
CHAPTER 8. THANKS TO THE ASSOCIATION: A STORY OF AN "ASSOCIATION OF NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN" (asociación de mujeres vecinales)

As we saw in chapter 5, one way for women to participate in the neighborhood movement is in what is known as associations of neighborhood women (asociaciones de mujeres vecinales). These associations are jealous of their independence but they still form part of the neighborhood movement, as the name indicates. In practice, they function like the women's committees (vocalías), usually. But as separate associations, they control their own money and can, for example, ask for their own subsidies from local and state government entities, especially from the Women's Institute.¹ The significance of their autonomy varies greatly. It can be an important step towards getting reluctant male members of an association to acknowledge the presence and importance of women and/or to create spaces for women to be able to speak up and be heard. It can also be an excuse for a neighborhood association not to have to worry about women's issues. There are both feminist and anti-feminist arguments both for and against the associations of neighborhood women. Let me tell you the story of one such association. It is a very different story from the Malvarrosa one, even though the women are of almost identical background: working class, peripheral barrio of Valencia, some variation in age but mostly middle aged or older, little schooling, mostly housewives. The difference lies in their manner of relating to associational life. The case may be unique in its details, yet it illustrates many general issues and it has a lot to say about a common problem of Spanish women which is seldom acknowledged in feminist discussions: that of the changes in the lives of now middle-aged housewives, and the struggles they have to wage with their own habits and opinions, whether they want to or not. The ones who wage successful struggles in the hegemonic direction of "emancipation" show up in social life in different kinds of activities. The ones who stay at home, doing more or less what they always have done, above all serving their families, are often stereotyped as conservative housewives, perhaps passive and ignorant. There are many derogatory labels for such women, most of them actually common women's names: "marujas" "maripilis" etc. We saw that the women in Malvarrosa took pains to differentiate themselves from such women. So did Carmen and Nuria, Laura and Mary Luz, Mati and Encarna.

The following story shows that such women, too, struggle to shape their lives and opinions into coherent wholes, and the neighborhood movement can sometimes, if it is open-minded enough, be very helpful.²

Asociación de mujeres vecinales de Benimaclet.

This was the true name of the association. There were few of its kind in Valencia, and it had several special characteristics, so it would be quite useless to try to make it anonymous.³ The woman who

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¹ The Women's Institute, Instituto de la Mujer, was set up in 1983, as an autonomous unit within a governmental department (which one has varied through the years). It was later followed by homologous ones in several autonomous regions, although some of these have since been discontinued. Its purpose is to encourage research on women, plan and evaluate government action to improve women's opportunities and conditions, and subsidize women's activities and organizations.

² The story of the women's committees in Vigo shows the same thing in a different vein, see chapter 11. There it was organized from the top down; the example in this chapter is of a spontaneous organization.

³ According to the annual summary of activities in 1994 by the Women's Commission of the Valencia Federation of neighborhood associations, there were five associations of neighborhood women in the city of Valencia that year. In another nine barrios there were vocalías. In the commission no differentiation was made; all fourteen worked together. Some activities that year were: celebration of 8th of March, lectures and handicraft courses in each association,
took the initiative to organize it and who continued to be the backbone in it has given me permission to quote her and to use her real name, Amparo Arce. She thinks, as I do, that the story of the association is worth telling.

She herself has written a short history of it. It begins as follows (my translation):

"I joined the neighborhood association of Benimaclet in 1990 with the intention to improve the barrio where I was born. I had already worked for ten years in the PTA of (name of school), where my children went, and four more years in the High School of (name). So I already knew what it meant to set up and organize activities for others. After the General Assembly of the association, at which I ran for office and was elected, I started to work in the women's committee. I was used to working with children, so I thought (stupid as I was) that it would be the same thing to work with women, that the women of the barrio were waiting for me to organize activities to which they could come.

"That was not so. Each lecture I organized was a failure. This lasted for three years. There were lectures and activities but the women did not show up.

"In 1993, there was the Third State Congress of Women and the Neighborhood Movement in Toledo, and I went in representation of the neighborhood association, in charge of the women's committee. We spent two days in a hotel, talking and listening, there were only women. We worked and shared our small victories and great failures as to getting our women neighbors out of their homes.

"The women of Madrid said that they were organizing as Associations of Neighborhood Women and that perhaps in the future that would be better accepted. If we women associated as such we could apply for subsidies for our activities, since we had few places to get together as women and recycle ourselves for our incorporation in society, especially those of us born in the 1940s, with little schooling if any.

"All of these explanations awakened a great energy in me, because if the association backed me, in the future I could see my dream of forming an association of women, getting women together who did not even know each other and get them away from the TV and make them talk to each other and find out that if they need a good friend they can find one in the woman next door. I set to work and defended the project I brought from Toledo with all my energy, because in the association they did not see why we needed another association for women, since there was the women's committee for them.

"I continued going to the Federation of Neighbors as responsible for the women's committee, and there we all commented on how difficult our project was. We had only one strength and that was that if we changed the name we could apply for our own money from the administration.

"It was not easy to obtain support. The associations said (and not without reason): divide and conquer. (...) 4

"After three months of talking about it, three associations with women presidents, agreed to give the name of Association of Neighborhood Women to the women neighbors who met there and thus go on to complete autonomy.

"I had not stopped insisting in my association, not for one single meeting, so perhaps it was boredom which made them help me to form the association.

"We are in December, and I see a woman passing by in the street with a beautiful Christmas table decoration, and I had the idea that perhaps that would be a good thing to get women together so they can each make their own decoration.

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4 She meant that the association leaders thought that the idea of separate women's associations was part of a strategy to undermine the movement.
"I find out who the teacher is, who would be willing to teach us and what it would cost. She wants 3,000 pesetas for each afternoon, but two afternoons would be enough time for what we want. I am worried if the women who might want to come would think it too expensive, so I go to the association and ask them to subsidize one afternoon for me, and they say yes.

"The next step is to find the women.

"I know of a group that I can see each morning taking a walk together to the beach, so I talk to one of them and she thinks it is a good idea, she says she will talk to her friends.

"Next day she calls me to ask when do we begin.

"The first step has been taken.

"Nine women show up, we make the decorations and I use the occasion to ask why they don't come to the association, because through the women's committee I could get them a place to meet and teachers for many activities that we women like, but they answer that they have been thinking of finding a Housewives' Association, they like that better than a neighborhood association.

"I talk to my colleagues and tell them about this conversation and say that this is the occasion to form our own association.

"They tell me go ahead, that they will support me.

"Then I tell the women not to search anymore, that we will organize our own Association, made by us and for us and our slogan will be COME AND JOIN, WE WILL ONLY DO WITH OUR TIME WHAT WE OURSELVES (feminine form) WANT TO."

This quote exemplifies several important characteristics of women like Amparo. She was a very energetic and intelligent woman and she had had several years of experience of associational work before launching this association. Even so, her language reveals her feeling of getting into deep waters. It also shows the lasting imprint of deficient schooling in the difficult post-war years of her childhood and youth. She is tenacious and independent, but also loyal to the neighborhood movement, which had given her the chance to become an independent-minded woman in the first place. She interprets the resistance in the neighborhood association to the women's associations mostly as men's traditional opposition to women's autonomy, and she strongly disapproves of this, yet she does not launch an autonomous association until she obtains the backing of the board of the neighborhood association, and she concedes that there might be some manipulative intentions behind the central campaign to create separate associations for women.

Since launching her association, Amparo had had to write many letters as president. She began most of them with the phrase, "This is the first time I am president of something, so I don't know if I am doing it right or if I use the right words, but..." This was true, and it was her personal honest style. But she had also learnt that it worked as a trick. It prompted the kind of answers she wanted, letters written in a way she herself and the other women could understand. She read most of the correspondence aloud at the meetings, in order to be democratically open and also to help the women see that it was not such a big deal to write to authorities, politicians or famous people.

Amparo had been a housewife most of her life. She had had four children and she had cared for four elderly parents and in-laws. Her husband was a factory worker. Until her children were almost adult, she had taken for granted that her husband had the right to control her activities, so she was desperate when he disapproved of her joining associations. Only little by little, using both dramatic pressure and classical seductive womanly manipulation did she gain the liberty to be active outside the family. Except for work, that is. That was accepted because it was necessary; she had worked for many years, cleaning offices and other people's homes. It was "only help", however. Her main identity was that of mother and wife.

In other words, she was the same kind of woman as those she wanted to reach. She knew they needed a lot of help and inspiration to "get away from the TV" and to learn that a woman neighbor may become a friend. She spoke their language. She understood them and they understood her.

But she was different from them in that she had been active in associational life for many years. And even though she was not really interested in politics, and not committed to any party line, she had come to have strong views on what society should be like and what should be done to
change what was wrong with it now. She was not the "sociable" kind of movement member, she was a revolutionary in the sense that *reivindicación* was a key word for her.

The other board members of her neighborhood association (men and women) knew this. They also understood that it took a woman like Amparo to reach the women who constituted a large segment of the barrio population. They agreed that these women should be reached. They understood that they could not be reached with messages of *reivindicaciones*. Still, they had their doubts about what Amparo was doing. They did suspect that the Toledo *consigna* of creating separate women's associations might be a PSOE trick to divide and weaken the movement. And they could not help feeling superior to the women in Amparo's group. They found them ignorant, selfish, pretentious and politically uneducable.

At the same time they were impressed. From the unpromising beginnings, a sturdy association grew up quickly. In 1998 it had 195 members. About 30–40 were present at the weekly meetings I attended (as compared to 6–12 at the neighborhood association weekly meetings). One of their main activities was selling lottery. They did this with great enthusiasm and success, earning so much money that the women's association could now afford to pay a major part of the rent for the neighborhood association premises, and it had also donated the cost for a new tile floor (to cover the old concrete one), some furniture and some activities. The women's association also regularly obtained the government subsidies they hoped for. They used them to organize activities, to which now a lot of women came.

They had had a literacy course (which they called "spelling course") and courses on such things as Andalusian dancing (*sevillanas*), calisthenics, obesity, sexuality, stress and depression, and how to stop smoking; they had a group which read and commented on novels and experimented with writing down some of their own comments (Garrido 1997, unpublished); a smaller group wrote poems and had sometimes recited them to larger gatherings, e.g. during the barrio cultural week; they made day trips to local museums and industries; they had picnics at the beach and they had annual dinners to celebrate the anniversary of the association; each year a growing number of the members joined the feminist 8th of March demonstration downtown; as of late 1998 eighteen members had also become members of the neighborhood association.

What made this possible? Why was it so difficult for Amparo to get anything at all going for three years and what made it so easy all of a sudden?

According to Amparo herself, it was the organizational autonomy that made the decisive difference. This is what she wanted to stress in the text above with the capital letters about using "our own time as we (feminine form) want to". That is to say, the message to the women was that men do not run this association, nor does any party or any other kind of authority: No one will tell us what to do. Amparo knew that this message was necessary for the women she wanted to reach. They do not want to be drawn into contexts where men might tell women what to do. They are deeply suspicious of politics and have little understanding of the advantages of collective organization of any kind. They want to make new friends, and they want a space where they can do things they like to do, like handicraft, or things they feel they should do to "take care of themselves" as the phrase now goes, i.e. to look good and fashionable.

The group of women Amparo first contacted had been thinking of joining a housewife association in order to do calisthenics and handicraft. They had organized regular walks to the beach for the sake of exercise and getting together. They were thus already a bit more "advanced" than the average barrio housewife. But they told Amparo they wanted nothing to do with the neighborhood association since they had heard that it was communist.

It was quite a feat that these women had acceded to cooperate with the neighborhood association, that some of them had even become members, that many of them no longer rejected feminism and that a lot of women with even less experience of associational life had joined. Amparo was rightfully proud of "her" association.

But she was also worried about its future, and about its political shortcomings, which she could not help but interpret along similar lines as the other board members of the neighborhood association.
Frustrations and limitations

"These women do NOT get the message that one could do something to improve society," she exclaimed in frustration, during a conversation with me in November 1998. "And they never will! For almost four years now, I have tried to filter little ideas to them, but they don't accept them, they don't even seem to notice them. They have accepted the neighborhood association, yes, but they still consider them strange people, communists, atheists or whatever. It is just that they are like little children in the house of their parents. The neighborhood association is the parent, parents do strange things, children don't have to worry about that."

I objected that the women's association in fact subsidizes the neighborhood association. Amparo nodded. "Sure, like good daughters, they do what they can. They are protected by the parents, they get to be in their house, so they return the favor, trying to be helpful. But that does not mean they are interested in what the parents do or think. That is another world!"

Perhaps it was not so much like a parent-daughter relationship as a classical husband-wife one, I suggested. Amparo agreed. "Yes, that's right. Now that you say so, I can see that. The husband does things, like politics, and the wife does not have to worry about that. As long as they get along and keep the peace. Yes, the women are adult, not children, but they are adult in a womanly way, they don't mix with the men."

Part of the problem, or the greatest reason for it, was the women's age. The group of friends Amparo first contacted, and which still constituted the nucleus of the association, consisted of women between 50 and 60 years old. Most of the new members were therefore of that same age. Younger women were not attracted, they had different kinds of lives, and they were not interested in having older friends. There were a few members between 40 and 50 who also came to the Thursday meetings, and quite a few who were even younger but who signed up only to be able to participate in the courses and never came to the Thursday meetings.

This means, said Amparo, that the future of the association is shaky. Who will take over?

I said it also means that the association does not cater to all women in the barrio, not even to all barrio housewives. It caters to a certain kind of barrio housewife, the women who have similar experiences of being educated to dedicate themselves completely to their family and who have spent most of their lives doing just that and have not rebelled against it. This excludes many kinds of barrio women: younger women, unmarried women, rebellious women of any age, women with education, women who work outside the home, etc.

True, said Amparo, reflexively. "But these women are probably still a majority." She suddenly felt a need to justify her efforts, in spite of everything she had just said. She told a story of a woman whose son had died. She was desperate ("even though she had several more children"), until a friend made her join the association. Little by little she started enjoying life again, and much later she confessed that if it had not been for the association "I would not be in this world any longer." Amparo told a few more stories, not so dramatic, but with the same morale: the association was necessary. One of the board members, a man, had told her that if just one woman was saved from suicide, that one life made the association worthwhile. "And I know that we have avoided more than one suicide, I know that for a fact, not to speak of the many depressions and so on. 'Thanks to the association,' that is the phrase I hear all the time. The women say 'thanks to the association' for this and 'thanks to the association' for that."

Amparo felt, and I agree, that her work had been amply justified. It was worthwhile, and not just on the level of alleviating individual suffering. The association was a forum for cultural negotiation. The women made friends there, friends of more varied kinds than they would make in their kin gatherings or other more narrowly defined contexts. With these friends they talked, they compared experiences and opinions. They talked of current events – mainly perhaps about famous people and their divorces and children and parties, but through their collective evaluation of such matters, they negotiated what was right and wrong in marital relations, how to handle young adults living with their parents until they are over thirty (which was the case for most of these women's children), how to manage new social facts, how to think of their own bodies and those of their daughters, and so on. Through these discussions, they obtained a wider perspective on their own lives, and they influenced each others' – and indirectly each others' kin's and friends' – outlooks.
It is true that they did not learn about politics. According to a minor study of this association (Soriano Llorca 1998, unpublished), none of them wanted to take on any associational responsibilities. They told the researcher that in order to have a position on a board one has to have free time, knowledge and a strong personality. The women did not think they had any of that. Instead, they said, they enjoyed belonging to an association because they felt they learned things, they had fun and did nice things, they enjoyed having time of their own outside their home. And, some of them also said, they felt that being together with the other members they "improved social relations". They felt that in the association they could "do things they had never been able to do before" and "have a good time".

It is quite correct to take "friendship" as the leading theme of analysis of this type of association, as Soriano does. She refers to the anthropological work carried out by Josepa Cucó (1991) in the autonomous community of Valencia, which shows that in this region, most associations are actually built on pre-existing groups of friends. Friendship is a key cultural value without which it is almost impossible to create collective organization, and it is also what people who join already existing associations most want to obtain. Amparo was unsuccessful as long as she tried to attract women through posters and advertisements, i.e. directing the message to individuals. But once she found an already existing group of friends willing to create an association, this nucleus became a stable base that could attract more members. In rural areas, friendship groups are often stable for many years, sometimes lifelong. The members of such a group (called in Valencian colla or quadrilla) are always of approximately the same age. This long-term and rather closed, although voluntary, pattern has been strongly affected by the abrupt urbanization of the region, but it is still recognizable, especially in more or less stable barrios, and among middle aged or older people of traditional bent. The women of the group Amparo found did not call themselves a colla or quadrilla, but they functioned like one.5

According to Soriano, all the women of the Benimaclet association had joined because they already knew someone, a friend or neighbor, who was a member.

Age and daily rhythm dovetailed closely. The women in the association had no small children any longer. After lunch, which in Valencia is between 2 and 3 PM, approximately, and after perhaps resting a while and doing the dishes, they had a long free afternoon to program as they saw fit, until dinnertime around 9 PM. Many of the women preferred not to go out after dark, which meant about 6:30 PM in the winter. The Thursday meetings were set for 5 PM.6

For women with small children, this time was about the worst possible one. Small children usually take an afternoon nap while the parents and older siblings have lunch, so they wake up and want their afternoon snack around 4 or 5. If they attend preschool, they have to be picked up about 5 or 5:30. School children come home around 6 and expect mother to be home to give them a snack, and many mothers go to meet their children at school until they are 9 or 10 years old. For mothers of both school children and small children there really is no free afternoon time to use for meetings. Only if they have a husband who agrees to put the children to bed and to postpone his own dinner can such women participate in activities outside the home, and then only approximately from 7 or 8 PM (depending on the husband's working hours) to 9 or 10 PM.

In other words, it is almost impossible to find meeting times that fit both younger and middle aged women. For women with a job, the difficulties are compounded, of course.

I was present at various Thursday meetings. I interviewed Amparo herself and talked to her many times. Once (in 1995) I arranged a collective interview with nine of the members of the

5 Cf. the women in Malvarrosa who confused "an association" with a group of specific individuals. The tradition of colla or quadrilla may be specifically Valencian, but similar traditions of friendship groups exist in most parts of Spain. Cf. peñas in Cordova, chapter 12. Cf. also chapter 4, what the "good atmosphere" of the barrio and of the association meant to Carmen. Cf. Glossary, ambiente. And cf. my monograph on women in Valencia (Thurén 1988), where I stress the importance of friendship. In international anthropological literature on women in the Mediterranean area, there has been some doubt about the existence of women's friendships, or even their cultural possibility. This is contradicted by most findings from Spain and explicitly critiqued by Sarah Uhl on the basis of her data from an Andalusian village (Uhl 1991).

6 That was in 1995. Due to another disposition in the habitus of the women, the time has tended to slide forwards. In 2003, the official meeting time had been changed to 5:30, most women arrived around 6 and the meeting usually began in earnest around 6:15.
association. Most of these, except perhaps two or three, were leaders of the association, i.e. women who had had some previous associational experience and who knew why they were in this association, and on whom Amparo could count to help her with practical matters and to be willing to fill the posts on the board.

One of them had been a nationalist\(^7\) way back in the 1960s; she had belonged to a theater group which produced plays in the Valencian language when that was a dangerous political act, and later she had been active in a feminist organization and in the neighborhood movement. Another one had only been in the PTA at her children's school, but that experience had been filled with difficult conflicts with some political overtones, so she had learnt a lot, she said. One woman was a widow. She had never done any associational work before. She said she had always wanted to, but her husband did not like the idea. "If he were still alive, I would not be here today, you can be sure of that." A couple of the other women told about how many children they had and how that had meant they had never had any time for themselves. "Only now, maybe for the last five or six years, have I been able to think of myself, now that some of them have left home and the others are more or less adult."

The leaders did not consider themselves feminists. But they were no longer afraid of the word and they were beginning to understand why Amparo was doing what she was doing. Most of the women said the main reason they were in the association was that one of their friends, the woman who organized the beach walks, had met Amparo and decided to take the whole group into the association. The rest of those present were in an intermediate phase; they realized that the association was something different from a group of friends, and they were beginning to find this interesting. But strange, a challenge. They expressed surprise at finding themselves in such a context.\(^8\)

**The Thursday meetings**

Amparo had been the first president herself. Later the posts had been juggled around, but Amparo was always the one in the know and the one with the moral authority, she was the one who talked to outsiders, the one who received mail and chose which things to read aloud and/or comment on at the meetings, etc. and in practice she was the one who ran the meetings whoever was president at the moment.\(^9\)

The women accepted her authority without comment. The informal hierarchy was perhaps unconsciously expressed in the distance between the table at which Amparo and the members of the board sat and the semi-circle of chairs for the other women.

The arrangement of the chairs also expressed the women's notion of sociability, and this was conscious. Once, when so many women had arrived that it was impossible to fit more chairs into the semi-circle, I suggested we rearrange the chairs into rows. The women said that would not be "friendly" and opted for a zigzag pattern instead, and when that, too, became too crowded, and a

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\(^7\) That is, she had been part of the movement to defend the Valencian language and what was known as the Valencian signs of identity: a flag, some knowledge of local history and geography, certain festivities, and so on. In the centralized Franco regime, "nationalism" referred to love of Spain as a whole and its "unquestionable" unity, but that was usually called "patriotism", and in the peripheral areas of the peninsula, local nationalisms developed and generally formed part of the leftist opposition to the regime. The best-known examples are the nationalist movements of the Basques and the Catalans, but there were others, for example in Valencia. Cf. also note 3, chapter 11.

\(^8\) In other words, in terms of the division of spheres, they were moving from the private one, where relationships are based on personalities and needs, toward the public one, where the roles one plays are more abstractly defined. This can be seen as a part of modernization processes, as many studies have argued. But such analyses usually forget about gender. As long as women are socialized mainly for duties in the private sphere, they will handle multi-stranded role relationships much better than role-specific ones. One reason they prefer the neighborhood movement to conventional politics is then, obviously, that the former is based on multi-threaded roles much more than the latter are. But for some women, even the unspecific but after all leadership roles in a neighborhood association, and even such temporal roles as speaking formally at a meeting, may seem too much. Cf. Coser 1991.

\(^9\) This had to do with her individual personality, certainly, but it also expresses a cultural pattern, recognizable throughout the political sphere and civil society in Spain. It may even be more generally Mediterranean. To describe very similar organizational forms in Lebanon, Joseph (1997) uses the emic term "little shops".
second row had to be accepted behind the first one, it retained the semi-circle shape, and a few women kept standing rather than sitting in the second row.

At each meeting, Amparo explained whatever business there was in a pedagogical way, translating bureaucratic terms into everyday words and explaining in careful detail anything that was beyond the everyday experience of an average housewife. Only a woman like Amparo could do this so well, knowing exactly what to explain and how, without seeming the slightest bit patronizing.

One example: The lottery usually presented no problem. The women were experts at figuring out who was to pay what and how to divide the prizes they won once in a while. But once there was a discussion on a technical detail. It went on for a long while and the voices were getting louder, until Amparo cut the Gordian knot. "Let's ask the lottery vendor!" she shouted, grabbed the protesting woman by the arm and dragged her out of the room, down the street to the lottery stall. They were gone for about fifteen minutes; meanwhile the rest of the women just went on chatting as usual. When the two women came back, they were smiling and joking, the problem had evidently been settled, and the meeting resumed.

Some of the discussions took a lot of time, because the women enjoyed talking in general and especially about things they knew well. When it came to contacts with authorities, Amparo reported and no one interrupted or commented anything at all. But when the women planned how to celebrate the first anniversary of the association's existence, the discussion was multifaceted and very long. Just the part on what food to serve took up twenty minutes.

At one meeting, one business item was a citywide neighborhood movement action that included the gathering of signatures (a common method in the movement). The women's association had decided to help. Or rather, Amparo had decided they should help and had explained it to the women at a previous meeting. To my great surprise, at this meeting they brought a lot of sheets with signatures. Those few women who did not give excuses: my daughter took them with her to school and she won't be home until seven; oh, I am sorry, I forgot them at home, I'll go and get them right away because I don't want you to think I didn't do it; my next door neighbor took two of my sheets and said she would get more signatures for me... One of them told proudly how she had taken the sheets with her to the bread store (a place most housewives visit once a day), "and everyone who was in there signed!" A couple of other women commented that that is what they should all have done: go around to the stores, especially the ones where you know people. But another couple of women said they could not do that, they would feel shy or ashamed, and one said she thought you would have to ask for some official permit to do that.

Amparo explained: "No, you don't have to ask anyone's permission, you just go in and ask people if they want to sign, and if they don't want to, they don't sign and that's all, no one is going to say anything to you."

In other words, most of them took for granted that it was a good thing to collect the signatures. But they treated it as school children might treat an assignment. They wanted the approval of Amparo and each other. The task was given and not questioned. Not a single word was said about the reason for the protest. They must have explained it, of course, when they asked for signatures. I am sure they understood the purpose of the action. But they had nothing to say to each other about it; once Amparo had "explained", that was that, and all that was left to do was to carry out the task.

What caused discussion was the fact that the signatures had to be accompanied by the numbers of the official identity cards. Many of the women felt that was unnecessary, and some had felt it awkward to ask for, so on their sheets there were no numbers, and they did not want to accept Amparo's judgment that those sheets were therefore not valid. They were not thinking of any danger of repression; it was rather that it seemed like a lot of work for people to get out their cards and copy the number. Amparo and a couple of other women, more used to protest activities, explained with jokes and humorous examples, that the numbers were necessary to prevent people from signing more than once. The women exclaimed in chorus, amid loud laughter: "But who is the idiot who is going to sit down and go through all the lists and compare the numbers!!!"

Another example of Amparo's style and the meeting atmosphere: Amparo had been to a meeting where representatives of various women's associations of Valencia had talked about how to prepare for the world conference in Beijing. She said the meeting had been "way above our heads",
that most of the women were "feminists and university people and so on" and that she did not think this association could contribute anything. But that they should know about this conference, anyway. Some of the women joked: "Peking! That is where we should go on our next trip!" Lots of laughter, jokes about who could be persuaded to pay.

Ampero said the meeting was for NGOs. "Do you know what an NGO is? You should, we talked about it in one meeting, remember? It's people like us who are in associations but do not belong to any larger organization..." The women nodded. Ampero went on to read aloud a long letter with instructions for associations that wanted to send someone to Beijing. The women listened distractedly, obviously bored, several talked among themselves. Suddenly Ampero interrupted her reading and sent a stern look towards one chatting woman: "Pili, later you'll have to tell me about it!" Pili said that it was just the woman next to her who had asked her something and she had answered. Ampero: "No, I mean what I am reading, you will have to tell me about it so I can see if you have understood!"

Ampero prepared each meeting. She had a list of things to talk about, sometimes on paper, sometimes just in her head. But she did not present this list to the women. Nor did they ask for it. Nor did they usually bring up any suggestions or issues of their own.

At the next meeting, Nieves took the floor in order to tell about the next citywide meeting, to which she had gone together with Ampero.

"It was last Tuesday, at the Women's Institute. And we were overwhelmed! (To me:) Marie, listen! That was at such a high level that we did not count for anything... Marie, are you laughing?! You bandit, did you know it would be like that, why didn't you tell us!?" I said I had no way of knowing, but I could imagine what it had been like. Nieves said that these women had been to other meetings to prepare Peking, they had been to Paris and Tunisia... "They are from NGOs. We are an NGO, you know." Someone asked what an NGO is and Ampero explained it again.

Nieves went on telling her story, with much irony in her voice and gestures. "The trip starts from Paris. You go to Paris on your own, you see, in any old way you can think of. From there the ticket to Peking costs only 115,000 pesetas." (There were laughs and sighs in the room, as Nieves evidently expected, but not as much as her dramatic style called for. The women were not interested enough to stop to think of how much money that was.) "And then the cost for board and lodging, the stay is for fifteen days, and with food and everything it comes to about twelve or fifteen thousand pesetas per day." Now there was laughter. "Can anyone go at all?" asked someone. Ampero said that of course, but I told you, it is very high level people, not like us, the ones who go are very well prepared, with activities of their own... Nieves said that there would be lots of halls with hundreds of rooms... The women murmured and seemed to lose interest again. Ampero shouted defiantly: "But we went to the meeting, because in that way we learn!" She stamped her foot for emphasis. More laughter, and then no more was said about Beijing.

I talked to Ampero afterwards, while we were having the coffee and sweets, which were always served after the meetings. She felt it was a good thing to tell the women about these things, even though they were not interested, because something would filter into their minds. "It is a slow psychological and pedagogical process, to discover that you are connected to those high levels, that information comes to you from up there, from out there. That that world is not totally cut off from our world."

Ampero commented as always on how proud she was that a few of the women were learning, were becoming interested in doing something more than coming for the gossip and the snack. At the same time she could not get over her consternation. "Why do they come, just to hear me talk? You have come now, three or four times, you have seen it, this is the way the meetings are, always, I talk and then we have the snack. Why do they come? To meet, to have coffee... But I think, too, that they obtain a feeling of being connected to something they do not understand yet, but they feel there is something..."

Epilogue

When Ampero had read my translation of this chapter, in 2002, she was worried at first that she might come across as paternalistic. I said that it was evident that she respected these women with
whom she had worked so hard for so many years. What is clear is that she knows that this work is very much grass roots and very much long term.

Then she herself gave me a new image. One of the women had told her how once, walking down the street in the company of her grandchild on the way to her school, they had met Amparo, and said hello. The little girl then asked her grandmother who that was, and the woman answered: "That was my teacher. See? I have a teacher just like you do!" And later she had told Amparo about it, intending it as a compliment. "That is what I am to many of them, a teacher," said Amparo.

That was a good thing, she felt. "The women do learn a lot." But she was no longer so sure that the association would change the lives and outlooks of the women in the long run. She was getting tired and had wanted to step down as president, but not a single woman wanted to lead the association. To Amparo that was a painful sign of failure. After almost ten years of work, with quite a large membership, lots of activities and financial success, the association had failed in that not a single woman had evolved towards a sense of associational responsibility. "So if I quit, the association will die."

I understand Amparo's disappointment. I also understand the impatience the rest of the members of the neighborhood association board felt – and showed – towards Amparo. These women had not reached a sense of belonging to a movement for social change.

But I still think her work had been worthwhile. The association had become a semi-public stage where these women had learnt to debate current issues among themselves and work their way towards new cultural understandings.

One example of that was a debate on wife battery that I witnessed in 2002. Gendered or domestic violence was one issue that had been launched many years earlier from the central women's structure, there had been several campaigns around it, but as we saw in chapter 7 it was not always easy for women in local associations to know what to do about it. By 2002, however, this had changed. Violence against women had become a major topic for public debate in Spain and the news media reported regularly on new incidents, always in combination with exhortations about how this social problem must be combated. It had become something everyone knew was a problem and everyone had to be against. That was so for the women in Amparo's association as well.

Something had just happened (I think it was a case of a woman of their own barrio who had died at the hands of her husband) that made Amparo arrange a debate. There were about 30 women present. As usual they sat in a semi-circle. The question to discuss was formulated as: "What can we do to stop this awful thing?" They took turns speaking, going around the circle.

While the first four or five women spoke, I was happily surprised at their awareness of the problem as a problem. The women said that it was indeed a huge problem, that a lot of women suffer in silence because they are ashamed to admit that their husbands beat them, that one major problem is that a lot of people still blame the victims, thinking that a woman who is beaten must have done something wrong, etc. They did not admit to such opinions for themselves, but they told anecdotes and examples that showed they knew well what they were talking about.

But after a while the comments grew more aggressive. Little by little the question was rephrased as, "What can we do to the men who hurt us?" and the women started competing in declaring their anger and the punishments they thought fitting. Leave him! And take him to court and see to it that he is left with no money, no home, nothing, in the street! Yes, and no right to visit his children! No, that is not enough; he must go to prison, too! Yes, and for many years! Yes, at least twenty years! No, for life! No, that is not enough – they kill don't they? – so they should be killed themselves! At this point Amparo intervened to say that Spain does not have capital punishment any longer and we do not want it back. The next woman then proposed castration, and everyone laughed and more suggestions were forthcoming about cruel ways of carrying out the operation and having the man bear the shame publicly afterwards.

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, and Amparo and I exchanged some glances. Afterwards, in a bar, she was concerned about the impression I got. "These women are not cruel, they are not aggressive!" she begged me to believe. And I did believe her; they were normal barrio women, very much concerned with the well being of other people. So how could they express themselves so cruelly? Amparo argued that we live in a violent society as a whole, everyone sees a lot of violence
on TV, there are violent expressions in the language, that does not mean that people behave vio-
lently, and these women did not literally mean what they had said, they just had this way of
speaking. It was almost like a game, a joke – had I noticed that they sort of enjoyed it?

Yes, I had, and I am sure they did not take their own comments literally. I said, "I believe
you, these women are not aggressive. But their comments were. So we have to find another expla-
nation. And I think it has to do with cultural change and cultural negotiation. (Amparo had heard
me use those terms many times, so she knew what I meant.) No woman can ever like it when her
husband beats her. But it used to be seen as normal. No one wanted to suffer it, but everyone knew
it was common, so in that sense it was normal. Now it is not normal. Now it is being criticized. It is
commented on TV, it is treated as a social problem, as you yourself presented it for debate. I am
sure the women agree, it is a problem, they no longer want to see it as normal. But that is quite a
change for them. That was not what they thought, or at least not what they would have thought
acceptable to say a few years ago. So they feel a sort of requirement. They want to be up to date, so
they know they must stop saying that the woman next door with the black eye must have done
something to earn it, one must stop criticizing women and start criticizing the violent men. That
kind of change in norms about what can be said publicly makes people feel insecure. So they may
want to make sure they come across as "evolved", and not caught in the traps of the former
discourse. They want to show very clearly that they now blame the perpetrators. And since this is
new to them, they end up exaggerating. It is like adorning themselves with a big sign, saying: 'I am
up to date! I am not one of those who used to blame the victim!' Besides, as you say, to exaggerate
and to compete among each other in order to emphasize a point strongly is a common way of
behaving for these women, for all of us really. It is a conversational norm."

Amparo looked deeply skeptical about my explanation. But I do believe that if these women
had not had a stage like the association, where they could expose and compare opinions around is-
SUes like this one, their attitudes would not have changed in the same way. The depth of their con-
victions may be in doubt. They certainly did not relate their new opinions to social structures or
cultural change. But they had definitely adopted a new way of speaking to each other and thus
influencing each other. I do believe that an association like this is vital for cultural change and that
Amparo had accomplished something lasting. Even if the association has to close down.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Epilogue to the epilogue: In 2013 the association was still alive and well. Another woman had agreed to take over as
president a few years earlier.