

Before she found out about the association, "I just stayed at home. I didn't know anyone in the barrio. My family, my children, that was my life. I belonged to a party and a trade union, sure, but just paying the dues, nothing more." She knew of the existence of the neighborhood movement but never stopped to wonder what it was really about. "If I thought of it at all, I guess I thought it was a boring place. That it was all to do with asphalting streets and things like that." She saw herself as a sociable person, but she preferred her old school friends to the barrio women. "I don't like chatting with the women in the stores, about scandals and famous people. I'd rather be alone than do that."

Then the neighborhood association of her barrio created a library. "We have always been interested in cultural things, going to the theater and art shows and so on. My husband is a grade school teacher. So we thought it was an interesting thing for the barrio, to have a library; they called it a cultural center."

So they joined the association. For a while they were only passive members, but little but little they started to "help out" once in a while, when they saw a need, "and then they pressed me into being on the board. () I did not know what a board was like. Going to meetings... having to decide whether you were for or against something... I did not know anything about that kind of things. () But they thought I ought to be on the board. And before long I was doing other things. I was elected secretary, because there was no one else who knew how to write minutes, and then culture and then health..."

I asked what it was in the association and in the work on the board that made her change her mind so rapidly.

"I love the social thing! I loved being with the children in the library. () And to help people in the barrio, the people who live nearby, you see their children grow up, they are close to you, it is a much more intimate relationship than for example a teacher could have with her pupils."

Her first experience of more or less feminist discourses had been at the statewide women's meeting of the movement, in Tenerife. "I was quite overwhelmed. Our neighborhood association
had just been federated, we did not know such things existed..." But they had formed a women's committee, so they were summoned to the statewide meeting. "(One woman) called me, and yes, I could go, so I went. But I did not understand very well why or who I was supposed to represent." It seemed strange to her to see so many women together, and no men, and she had noticed that some of the women were very "advanced" while others knew even less than she herself did about the matters discussed and about how to behave in this sort of context.4

Later she had worked with women's issues in the federation of her town. I asked what she now thought a women's committee should be.

"Well, that depends on each barrio. To give something to the women of each barrio. To have more things happening in the barrio, in general. Some of the committees are more feminist, more reivindicativas, but most are not. I am not. But I will sign up for anything. I am always ready to work, as long as it is for my barrio. There used to be no activities at all for women. But then our mentality changed. Now I organize courses just to have something to offer, so that women will come out of their homes and get to know each other."

She did not like to use the word feminism.

"But I always defend women's rights, equality, to be persons, all of us, women as well as men. I don't mean to grab a stick and go after the men, that's not it. Sometimes I get along better with men than with women. I am not at all interested in clothes and those women's things. When I was little, I felt it was unfair that my brother didn't have to clean the house, and I had to, even though he was older. My mother was very conservative as to education, but she was a feminist without realizing it. She told us about families she knew, injustices in the law and the effects they had on women. () Then you grow older and you see all the injustices, for example how people criticize women who go out and they don't criticize the men. To begin with I did not know what the women's committee could be, and now I can see that it can be something more than a cultural activity. You have to get women out of their homes. Today a lot of people say, why do you need equality today? It is true that there has already been a lot of change. But the elderly women of my barrio, they still have the same old mentality. They won't go to a cafeteria because they fear being gossiped about. They go to courses, yes, and perhaps to a course dinner, it is possible, but then they have a big fight with their husband afterwards."

She herself had attended a course in self-esteem for women leaders.

"The first day I felt very depressed. Like going to the doctor thinking you are healthy and finding out you are not. But later I liked it. You have this image of other women, thinking they are so liberated, the women of the board, the social workers, the people in the party, even the feminists, women who have studied, professional women... And you can see that they are not all that liberated either." In the course, they had been asked to make little female dolls out of clay, for example. "And no one made a real woman, only neutral dolls, without genitals! It makes you think..."5

Nuria was a PSOE member, but the neighborhood movement was more important than the party for her. I asked if this caused problems for her in the party. "Plenty!" she laughed. "A lot of people, in my party and in other parties, find it very strange; they don't understand that you don't want to do what the party asks you to do."

Nuria was representative of a newer generation of reformist movement activists in many ways. She was ambivalent and contradictory on feminism. She was very energetic, still enthused by the things she was learning. She suffered from none of the nostalgia so common among old-timers. She had nothing ideologically against working for reivindicaciones but she did not discern any special material or political urgency. "What can we reivindicar? The barrios have everything now!"

In the interview, that is. I later heard her give a little pep talk to the board of her association, and then she stressed the reivindicativo aspects as much more important than "giving service". I am sure she adapted to the situations; she probably saw me as a person to the left of her politically, so

---

4 In all of this, Nuria was quite typical of a majority of the women who attended that meeting, judging from what I myself heard there. Cf. chapter 5.
5 I am sure this is a common experience. Many Spanish women I have met through the years confess "ignorance of the body," meaning usually that they have an ambivalent attitude towards bodies in general, female bodies in particular, and sexual aspects even more so. So it is logical for self-esteem courses to work with this. In a personal communication, Norwegian anthropologist Ingrid Oeveraas told me she had a similar experience in a similar workshop in a feminist group in Valencia, where she did fieldwork. "We were to draw ourselves, and nobody (except me) drew a naked female body. They drew dolls and faces, etc. When they saw my drawing we had a debate on just that."
to me she wanted to stress the legitimacy of sociable activities, whereas the board consisted mainly of sociables, so there she wished to underline the importance of more political activities. Like almost all activist women, Nuria saw a difference between herself and "ordinary barrio women". In her case she saw it as a difference mainly due to age, but also due to a low "cultural level" on the average in her barrio, meaning both lack of studies and low incomes. But she did not draw stark ideological contrasts between "traditional" housewives and "progressive" activist women, as so many other activist women did. She saw more of a continuum and a complex picture of many differentiating factors.

Younger women, recently arrived to the movement, with above average schooling, did not experience joining the movement as quite such a revolutionary change in their lives as women like Carmen (chapter 4) or the women in Malvarrosa (chapter 7). For women like Nuria, the world did not suddenly open up; it was already more or less open.

But even so, women like Nuria felt overwhelmed and happy to learn such things as what it is like to participate in meetings, "being for or against something," and to get the chance to do such sophisticated things as going to state-wide meetings. They, too, felt dizzy at discovering what the connectedness in the movement meant, what possibilities opened up both for them personally and for their barrios. Nuria, too, repeatedly underlined how her whole personality had changed when she took the step from "home" to "street". It was a change towards self-esteem and knowledge.

These discoveries were exciting enough to give women like Nuria plenty of energy. They were valuable workers for the movement. Without strong ideological convictions, however, they run the risk of running out of energy sooner or later, especially if they encounter personal disappointments or unsavory conflicts. Of which movement life is full.

As a matter of fact, when I saw Nuria again in 2002, she had left the movement because of a conflict. It was a multifaceted conflict in various phases, having to do with regional politics, feminism, authoritarian men, unprofessional women, misunderstandings around meeting formalities, barrio gossip about her bad housekeeping... None of the factors had been sufficient by themselves to discourage Nuria, but all of them together and over a long period of time were. She had been depressed for a while, then she had found another similar activity where she now spent her recovered energy, and she still felt the neighborhood movement was a great thing.

She read my summary of the interview with her, eight years earlier, and these were her comments:

"I think this is a correct picture of what I was like then. Naïve! (Are you that disillusioned now?) No, but with time you see more, you realize that everything is much more politicized than you think. I just felt like doing things then. () Neighborhood work gives a lot of satisfaction. You can develop as a person, there are lots of different things you can do and learn about: I have worked with urban planning, with children, with the library... lots of things. I have learnt so much. The courses, too, administration, teaching... even to use a computer. The movement has given me so much. Above all meeting people. The friendship. That is the positive part. But there are also negative things, of course. If you are a woman, it takes extra effort, exactly like if you work in an office, I think; you have to work more to obtain a position or just to get some respect, to get people to listen to you, for that you have to make double or triple the effort compared to a man. And then politics, that is a bad thing, too. And the fact that all the good things the movement does are not recognized, not by the people of the barrio nor by the municipal politicians."

Laura

---

6 Just in case someone finds it strange to say that she adapted to the situations, when I describe her as opposing the dominant view in each situation, I should point out that norms of conversational attitudes vary culturally. In Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries consensus is usually striven for. In Spain, the adaptation usually goes in the opposite direction. The disposition is for opposition. An interesting conversation is thought to be one where people do not agree (Fant 1989). The attentive reader may note that I myself used this norm to advantage in interviews, prompting people to discuss issues by arguing against them.

7 They were not literal, because I did not tape this time, but she has read and approved this piece of the text, too.
Laura had had various prominent positions on the board of her barrio association and in the federation of her town. So had Nuria and Mary Luz, but unlike them Laura told a story of political success.

Since she was so visible, I met her many times, but her story as presented here is mainly based on one interview we did in her association. It was taped, but I have chosen to tell it mostly in the third person, because her generous torrent of words had to be edited.

Laura was born in the 1940s, of peasant parents in another part of the country, but she had lived in her present barrio for many years, almost since she got married.

She said she had no political consciousness when she got married, "so my husband had to make it for me." He was an underground labor activist during the dictatorship. Her parents had never transmitted any political ideas to her. Her mother came from a religious and conservative family. Her father had been in the civil war on the republican side, but he never explained anything to her about politics. "I did not know anything. I did not even know that I lived in a dictatorship! My father respected me very much, he wanted me to form my own opinions. When I discovered that I lived in a dictatorship, I told him, and he said that it was about time you realized that. And I said: That is not acceptable! I had to do something! Compare, learn... that is when I decided to participate."

Her husband Alberto was worried and warned her of conflicts, repression and other risks. But she said that he, too, respected her very much, "he lets me do what I feel I have to do." Above all she wanted to learn. "I was like a wild horse, I wanted to know everything and change everything."

To start with she became active in the PTA of her children's school, and when the children reached high school age, she went on to work in the PTA there, too, and now she had experience, so she worked alongside the administration of the school to obtain better material and better teachers. "That was when I began to learn how to ask for things."

When the Transition got under way, Laura considered joining a political party. "But the children were still small. And Alberto has had such a bad time in union work, he is always warning me about the consequences of a decision like that. And warning me about the possible consequences of my temper. (...) But when the kids grew older, when they started going to university, I realized I was left without a platform for my political work. So I told myself, the time has come for the neighborhood movement."

She had already been a member for many years, but a passive one, not very interested in what was going on inside the association. There had never been any momentous struggles in the barrio that could awaken her interest, and she did not personally know any of the activists. The general image of the association in the barrio was that they were a group of small time leftist politicians quarreling among themselves.

But at a certain point in time Laura and Alberto decided to become active together in the association. "And the first thing we saw was that the barrio had a very bad idea of what the association was. (...) All of the work that was going on there, the people of the barrio did not know about it. And that is bad. At least there has to be some respect, whether or not people want to participate themselves." This was not a bad period for the movement as a whole, but in their association there were only a few activists and hardly any activities, which could attract more members. "So I went to the federation to ask. We did not know what to do. The federation sent me to other associations that had activities and they told me how it works..."

After a period of learning, Laura started to think that she had to do something specifically for women. "I saw the women in the streets and talked to them and all they could talk about was the TV soap operas, and the children of course, always the children, that was their life." She decided that handicraft courses was the appropriate thing to start with, "to get them out of their social absenteeism". Besides courses, she tried to get the women to go to museums, "to learn". She quoted the women's reactions: "No, I have never been to any place like that... no, I don't want to go, it will be boring..." But Laura insisted and persuaded a few "avant-garde ones" to go. "And when they came back and said they had had such a good time, the others wanted to go, too. And I tried to find someone who could explain things to us, in a way everyone could understand."
Soon there were outings, lectures, physical education... Laura found subsidies for the courses, for the women had very little money, they could not pay what the teachers charged out of their own pockets.

Laura continued to work with the women for several years. From among "her" women, who had been so "ignorant" to start with, a few activists emerged, some of who were now "like devils" organizing demonstrations and petitions, and they had learnt how to obtain their own subsidies.

Which was necessary, now that Laura no longer worked with them. She had gone on to work in the federation. She explained that they had had a problem in their association with their representative to the federation. He reported extensively on the political intrigues in the federation, but the people in the association could not understand what it was all about. (The following quote is approximate.) "So a few of us started going just as observers. And then we realized that it was not just a lot of political intrigues, but that those people were working with important issues that concerned the whole town. You start getting to know more people, from other barrios, you begin to understand the workings of the federation, you see that there are similar problems in other barrios, and some problems affect a whole set of barrios and could be better solved if the barrios work together... You get to know people personally, so you learn more about the whole town, you experience the problems of the whole town more intensely. And having personal relationships, people who explain what they feel, you see that it is beautiful to work together. I used to have my little world (in the barrio), I knew how to work it very well and I thought that was fine. But from the federation you get a wider vision. The whole town, that is a good thing, you have to work with that, too. And support the people who are in the general line of things that you want."

Laura felt she had come to understand the importance of political work in the sense of building alliances, choosing the right person for each task and foreseeing what other groups might be up to. "This year some new people were trying to take over the federation. I was scared. If they got what they wanted, the whole purpose of the federation would change. So I asked the president if I could help him in any way." He then invited her to join the board of the federation, in an important position. Laura was surprised and scared. "Madre mía! But then I said, OK, but on one condition..." and she went on to tell me not one condition, but a long list of conditions, a complete political program that she had proposed.

"I like to express myself clearly. This is what I want, and if that is what we are going to do, then fine, and otherwise I will just leave. I can walk out through the same door I came in. Because for me this is not a platform for a political career. I am not interested in that, only in trying to clean up the mess in this federation." There had been scandals, some corruption, and lots of personal doings without consideration for the common purposes. Laura would have none of that. And she thought that was why she was elected. She had a clean reputation, and a good record of successful work in her own barrio, and she was "not comfortable for any political party", she was a staunch independent.

**Trajectories out of the movement**

Some people leave the neighborhood movement in order to go on to other things. Some of these become professional politicians and dedicate their energy to their party. This is not very common, but it happens and some become well known. What is much more common is for women to use their experience from the neighborhood movement in some new political area. "Now that I know the movement by heart, it bores me; I want to try something new"; "I want something more up-to-date, more in tune with what society needs now"; "since the neighborhood movement seems to be dying, I need another place to work, with other things," etc.

What other things? That varied. In 2002, the World Social Forum was often mentioned. A few years earlier most people went to work with the drug problem, the peace movement, Amnesty International or union work. (This is according to my impressions. I have not seen any statistics and do not think any exist.)

---

8 See note 6 in chapter 13 for some examples.
Many activists wanted to make sure that I understood that young people nowadays prefer organizations that work with one issue only, e.g. anti-war movements, ecological issues, service to battered women, aid to the third world...

Another type of organization, which was not new (I have known them since the 1970s), but was often described as something new, was "platforms" or "coordinators" or "let's save" (salvems was the Valencian word, a verb form used as a noun). These were coordinating committees around specific issues, uniting activists and resources from various organizations interested in the issue from different points of view. It is probably true that this model has become more common lately. Neighborhood associations usually take part in platforms that concern their area.

Besides the search for new contexts, there are other reasons for leaving the neighborhood movement. I met several people who had participated intensely in the movement during the heroic or glorious years and then quit out of disgust. This disgust was usually a mixture of not wanting to have anything to do with party manipulations and of not agreeing with the less reivindicativo tendencies. In some cases specific personal experiences had meant sudden and dramatic exits, but the usual story was more about slowly withdrawing, relocating energy elsewhere. However, activists who stopped being active usually remained members of their barrio association.

I am sure some people quit simply because they were tired. But I did not meet anyone who actually confessed to that as the main reason.

Some of those who were still active did confess that they were beginning to feel tired and were thinking of quitting – but they always ended up arguing against such a step, apparently trying to persuade themselves that they would feel bad abandoning the struggle, or they would be bored at home, or they had not (yet) found any alternative that appealed to them as much as the neighborhood movement.

Usually the story of quitting included one or several of the following factors: some conflict with comrades in the struggle; bad conscience because one felt one was neglecting one's children, husband, domestic duties, parents; a wish to have a richer private life (reading, fun, travel...); doubts about the efficacy of the neighborhood movement. And perhaps a growing commitment to a political party or some other political activity.

In most cases the reasons were complex, of course. Let us look at two examples, both unique, both illustrative.

Mati

The first case shows a representative mix of frustrations. As usual I have changed some details to assure the anonymity of the narrator. The interview was not taped, so the quotes are not literal, but I took detailed notes, especially of emphatic or colorful expressions, and will render parts of the story as quotes to hint at the strong personality behind it.

Mati had "always" been politically active, especially in her union when she worked in a factory before she got married. That was in a big city. When she got married, she moved to a smaller town, and there she had found it very difficult to be accepted as a union leader. She felt she had a lot of experience and therefore would be able to make valuable contributions in the new place, but it had not been possible. She described the union, and the whole town, as "very closed". It was necessary to have personal contacts, "for people to have known you since before you were born," in order to be accepted as a leader or even as an ordinary activist. Finally she had found the neighborhood movement; it was somewhat more "open", she felt, so she worked in it for many years.

In 1995 she had lived in the new town for twelve years. She still felt like an outsider, but well adapted, she had a position on the board of her association and also worked in a women's organization. When she had her first child, she continued with her salaried job, too, "but it was horrible, running always, always tired, always late to feed her...", so when the next one was born, she quit work. But she was emphatic that she had "never stayed put inside the house" but always been active in various associations.

In 2002 we met again. Now she told me she had quit the neighborhood movement, and that she was very sad about that, she still felt it was "a great thing" and she hoped it would survive. But she was not sure it would, there were many crisis tendencies. And she herself had had many problems, so she had finally quit, out of disgust and feeling worn out. She had "rested" for a couple of
years and was now about to join Izquierda Unida. She still believed that a democratic society needs
many kinds of political organizations, but someone has to steer it all and translate it into effective
social change, she said, so political parties are also necessary. She was not interested in a political
career, only in giving of her experience. But she was looking forward to "learning some discipline; I
am lazy, I need a party to tell me what to do." She laughed, aware of the contradiction to everything
else she had told me about her past, but apparently sincere. Perhaps she meant that she wanted an
activity that was more clearly directed towards an explicit purpose.

In the movement she had worked mostly with women's issues, and she considered herself a
feminist, but she had always opposed separate associations for women, even women's committees.
"We have to integrate!" she insisted. And she felt that one reason the women's associations inside
the movement have not been effective is that they have "stopped at the level of handicraft courses."
She agreed with me that such courses can be of great service to many women, and that they may be
a necessary first step to persuade women to do anything at all outside their homes. "But they have
stopped there, they have not gone further. And the conversations they (the women in the courses)
have, they are horrible! Pure gossip. They don't learn anything or get any consciousness or
anything." She felt it was a question of weak leadership. For Mati, "education" (formación) was the
key word, and she pronounced it in almost every other sentence. "You have to create a barrio
consciousness. And rid people of all those fears. Today, there are no valid reasons for women to
organize separately."

One reason she quit the neighborhood association was that she felt her association, and the
movement as a whole, consisted of small closed groups of friends who did not know how to work
together with others and who resisted admitting new people. Another reason was that she had been
the only woman on her board for many years, and that had worn her out. She was further critical of
the attitude of activists who are only interested in their own barrio, "or even their own street, even
only one side of their street! The broken street lamp at the corner..." (The corner lamppost, la farola
de la esquina, was a common metaphor in the movement for this kind of narrow-mindedness, which
was certainly common, but also constantly criticized.) She deplored the lack of ideological training.
"There are lots of leftists in this movement, but they have not managed to transmit their ideology to
the people."

But she did not agree with those who say that the neighborhood movement has had its mo-
ment and that it must now disappear and leave room for other things. "It is worthwhile for it to
continue even if it does not change. It is good for people to have a commitment to their barrio. I
would like to see lots of changes in it, but to have it continue as it is is preferable to not having any-
thing like it at all."

Her final decision to quit was caused by a minor incident that she experienced as an insult.
Her association had organized a women's party day with a handicraft show to celebrate the
objects the women made in the courses. Mati felt ambivalent about it; she saw that it was a good
thing for the self-esteem of the women who participated in the courses, and there is nothing wrong
with handicraft, she herself had participated in one course and become very interested in ceramics.
But she insisted on the political limitations of handicraft courses. And she was upset about the atti-
dudes of the men in the association. "Make a party for the women, that is all they need,' that is what
they thought." When the snack was served, "not one of the leaders of the association sat down at the
tables where the women were! Not one! They all stood by the bar!" Mati interpreted this as a
conscious marking of distance and male superiority.

I said perhaps the men were shy about mixing with women. Gender separation is after all the
traditional pattern. And in bars and cafeterias, very often women sit at tables while men stand by the
bar. Mati understood what I meant. "Yes, of course, that is how it is... but I don't agree with you!
That is not all there is to it!" She said that such traditions were not acceptable, integration was
necessary and the neighborhood movement was one place where that should be one of the purposes.
So the men should have made an effort, and she thought they would have done so if they had not
felt contempt for women's activities.

The celebration had been a success in numbers. "Lots of women came; you know, women
like whatever does not cost any money, and of course they like the handicraft, and of course the so-
ociability, yes, of course, that too. But I felt awful!" She and two other women had organized the
whole thing, and the men on the association board had not lifted a finger to help. "They had this
attitude, that 'you wanted this, so you do it. Since it is for women and you are a woman... And since you are a woman, you understand these things'..."

I am not sure Mati told me the full story. Such attitudes on the part of the men are after all extremely common, almost all active women had anecdotes to tell along the same lines, so Mati with her long experience should not have been surprised, and this did not sound like an example of the most offensive kind. But for Mati it was the final drop. She quit the board and stopped being active in her association.

But she was still a member. And she was glad that the handicraft celebration had become an annual tradition.

I think Mati was really discouraged because she saw no way of creating activities that would attract "ordinary barrio women" while being at the same time at least a little bit political. She kept coming back to what she had experienced as so frustrating in the course she attended. "The women only gossip. Or talk about soap operas. There is no debate. That is normal in a way, sure, for them, they are not used to debating. But you have to get them out of this routine. And they won't come out."

In other words, as Mati saw it, the women in the courses had not come out of their "homes" – spatially perhaps, but not socially and not culturally. And for her, who had, it was tiresome to be constantly reminded of the limitations she had overcome.

For a while she had worked with an association to combat domestic violence. That is a worthwhile thing to work for, she said, and focusing on one issue fits the associational patterns of young people better than the neighborhood movement. "For a while I felt fine in there. Our work was good and effective. But you have to have a special personality to be content with that. I was bored after a while, I need to talk politics!" That was why she had decided to join a political party.

Encarna

The second example is a woman who left the neighborhood movement not for politics but to set up a business.

Actually Encarna started her business while still active in the movement. She did not do it because she wanted to but because she had to. She had cleaned homes, offices and stairs for most of her life, but recently she had been unemployed for a combination of reasons, mainly that her town was in economic crisis so there was less demand. Her husband, a factory worker, had also been laid off, and when his period of unemployment benefits was coming to a close (she had never received any), and neither of them had any new job, they had to do something. They had five children, all in school, and neither set of parents had money enough to help.

Encarna thought she had to use her experience: knowing the cleaning profession well, having learnt organizational techniques in the neighborhood movement, and having also obtained a lot of useful contacts through the movement. So she and a couple of other women decided to start a cooperative. During my first period of fieldwork, she worked very hard, but there was little cleaning to do; mostly she dashed around trying to set up contracts.

When I came back to her town in 2002, I was glad to hear through others that the cooperative had done very well. But Encarna was no longer active in the movement. So I went to see her at her office. She was overjoyed to tell me her success story; she even shed a few tears, out of joy but also out of sadness, remembering the hardships. The cooperative had managed, after a difficult first year, to obtain contracts to clean a school and for municipal services in the homes of elderly handicapped people. Once they had a few contracts, more were forthcoming. There were now over 40 employees, including a receptionist and a bookkeeper, and Encarna was the manager. They had pleasant offices where they also had several washing machines ("a lot of the old people don't have any, and we can't have our employees wash by hand"), and they had a couple of class rooms, for they had now also contracted municipal courses of the kind the neighborhood movement also offers (and Encarna knew how to organize), especially in consumer habits, literacy for the elderly and some courses for school children, e.g. in how to shop for food.

Encarna said a lot of people were envious and made comments like, "now that you have found a position". Such comments hurt. "I have not found a position! I have made one for myself, and it has cost me a lot of sweat!"
Encarna asked me to be sure to write in my book that the neighborhood movement is a school. For a lot of people, in different ways. For her it had meant first of all self-esteem, which she lacked because she had hardly gone to school (never as a child and only a little to literacy classes as an adult), and then all the little things that you learn as you go along, how the town bureaucracy functions, where to turn to obtain things, how to ask when you don't understand... The movement can be used as a springboard for political careers, but it can also be used as a springboard to a better life in general, for the individual, according to Encarna.

She stopped being active in the neighborhood movement because the cooperative demanded all her time, but she still supported it. She was critical of what was happening in the movement of her town, but she felt loyal to it, for what it had been and what it could still be. And of course for what it had meant to her personally.

If we compare Encarna with Carmen (chapter 4), we see a woman with a similar background: a harsh childhood with no school, early work for a living, early marriage, constant struggle for the survival and well-being of her children, a strong class consciousness finding an outlet in neighborhood association work, learning and struggling hard there, enjoying it but finally quitting. But there are also important differences, and I think they are mainly due to Encarna's being almost twenty years younger than Carmen. Encarna did not feel "shy", she had not been put off by the new styles of interaction imposed by democratic / bureaucratic municipal offices, on the contrary, she had continued learning and she had managed to capitalize on this learning to build a material base for her private life. And this success had produced more than money; it had given her self-esteem and knowledge of many kinds. Her new life had changed her appearance and manners; as a matter of fact there was now a middle class air about her; but it had not changed her convictions. She no longer had the time for political activities, but she believed in the movement. Politically she stood where she had always stood, close to Izquierda Unida. She managed a business because she had to do it to survive, but she did not believe in capitalism.

In the eyes of a younger generation

Here is a short comment from a young (30 years old) woman who recently decided to join the board of her barrio association without having much previous experience of the neighborhood movement. The quote is literal (although translated of course), because it comes from a mail message; parentheses indicate that I have edited a little in order to safeguard her anonymity. Her words are representative and indicate continuity in the outlook of activists:

"It happened like this: I used to go to the neighborhood association once in a while, not much, because I had a lot of other things to do (...). I admired the people there, their solidarity with other people whom they did not even know, and their interest in helping them, usually in exchange for nothing but simply because it is necessary to help others. I loved that. So one evening – we (a group of friends) had been out having some beer, I think we came from a demonstration – we went to the association. That was when (the president said new people were needed for the board, he wanted to quit and he thought veterans have to give younger people a chance). So when he asked (who would want to sit on the board), I raised my hand."

Her husband was upset at first, saying she was too impulsive, she had too many other things to do. (She was studying and working, and they were planning to have children soon.) But then he, too, volunteered.

I asked if she had no previous political experience whatsoever and she wrote back: "Even though I have always had a clear idea about my ideology and I have participated in a lot of political acts, I have never wanted to belong to any political party for one essential reason from the point of view of gender: the parties have totally patriarchal systems, even though Izquierda Unida tries to remedy this in some sense with their policy of equal numbers. However, after the last elections (which were disastrous for this party), I decided to give them my support and signed up. I am afraid the IU might disappear; that would be a great catastrophe. That is all."

This woman is representative of a generation for whom the neighborhood movement is just there. Such young activists usually have a hazy idea, or none at all, about the early history of the movement. They did not have to build it. They just know that it is an alternative and a complement
to party politics, more democratic and less patriarchal. When I tell them that there is no neighborhood movement in other European countries, they are surprised.