OUT OF THE HOUSE - TO DO WHAT?
WOMEN IN THE SPANISH NEIGHBOURHOOD MOVEMENT


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Introduction

Spanish women do not participate in formal politics to any great extent. For example, the number of female parliamentarians hovered around 6% during most of the 1980s. This fact reflects a long history of conditions that have tended to alienate women from the political sphere.

However, there is one political context in Spain in which women and men participate in practically equal numbers. This is the so-called neighbourhood movement or citizens´ movement (movimiento vecinal or movimiento ciudadano) which was born as a semi-legal resistance movement during the Franco regime. Its express purpose was to improve conditions in the areas of towns and cities (barrios) where poor people lived, but since this entailed a struggle against the dictatorship, "participatory democracy" became an integral objective. It was around the time of the transition to democracy, in the late 1970s, that women started joining the movement in greater numbers, and they are still increasing. The study of this movement is important because it can elucidate the relationship between the gender order, the political order and cultural change.

This chapter discusses the possible reasons why Spanish women who decide to participate in political activities usually prefer a neighbourhood association to a political party or a labour union and how they can act once there and what it means to them and to society. The aim is to describe relevant factors of various kinds in such a way as to make the specific Spanish experiences interesting and relevant to broader feminist debates. The examples discussed shed light on processes of redefinition of private and public domains and the location of the separation between them. They also show that the role of gender as a major principle of social organization is being renegotiated. Such negotiation is not unproblematic. Men´s resistance to certain gender
changes result in conflict but also cultural innovation. So do women’s fears, ambivalence, enthusiasm and learning as new stages of activity come within reach. The analysis will show interconnections between the organization of time and space and gender in the *barrios*, and what they mean for political activities and how women and men negotiate among themselves for space in their partially common, partially different political struggles. There are gender-related differences, within the working class, in people’s view of themselves as agents of change.¹ Examples from four towns will serve as illustrations. But first of all we need an outline of the historical background of the movement.²

**Background**

Spain has gone through dramatic processes of economic and social transformation during the last few decades. In the 1950s it was a mainly agricultural country with difficulties to feed its population. During the 1960s it was urbanized and industrialized at a rapid pace. Of all OECD countries, only Japan had a faster growth rate during that decade. This meant that a large proportion of the population moved from villages to cities. Around the largest cities, self-built shacks mushroomed in the 1960s and slowly disappeared during the 1970s.

There was an improvement of average living standards, but it came at a high social cost. Not only was village social life destroyed, workers’ health strained by pluri-employment, and so on, but all of these processes of change took place under conditions of dictatorship. Then even that changed. During the 1970s a political transition was begun. Franco died in 1975. More or less democratic general elections were held in 1977 - for the first time since 1936. A new constitution was approved in 1978, and after new general elections a socialist government took over in late 1982. The degrees of democracy and socialism are certainly issues for debate, but it is a very different country from the one Franco governed.

Individual lives changed too, of course: experiences and expectations had to be re-interpreted. There were cultural changes that were just as dramatic as the economic and political changes.

In the Mediterranean area, gender is frequently used as a root metaphor to express other social phenomena. The relationship between women and men is used in proverbs, poetry, song, jokes, ¹ Obviously such a long list of issues cannot be fully discussed here. In a short article like this, one must choose between developing just one or two themes well or suggesting a larger number in a more superficial manner. I have chosen the latter course because the neighbourhood movement is so little known that it needs to be presented in broad terms before it can be analyzed more carefully. Cf also note 2.
² The fieldwork was carried out between March 1994 and March 1995 in six different towns and cities. I also had previous information on the movement. I was an activist in it myself in the 1970’s in Madrid, where I was an ordinary housewife, albeit of foreign extraction, for many years before I moved back to Sweden and became an anthropologist. I also used the neighbourhood association as a point of entry in the barrio of Valencia where I did fieldwork in 1982-83, so even though that project was not centred on the association, I obtained a good knowledge of it. And since then, I have stayed in contact with it. A monograph based on the 1994-95 fieldwork is in progress.
drama, gestures, insults and so on, to illustrate political power, religious feelings, philosophical abstractions...

When something important happens in such a society, it is bound to affect the gender order. And vice versa, the gender order shapes the general processes of change. And change is *culturally perceived in gender terms*. During the 1970s and 1980s, discussions regarding "change" often sparked debates about sexual morals or mothers working outside the home. The tendency is weakening now, because gender is retreating from its privileged cultural place. The gender order *is really changing*.³

**History of the neighbourhood movement**

After the civil war (1936-39), Spain was exhausted in every way, and the resistance against the dictatorship that was organized, in spite of everything, was largely wiped out during the 1940’s. Starting in 1956, however, resistance grew again. A new generation had grown up, and the political parties in exile changed their strategies from confrontation to infiltration. In this way, for example, the Workers’ Commissions were organized. They were illegal but powerful enough to organize important strikes already in the early 1960s and they were recognized de facto in many settlements towards the end of the decade. Because they worked through the legal vertical trade unions of the regime, they could reach and recruit more people than the underground parties could.

According to the political philosophy of the Franco regime, any society rests on three fundamentals: union, family and locality. The vertical union structure, controlled from the top, was the way in which the regime organized the first pillar. As to the second pillar, the regime coincided with a majority of the population in its view that the nuclear family is the basic building block without which no society can work well. This opinion coincided with experience and practice. More than 90 % of all Spaniards live in nuclear families, and family members are strongly solidary with each other.⁴ The third building block was the locality. This, too, is a point of coincidence between fascist theory and Spanish tradition. The rural village or the urban *barrio* has usually been the social frame of reference for the individual outside the immediate family.

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³ As it would have to after such fundamental changes in other spheres of life. But please note that this sketch of the changes is offered only as background. A discussion of the possible causal relationships between different facets of these processes would take us too far from the main purpose of this article. Likewise, I leave open the question of the extent of change in the gender order. It is changing, that is clear, but it is not so clear if the change is affecting deep cultural premises or only their more superficial expressions.

⁴ As in the rest of Europe, the tendency as a whole is for homes with only one member to become more common. In 1991, they were 13.4% of the total. However, most of these consist of elderly people. One-member households consisting of persons under the age of 25 represent only 1% of all households. And if we look at percentages of the population, 95.2% of all Spaniards reside with kin of one kind or another. (Documentación Social, 1995: 144-147)
In small villages, the structure of the locality was the village itself. It was organized as a local administration headed by an appointed mayor. But the cities presented a problem. To be sure, the city equivalent of the village was and is the *barrio*. Spaniards identify with their *barrio*, just as they identify with their village. It is a place where one is known, where one feels safe, where most of one's social network is localized. But the *barrios* are not administrative units. And with the sudden rush of immigration to the cities during the late 1950s, new *barrios* spread and old ones changed. The local identity of urbanites grew diffuse. Culturally this was experienced as a lack. Politically, it made the regime nervous.

The response of the regime was the 1964 law of neighbourhood associations. The idea was to construct something similar to the unions, but on a territorial base. The one legal party, the Falange, would act as an umbrella organization. Each association was to have a clearly defined territory that could not overlap with any other. The statutes were dictated by the Falange. Permitted activities were carefully specified and separated from forbidden ones. In other words, from the point of view of the regime, the structure of the neighbourhood associations was to be built up in analogy with the union structure, and as such control and influence everyday life, and, unlike the unions, it would reach even the women, the young and the elderly.

From the point of view of the resistance against the Franco regime, the neighbourhood associations offered as good an opportunity for infiltration as the unions and for the same reasons. The legal purposes of the associations were soon inextricably mixed with illegal ones. To improve conditions in poor neighbourhoods meant, in practice, to protest against land speculation, lack of infra-structure and services, bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, and so on. The former purpose was legal, the latter illegal, but they were impossible to tell apart.

The first associations grew up on the outskirts of Madrid, Bilbao and Barcelona, in *barrios* which lacked such elemental services as water and transportation to places of work. The inhabitants also asked for schooling for their children, electricity, health care - for many, the hope of such facilities was a major motive for moving to the city (Molina 1984). There was a need for ways of organizing collective action, whether of protest or of self-help. And in these *barrios* lived some of the factory workers who had been reached by the Workers’ Commissions.

In this way, a sort of semi-legal resistance movement grew. The neighbourhood associations were soon infiltrated by the underground political parties, and they became increasingly daring. They began to express demands for the things they needed, above all dwellings. There were a few successes. The regime realized that the cities needed workers, and the commercial builders could not build houses the workers could afford with the wages the employers were willing to pay. So

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5 At least this is true for the working class. Middle class barrios vary more, and middle class people vary in their orientation. In general, middle class networks have a wider spatial range.
a few schemes for working class housing were set up. Some neighbourhood associations functioned as channels for communication between the schemes and the workers, so that their needs and wishes could be taken into account.

The associations spread to other, more established barrios, even to middle class barrios. One analyst of the movement has pointed out that the circumstances of the dictatorship created common interests across class barriers (Castells 1986). The middle class, too, suffered from the lack of schools and the deficient health care system, middle class people too suffered from noise and air pollution and they too lost money due to land speculation and building fraud. They, too, needed fora for debate, places to learn about politics.

The legal purpose of organizing the social life of the barrios was also very important. After losing the stable social organization of the villages, people found themselves living among strangers in an urban context they were ill equipped to handle. "Hacer barrio" - to make the barrio into a living social reality - soon became a central slogan. A yearly fiesta, usually with some saint’s day as an excuse, sports and games for the young, a place for the elderly to play cards, cooperative food outlets to bring down the cost of staples like bread, perhaps a literacy course.

So the neighbourhood association became a political, cultural and social centre, in one barrio after another. At times the regime got nervous again and closed them down, but the movement as a whole grew steadily.

In the mid 1970s it looked as if the regime would change into something else once Franco died, and as if that day was not too far off. What was not clear at all was what exactly would happen. The neighbourhood associations had by this time federated themselves in the largest cities (which was illegal), and the movement was spreading to smaller cities. For the plethora of small leftist parties that was coming into existence, the movement was a place to measure their strength and to act semi-openly. The movement became something of a political prize to be fought over.

But most of the movement activists were not party people. They participated because they wanted to improve their barrio or the living conditions of their families and, after a while, because the association was where they had their friends. For many, the neighbourhood associations became their major political school. It was the only accessible political school for people who were not willing to go into exile or underground. The insights gained led many to join a party; others, however, were put off by the party tactics of infiltration and in-fighting that they could observe first hand. Towards 1980, many associations became battle grounds between different parties.
1977 was a critical year. Political parties were legalized, so party activists who had used the movement as a front could surface and work openly under their own colours. Many of the most active and most experienced leaders abandoned the movement. Some activists thought that the main objective of the struggle had now been won, the regime had come to an end, so it seemed more useful to spend one’s energies elsewhere. This feeling grew even stronger after the first democratic local elections in 1979, when socialists and communists took over the administration of most of the big cities. Some ex-leaders of the movement even became town councillors or mayors.

But not all objectives of the movement had been reached. It was still necessary - and fun - to try to "make barrio ". In many places the yearly fiesta had become a fact of life. Someone had to coordinate senior citizens’ clubs, photo contests, barrio marathons, film clubs, women’s committees, language courses. For some activists, the movement had become a home, a place that had cost years of work, private money and sometimes fines, jail and beatings. Such a hard-won space could not be given up easily.

And it soon became clear that the political fight was far from over. There was a need to maintain a check on the fledgling democratic institutions, including the parties themselves. There was still a lot of corruption and speculation, barrio facilities were still deficient and in many issues the neighbourhood associations could make specific contributions thanks to their detailed knowledge of locality.

The issues changed over the years. After basic needs like housing and water were more or less met, there was transportation and health care to consider. Then came schooling, traffic safety, better street lighting, playgrounds and parks... Such themes blended into more general ones, such as local industrial politics, bureaucratic corruption, unemployment, air pollution and noise. During the 1980s the important new issues were: drugs (working class barrios were hard hit); the ‘Gypsy problem' (old ethnic animosities found a new vocabulary, as the Gypsies were thought to be the principal drug dealers) and crime.

In the 1990s the movement was still growing but also changing. There was a growing opinion that "confrontational" tactics were "old-fashioned" and that the movement should become something more akin to the voluntary work or family associations found in other European countries. Social work, sports and local festivities took up ever more of the activists’ energies and time. But there were still many burning issues that could bring thousands of barrio inhabitants into the streets at a moment’s notice. The movement continued to have an important resource known as poder de convocatoria - calling power, influence, the capacity to create action far beyond its regular membership.
The methods have varied, too. In the early years it was mostly a question of resisting, often violently, the tearing down of self-built housing. Then came an era of oscillations between very cautious negotiations with the authorities, and massive illegal protest meetings. Collecting money for fines and bails used to be important, then, too. During the transition towards democracy, the negotiations became somewhat friendlier, and the symbolic actions less violent. Demonstrations, street vigils around crucial sites, occupations of municipal offices, and traffic stoppages were common, as were petitions to local politicians, letters to the editors and securing sympathetic press coverage. As democratic institutions stabilized, association work increasingly consisted of visiting municipal offices, meeting with politicians and the press, keeping an eye on official bulletins.

But there was also always the creativity of each association. Humour is a congenial weapon. I lived in a barrio in Madrid where there was a beautiful park that used to belong to a duke but was now city property. The barrio had no other park, so the association claimed it for public use, and since the city did not respond, we used to "open" it with a mock ceremony, in combination with a barrio picnic outside its walls, every spring. (And after some five years of that the park was opened!) Another barrio in Madrid organized a "rat hunt" modelled on English fox hunts. Sarcastic poetry and costumes, political songs and sketches were often included in the fiestas.

During the 1980s, the neighbourhood associations were recognized by many towns and cities as 'interlocutors' or 'public interest organizations.' In the media and in private conversations, the movement was often mentioned together with other 'new' social movements, especially feminism, pacifism and ecologism. It was usually considered more mainstream than these, but less mainstream than parties or trade unions.

Organizationally, the movement had established stable structures. Most associations have their own premises by now, and many produce regular bulletins. The city-wide federations work for city-wide issues, such as the organization of traffic and public transport, and for city-wide coordination of barrio issues. The various federations have formed a confederation for all of Spain, and some experienced activists now search for a special place for the movement on the national political scene alongside parties and unions.

In 1996, the movement had close to two million members, of which perhaps one tenth were activists. There were around 2.000 associations, organized in over one hundred federations.6

**Time, space and gender in the barrio**

6 These figures were given to me by CAVE (Confederación de Asociaciones de Vecinos del Estado Español), the confederation office. There were also some associations and federations outside this structure.
During the early years, the movement was almost exclusively male, sprinkled with a few exceptional women (for instance nuns, lawyers or social workers), but the proportion of women has steadily increased. In fact, most of the newly recruited activists in the 1980s and 1990s seem to be women, and mostly average barrio women. The confederation has set up a so-called women’s structure and a few state-wide women’s congresses have been held, but it is far from clear exactly how the structure will relate to the confederation, on the one hand, and to the women of the movement on the other.

The gender order has inevitably left an imprint on the neighbourhood movement. Likewise, the gender order as a whole cannot remain untouched by the fact that there is now one political forum in the country where women are present at a level close to the 51% they represent in the population as a whole.

The gender order in Spain has traditionally separated women and men into different life styles, different domains of activities and different daily spaces, all marked with contrasting gender symbols. The key metaphor for it all is that ‘women are of the house, men are of the street.’ The house stands for family life, household chores (even outdoor ones), maternal duties, privacy and intimacy, and so on. The street stands for everything else: economic activities, friendship ties and sociability, sexual activities outside marriage, formal education, and all decision-making that affects units larger than the nuclear family.7

The separation is growing less rigid and less important, and it is under constant debate, but it is still a structural and cultural fact with clear consequences (cf Thurén 1988 and forthcoming). Most women lead lives very different from those of most men. And since different vital experiences produce different subjectivities, women’s political priorities are often different from those of men. So are their styles of interaction and communication. This makes it difficult for women and men to work together, even when they share some goals.

Many women undoubtedly see the neighbourhood associations as a space very similar to the parent-teacher-associations, i.e. as suitable places for an extension of their duties as mothers and homemakers. In this sense, the movement has played a role for women similar to that of movements in other countries which have been compared to the neighbourhood movement.

7 This type of gender order is not specific for Spain, of course. In Southern Europe, generally, the gender orders have been based on complementarity of roles, separation of spheres and a view of gender as a rigid dichotomy. This has been reinforced by the views of the Roman Catholic Church. So feminists in Southern Europe have very often stressed difference, trying to revalorize femininity rather than question its present expressions. See for instance Librería de Mujeres de Milán 1991, and the work of Luce Irigaray. What is special about the Spanish situation is that there is a tension between this tradition and the strong stress on Enlightenment values, fomented by the circumstances of the process of democratization (Thurén 1988 and forthcoming).
(Castells 1986, Salida 1989), such as the *ollas comunes* in Latin America. Women tend to see political parties as male spaces, whereas the neighbourhood movement is seen as something closer to home, easier to understand, less of a power game, more of an instrument for improving the surroundings of your own home, the life of your own children. It is not politics, they say. And women in more traditional political organizations often agree, but adding that therefore women’s participation in neighbourhood associations is of little consequence.

Political or not, the associations constitute a public space. And we must not forget that, unlike other activities where many women participate, such as parent-teacher-associations or church groups, the neighbourhood movement is not a mostly female space, since half of the participants are men. It is not quite gender-neutral, but it is more gender-neutral than almost any other public context in Spain. Many of the women activists do things that are not marked as feminine, and even when women leave their houses in order to do traditionally female work, they do leave their houses and get involved in issues that concern more people than their own families. They cannot avoid learning new things.

But such women are often despised by the more 'advanced' women, i.e. those who feel that gender markers must be explicitly criticized. There is tension inside the neighbourhood movement between people who want to use it as a platform for radical social change and people who see it more as an instrument to solve problems of everyday life, and this tension is also reflected in debates on women’s issues. In emic terms: Should women in the movement stay as they are and do 'feminine' things in 'feminine' ways, or should they 'learn' and 'move forwards' towards being 'persons'?

We can distinguish several reasons for women’s increasing presence in the movement. First, when the political leaders left during the early part of the political transition, it was men who left, since very few women were party activists. So the proportion of women in the movement rose automatically. And this in turn made it easier for more women to join.

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8 *Ollas comunes*, literally "shared pots", are arrangements in which food is prepared communally in order to save on costs. Usually women do not just do the cooking but most of the organizing.

9 I speak of activists, not of members in general, for two reasons. First, it is principally as activists that members influence the movement and are influenced by it. Second, it is as activists that women represent about half of the movement. This can be seen at meetings, demonstrations, and so on. It is more difficult to calculate the proportion of women members. When it comes to registration of members, the movement vacillates between the "traditional" view that if a man signs up, all persons in his family are automatically members, but the membership counts as one, not several, and the "modern" or "progressive" view that membership should be individual. Therefore, membership figures are difficult to interpret.

10 That in turn has to do with the general view of politics as a male sphere, of course, but "progressive" women who reject that interpretation often stay away from party politics anyway with the argument that existing parties do not understand or bother with women’s issues, or, worse, manipulate them. The acrimonious debate on "double militancy", i.e. whether feminists could/should also be active in political parties, divided the Spanish women’s movement into opposed camps during most of the 1980’s and is still a sensitive issue.
Second, there is the basic fact that the movement is territorially defined. It is in and of and about the barrio. And the barrio is where women not only live but work. Women do not stay indoors, in fact; even in places like Linares (cf below), where they are supposed to remain within the confines of the 'house,' they move along city streets as much as men, or more, because while men are at their jobs, women’s family duties take them on errands all around the barrio. It is not quite legitimate to walk around for one’s own pleasure. Nevertheless, during the day-time, typical barrio streets are full of women and only a few men, and it is full of activities that form part of family life, such as children walking to school and housewives shopping for food. In other words, the barrio is a mediator between 'home' and 'street.' It is outside the home, but it is close to home; and it is a women’s space during much of the day.

An association that takes the barrio as its object of concern, is thus a suitable place for women interested in public life. The decision to go into the 'street' is not so momentous, since in a way they stay in or near the 'house.' There may be opposition to their presence, but less than in other political contexts. It is a place where they can learn more about things that interest them but without having to learn a different interactional style before they can take part.

From a practical angle, too, it is much easier for a woman to be active in a neighbourhood association than in a party or a union. The premises are close to home, so going to a meeting takes less time, which is important for most women, especially mothers of small children. Also, you can take the children along if you have to, or you can tell neighbours where you are so they can come for you if necessary. Proximity is also an advantage for older women and/or people who do not read very well, who are not comfortable moving far away from their neighbourhood.11

The timing suits both women and men, with inevitable individual variations. The meetings are in the evening, when most people are back from work, but before dinner time, and Spanish children go to bed late, so even mothers of school-children can attend to evening family duties after the meetings.

However, they cannot as easily participate in the frequent after-meeting socializing in bars, which places them at a disadvantage in moments of tension or crucial decisions. It is not at all common for husbands to take over home duties, so most women have to hurry home after the meeting. An added difficulty, is that women are not as comfortable in the bar context as men are. Downtown cafeterias are gender-neutral nowadays, but the bars in the barrios continue to be strongly marked as male spaces.

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11 Women tend to organize on the basis of the barrio, not only in the neighbourhood movement, but also when they form groups for other purposes. Cf Maquieira 1995:290.
Pleasure is a motive, too, for men as well as for women, but more for women, since they have fewer alternative meeting places. In spite of the serious purposes and in spite of frustrations and conflicts and sometimes personal risks, most activists have fun in the movement; and many activists told me that they had all their friends in the movement. (Cf below on stories of participation.)

Perhaps the main reason for women’s presence, however, is that women usually know more about the barrio than men, and this legitimates their participation to some extent even in the eyes of those who would uphold traditional gender specifications of domains. Only about one fourth of working class married women work outside their homes. For the other three fourths, the barrio is their daily territory. They know the places and the people. The content of women’s family work, too (whether or not they also have another job), has much to do with the barrio as a space: they know where the children play and what dangers there are and what they would need to grow up happier and healthier; they know the food stores and prices and qualities; they know if drug dealers gather in some corner, and so on. They also find out long before the men about trends in youth activities, signs of land speculation, strange goings-on down by the factory parking-lot, traffic danger spots, and so on.

One aspect of the traditional gender-specification of domains that is still relatively alive, albeit not explicit, is the feeling that women are unable to represent anyone but themselves and possibly their children. They cannot usually represent their whole family, much less non-kin. This probably lies behind some of the difficulties women encounter when trying to work in other political contexts or in the movement beyond the barrio. The proportion of women decreases drastically as one moves up in the organizational pyramid. Already at the level of city federations, there are few women. People in a federation represent their barrio. So activists tend to elect men, and women tend to avoid being elected. I am inclined, however, to see practical reasons as foremost for the absence of women in the federations, nowadays. Federation premises are farther away, so going to the meetings takes too much time.

In the barrio association, at any rate, the activists do not represent anyone but themselves. They are there as individuals. This is a further factor facilitating women’s participation. To be sure, it has been argued that women are less individuated than men in Western countries, and this is certainly true for Spain. One major obstacle for women’s participation in any aspect of public life is their close connection with a small collectivity, the family, and the relatively lower degree

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12 This figure should be contextualized in many ways for which there is no room here. It varies according to kinds of city and region, there is much unregistered work, and so on. One fifth was the approximate proportion in the Valencian barrio where I did fieldwork in 1983. Since then it has become more common for married women to work until they have their first child, and some are going back to work after the children have grown up. On the other hand, unemployment has grown worse. Statistics now show that about one third of all adult women are in the labour market. My data from both Valencia and Madrid indicate that women are indeed eager to enter employment if they can, but it is still very difficult and few have regular jobs over long periods. The typical pattern is rather in-and-out of a variety of activities with intervening periods in unemployment or inactivity.
of legitimacy accorded to their actions as individuals, outside the family context, for their own benefit or because they feel like it. But if and when they overcome this basic obstacle, it is easier for them to act as individuals than as representatives for larger collectivities.

As more and more women enter the movement, this fact in itself makes it easier for even more to join. The style of interaction, the issues taken up, and so on, become more "woman-friendly" and the fact of participation becomes less unusual, requires less legitimation, awakens less gossip, suspicion and resistance. It also becomes more probable that network links will draw women in (cf below on the stories on participation).

The importance of gender as such also decreases as women move in. The assignment of tasks on a gender basis is disappearing. Women used to be secretaries and work with "soft" issues such as culture, while men were often the treasurers and presidents and worked with issues that required negotiations with the authorities. Now, both women and men take on all sorts of duties. When I asked about the division of labour according to gender, it was always vehemently denied; whether or not it existed in practice, it was clearly not acceptable in theory.

The atmosphere of a meeting, at a demonstration, at the bar, and so on, also influences women’s possibilities and well-being in the movement. Perhaps it is even the major factor, in comparison to other political contexts. So let us take a closer look at this.

Interaction in the association

The interactional style of the movement is generally relaxed and down-to-earth, humorous and ironic. Styles of work and talk are changing towards more formality, at least in some places, as the movement becomes more institutionalized. Nevertheless, they are still relatively informal everywhere, at least in comparison to political parties and labour unions. Many women (and some men) said they felt out of place in such organisations, because they had to learn pre-established ways of speaking and acting.\(^{13}\) Participation in the neighbourhood movement requires less adaptation. One can come as one is.

The movement also lends itself well to innovation, because it is relatively new itself, because it has always experimented with styles and methods, and because of its loose forms and true grassroots characteristics.

\(^{13}\) This is a common observation in Western feminist political studies and also in many other parts of the world. I have met many Spanish women active in parties and labour unions; most of them are proud of the fact that they have learnt new ways. They often dub them 'more efficient.' But women have been socialized to be more sensitive to particular individuals and their particular characteristics, and usually feel more at home with non-hierarchical, non-formal styles of interaction. Cf note 12.
The pragmatic, friendly style is related, of course, to the fact that many of the activists know each other in more roles than one and that most of them have overlapping networks. The style is also compatible with the issues as they are culturally perceived: 'small' 'everyday' things like street lights and bread prices; 'family' issues like health care and schooling; even 'dirty' issues like drugs, rats and garbage collection. Nothing elegant, nothing momentous about them.

Most of the activists do not have much schooling beyond primary education, if that. Those with more have to adapt to those with less, or the association will not function well.

For all these reasons, meeting procedures have to be informal; and because they are, the atmosphere is usually friendly. The assignment of tasks is more pragmatic than formal, too: whoever has the time or inclination volunteers (or 'is volunteered') when something has to be done. Most associations have annual meetings that elect a board, but to be elected is not a very important criterion for being active; usually whoever comes to the meetings with some regularity is considered active and is listened to. Voting is extremely rare. Minutes are hardly ever kept.

Experience counts, veterans are listened to, but reference to personal experience in the movement as a ground for prestige is avoided, and the same goes for education and income. Formal signs of hierarchy are even more scrupulously avoided. Presidents try not to invoke their authority to keep order. Everyone addresses everyone else by their first names and with the informal pronoun 'tú', irrespective of age, gender or other statuses.

There are certainly often strong tensions under the surface, because of the differences in background and ideology, and sometimes because of conflictive issues. But individual preferences and opinions are well known to all, so conflicts can be averted or joked about, as the situations demand.

Much of the joking is sexual, to be sure. But the women are used to this, it is a common feature of other gender-mixed contexts in which they move, too, and it is seldom outrightly denigrating. There is some playful flirtation, but very little serious flirtation, since most activists are married and involved in dense local networks which would carry gossip instantaneously.

All in all, the style of work and interaction is adapted to the cultural and social circumstances and both women and men feel relaxed and competent in it.

Now, of course gender is relevant for styles of interaction in the movement, like everywhere else. At association meetings, men tend to take up more space in every sense than women. They speak more and louder, interrupt more often, dominate the turn-taking decisions and spread arms, legs, jackets and notepaper wider around themselves. This is invisible for most members,
because it is taken for granted. Women’s behaviour is only relatively deferential and circumspect. But the context is political, therefore the men have preference in defining the terms. Countervailing these tendencies, however, is the fact that women know more about barrio life, as we saw, and that gives them authority in debating the issues. They do not keep quiet.

The men, too, concede authority and space to women. They do so, first because of the women’s knowledge of the issues, which is recognized. Second, they do so because association activists are usually radical enough to question all social structures, including the gender order. When asked, they insist that women should have the same rights to speak and act as men. Such statements and/or convictions do not always translate to actual and automatic behaviour, but when it comes to barrio issues they often do, because the women’s knowledge is legitimate knowledge even according to the traditional separations of domains. They have obtained it in their daily job as mothers and housewives and they display it for the legitimate purpose of improving the lives of their families. It is knowledge recognized not only as a fact, but as valuable and legitimate - and as more or less legitimately obtained, even though the men complain that women 'gossip' too much.

From the perspective of political parties, much of the style of the movement seems inefficient, and many party activists look down on it. A special kind of participant are those who belong both to a party and to the movement but try to influence the movement in what they consider more 'serious' directions. From the point of view of the average movement activist, such efforts rather go to prove that political parties are manipulative, power-hungry and untrustworthy. Personally, I believe that the grassroots characteristics are the strength of the movement, so it would lose what efficacy it has if they disappeared.

However that may be, it is a rather safe hypothesis that these grassroots characteristics, taken together, create a woman-friendly context. And that was one of the things that the women themselves underlined when they answered my questions about their motives for participation. However, it varies according to region and community, as we will see.

**Stories about participation**

There are certain recurring differences between the stories of men and the stories of women concerning their participation. Interestingly, these differences look very similar across regions, in spite of all the variations in other circumstances.

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14 Many feminist analyses of obstacles for women’s participation in ordinary Western political contexts focus on such things as hierarchy, formality, imbalance in proportions between women and men in a given context, traditional definition of issues, etc. Cf e.g. Astelarra 1990, Bystydzienski 1992, Davis et al 1991, Feijoo and Herzer 1991, Jones and Jonasdottir 1988, Women’s Studies International Forum 1994.
Some people, both women and men, had clear ideological reasons for being active. They said 'I am a Christian' or 'I am a communist' or 'I have a working class consciousness,' signalling that this one phrase was more than sufficient explanation. Some admitted that they had reached this conviction through work in the association, for others the reasons for first joining had been the same as the reasons for continuing. Whatever the details of their stories, they had in common an idea that social injustice was prevalent and that it ought to and could be changed. And that the neighbourhood movement was an appropriate place for the struggle, one must presume, but that was seldom made explicit. The need to struggle against injustice overrode all other considerations. It even made established gender ideas pale in comparison, although many men and women of this type confessed 'contradictions' in their 'mentality' when it came to gender.

For most of the active women, however, the ideological background was not important. It was present in most cases, but not clear in its outlines and not usually mentioned as a major motive. Their reasons were more social and individual. No woman said she was tempted into political activity because she wanted influence over important decisions. The main motive was usually expressed in vague terms as 'doing something for others', 'getting out of the house', 'knowing what is going on', or similar phrases, indicating a 'feminine' (according to the dominant gender order) concern for the well-being of others in combination with a critical attitude towards the confinement of women to the 'house' and the consequent lack of mobility and information.

A very common explanation of what it was that concretely made them decide to join the movement was that they were influenced by a particular individual. They happened to know someone active in the movement whom they admired. They usually described this person as someone who 'did so much for others without thinking of themselves' and someone 'who could be trusted always to help you if you needed it.' The person was usually also described as gregarious, smiling, 'nice to be with,' someone who would 'always stop to greet you in the street' and remember to ask you about your personal problems.

This person sometimes suggested they join, but just as often the initiative came from the joiner herself. She would approach the already-active one and ask about her activities and if she too 'could help.' At this point of the narrative, my informant would usually refer to her own "ignorance" or lack of experience to explain why she needed some persuasion to join. "Ignorance" meant both lack of formal schooling and lack of previous knowledge of the movement or of anything related to politics.

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15 Of course, some women might have felt such a thing but deemed it illegitimate to admit. To want power was not a very acceptable thing in the movement. But I did hear some men express such feelings. Outside the movement, in political parties, I also met some women who did. So I am inclined to believe that most movement women really were not moved by any wish for power. I would even affirm that they were seldom conscious of the real, albeit limited, power they did exercise.

16 Similar motives for joining associations - of any kind - are quoted in a study on women’s organizations in Madrid (Maquieira 1995).
The men, too, told stories of personal contacts, but they talked more about the process of ideological "evolution" they had gone through and how they had reached the conclusion that it was a good idea to become active in the movement. Especially the leaders talked in very political terms of the need for participatory democracy. Non-leaders usually spoke more of the deficiencies of their barrio, which they, being intelligent, had noticed, and, having a sense of justice and responsibility, felt they had to struggle to correct. If a barrio does not struggle, they said, ordinary politicians will do nothing. One common phrase was: 'Only babies who cry get fed.' (Quien no llora no mama.)

The main difference according to gender was not the presence or absence of the helping hand but the characteristics of that hand. For men it was someone with knowledge and preferably a position, someone who explained the theoretical purposes of the activity. The help was needed in order to overcome lack of information, mainly. For women it was someone who could convince them that they, too, were valuable. They, too, needed to overcome a lack of information, but even more a lack of self-assurance. The lack of self-assurance was both individual ('I don’t think I am good at that kind of thing') and gender-specific ('women are not usually good at that kind of thing') and often a combination ('women are not usually good at that kind of thing, and I don’t know if I am an exception, and to act as if I were will make me ridiculous').

For both men and women, the helping hand almost always belonged to someone of their own gender.

The men, then, stressed the problems and the purposes. Sometimes they expressed it in terms clearly originating in some political party discourse. The women hardly ever did so (except for the very ideologically committed ones). On the contrary, it was quite common for them to deny that what they were doing was politics at all. They said they wanted above all to "contribute". To what was it they wanted to contribute? Solving the problems of their barrio, of course! In other words, their motives were actually the same as those of the men, but while the men expressed it in political terms and referring to power and to their own capacity, the women preferred more humble and moral terms.

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17 One type of course that is becoming very popular with women activists are those that aim at raising 'self-esteem.'
18 An illustration: One woman told me she wanted to become active. Her husband did not oppose the idea, and her children were old enough, she had the time. She also knew some of the activists, and she had a fairly good idea about what the association was. Still, she found it difficult, because there were no other women active in her association. I thought that she did not want to be the only one, and that was part of the truth, but it was not the important part. She thought many women of her barrio might become active very soon, if there was only one to start with. What stopped her was rather a circle that needed breaking. No women were active now because there were no active women now. She thought a woman always needs the example, the company and helping hand of another woman in order to enter a male space like politics. She would not mind so much being the only woman once inside (and for a short time), but she did not know how to approach the men in order to enter.
Questions about women in the movement

So far I have offered answers to anthropological questions, outsider questions. The people in the movement themselves also had questions about women’s participation. But whereas I wondered why so many women do participate, the emic focus was on non-participation.

Without really bothering to have an opinion on what the 'real' differences between women and men might be, activists wanted to resolve certain gender-related problems for practical reasons, for the good of the movement as a whole. The debates on 'women’s issues' were also prompted by the confederation initiatives on women, and by new opportunities for special subsidies for women’s groups. In these debates, four things were usually taken for granted: Women should participate in public life much more than they did; the neighbourhood movement would be a good place for them to start; the movement would benefit, too; but most women are 'still' 'limited' to a life centred on home and family.

The men in the movement were often critical of both women’s and men’s non-participation. They thought everyone ought to be more solidary, they thought most people were lazy or selfish. The criticism was the same for women and men, except that they often added that women can no longer claim discrimination or lack of education as an excuse. A frequent comment was, 'Nowadays everything has changed, so what is stopping them?'

The women in the movement were more understanding. They knew the obstacles first hand, so they believed in their existence. But they felt they had overcome them, so why could not other women do the same? In other words, women and men in the movement spoke of women outside the movement with similar but not identical distance.

One commonly discussed issue was whether separate women’s groups were necessary, and if so, why. Are they desirable, or should the goal be to overcome whatever it is that makes them necessary? Are separate groups for women the only way to attract women to the movement? What else can be done to 'get women out of their homes'? Will they come to special women’s groups? If not, why not?

Another issue was how to improve women’s self-esteem. There was also a suspicion that perhaps the movement did not address specific female needs. Activists asked: What are women interested in? What can we offer them? Why do they sometimes resist even when we offer what they say they want? Was the main obstacle 'the traditional roles'? some asked. Or was it mainly men’s resistance? Why do men resist the idea of women’s participation so much?
The women´s structure at the level of the Confederation was controversial. There were debates on whether it would result in manipulation of women, and if so in whose interests, and if it would undermine women´s own initiatives.

One common opinion was that it is wrong to identify people as women and men. Some believed it was better to decide to be just 'persons,' participating in the same associations, on the same conditions, with the same activities. After all, what we are working and struggling for is a better society for everyone!

The role of women´s committees was also an issue: What should they do? Must they be feminist? Or could they be for 'ordinary women' and if so, would they not end up as just clubs for gossip? On the other hand, if a neighbourhood association has a feminist women´s committee, won’t that scare away all other ordinary barrio people, men and women?

In other words, in one way or another, the concern that dominated these discussions was the old issue of difference versus similarity and the confusion of similarity and equality. As we shall see, this issue also distinguishes the experiences in different towns and cities.

**Different ways of participating**

My generalizations so far have been based largely on data from Madrid and Valencia. Since they are big cities, these experiences can be treated as ideal-typical for the movement, which was born in big cities and focuses on urban issues. But what happens in small and medium-sized places is also relevant. Let us look at four examples to obtain an idea of the range of variations in what women do, can do, are allowed to do and want to do in the movement.¹⁹ The gender order looks different in different parts of Spain.²⁰ Since women need and want different things, the neighbourhood movement comes into their lives in different ways. What the examples taken together show is that the movement can play an emancipatory role in different gender situations and that women in very different circumstances find it useful.

**Elda** is a town of some 55,000 inhabitants in southeastern Spain, in the region of Valencia. The neighbourhood movement got an early start there, so it was well established by 1994; all the barrios had their own association and all except one had their own premises. The

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¹⁹ I do not want to speculate about any causal relationships between different kinds of places (regional culture, economic structure, size of town, etc.) and women’s political participation. Such relationships probably exist, but they are difficult to describe correctly and they are not important here. The important thing - and the reason I did fieldwork in various places - is to show, first, that there are variations, and, second, that in spite of these variations, there are certain themes that recur throughout the movement. It is in these similarities, in the midst of variation, that we can expect to find the clues to the overall meaning of women’s participation in a movement of these characteristics and thus to make the Spanish experience relevant for women in other countries, especially for feminist strategy building.

²⁰ And of course in different classes, but since the movement is mainly working class, I will not go into that.
cooperation with the city council was close and friendly (too intimate according to some). Both the city council and the movement were dominated by the socialist party, PSOE.21

Elda is an industrial town with a proud working class history. The shoe industry is the single dominant industry here. Women in Elda have 'always' worked, so they said. Most tasks in shoemaking are considered gender-specific, and about half are for women, so women could count on jobs. The women of the movement in Elda said that they felt different from women from other parts of Spain, when they met them at congresses and heard their complaints about discrimination. 'We have evolved beyond all that.' Women in Elda are used to having a say, they said, because they have always contributed a substantial part of family income.

Nevertheless, Elda women did complain about husbands who did nothing in the home, who did not like their wives to go to meetings, and so on. In most of the associations, there were many active women, but there were one or two with very few and one with none. Of the eighteen representatives to the federation, only one was a woman. But for all this, the women’s commission of the federation was unsure of its purposes. They did not feel there were any special women’s issues to fight for. Except perhaps to get men to 'help more' at home. The one thing they were really worried about was unemployment, a recent fact of life in Elda. They underlined that this was a problem for the men, too, but they did organize a sewing class for women, arguing that one can always earn some money sewing, or at least save on the family clothing budget. The commission was also vaguely interested in 'clarifying our own ideas on women’s issues.' They knew there was a body of feminist theory that might be relevant for them, but they did not know how to gain access to it, and they did not seem ready to spend a lot of energy finding out. Like most movement activists, they were more interested in practical struggles than in theoretical issues.

Linares is another industrial town, of similar size and geographically not very far from Elda. But it belongs to another region, Andalusia, and it has a very different history. The traditional industry in Linares used to be mining; now it is the automobile industry. Both have been defined as masculine activities. So unlike Elda, women have never participated much in the labour market of Linares.

The neighbourhood movement was a newcomer of the 1990s, and very few women took part in it. A couple of barrio associations dated from the 1970s, but the federation was quite recent and, as far as I could tell, it and many of the associations were being pushed into existence by PSOE militants. One young university-educated PSOE woman was trying to organize women’s

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21 PSOE = Partido Socialista Obrero Español = Spanish Workers’ Socialist Party. It is the largest party of Spain and governed uninterruptedly and usually with comfortable majorities from 1982 to 1996. PSOE activists were seldom seen in the neighbourhood movement before the mid-1980’s but their presence is now growing in a way that has many activists worried.
committees. The long-active middle-aged barrio women accepted that, because they saw a great need, but they were sceptical about her motives and her ability.

Linares women did not go out much. To visit in each other’s homes was acceptable, but the women talked about it as a right conquered in their own life-time. It had only recently become generally accepted for a married woman to have a cup of coffee in a cafeteria. To join an association was construed as the next step on the road towards freedom of movement, and that was where the acute struggle was in 1994.

Many of the associations had no women at all on the board, and in one association there was organized opposition against the first two women who dared to join the board. In another association, a large group of women had become active, whereupon most of the men quit. Most of the resistance, however, seemed to come from husbands. In such a situation, women can do little association work beyond conquering the right to join.

In another order of things, however, hundreds of Linares women demonstrated weekly throughout the winter of 1994, as workers’ wives, (when one quarter of the automobile workers were laid off with threats of worse to come). In other words, Linares women could go into the streets in their traditional gender role. They kept the distinction between 'street' and 'house' intact. They could be in the street, physically, but socially and culturally they remained in the realm of the home. They were defending their families. To join an association for their own sake was quite another matter. That could undermine the genderization of domains, and that was resisted by many women and most men.

But the activist women argued back. The women of one association had prepared a play about how women who are not allowed to have friends fall ill, and how one such woman persuades her husband to let her join the neighbourhood association. As a consequence her whole personality improves and with it their marriage. He is then convinced that the association is a good thing and he, too, becomes active. A women’s choir had a repertoire of songs about the therapeutic and educational effects of association life on women.

Cordova is a city of about 300.000 inhabitants, Andalusian like Linares. It is a provincial capital, functioning traditionally as an administrative and commercial centre for the surrounding agricultural area, but nowadays it also has some industry. It has quite a lot of tourism because of its rich cultural heritage, notably the famous mosque-cathedral.

It is a beautiful city, but difficult to live in. Class is a major factor of life. Incomes, educational levels, life styles and opinions are polarized. In the first democratic local elections, in 1979, Cordova elected a communist mayor, and the communists have dominated city politics ever
since. The neighbourhood movement came early to Cordova. It has been very successful and it is close to the Communist Party. Cordova is one of the places in Spain where the movement has attained most recognition and become integrated into formal city politics.

It has remained a mostly male movement. The women said this was because the city and its men were 'still very Moorish.' Only two of the fifty or so associations had women’s committees, and as far as I could tell these two were also the only ones that had women on the board.

That does not mean that the women of Cordova were not active, however. They were perhaps the most radical of all the places I visited. There was a lively feminist movement, which received support from the city council, and it had not stayed aloof from barrio women. Feminist and other women’s groups were organized together in a federation-like structure, through which they could obtain financial and organizational support for activities such as women’s congresses, women’s film clubs, literacy courses, conferences, debates, and so on. For the immediate future, they planned a series of workshops on 'sexuality from the perspective of women’s pleasure and desires.' The leading feminists who told me about it underlined proudly that this brave formulation was not theirs but had come 'from the women themselves.'

Many of the women’s groups were barrio groups. They had a territory which coincided with that of the 'men’s association,' as they usually called the neighbourhood association, and their purpose was to "work for the good of the barrio", but they had found it necessary to organize separately from the men. There were tales of women who had tried to work in the 'men’s associations' and had to quit, because the men activists did not cooperate, because their husbands were suspicious of late evening meetings and because the neighbours gossiped about their possible sexual motives in being around so many men. In other words, there were actually two neighbourhood associations in many barrios, one for men and one for women, working on similar issues. In some cases they shared the same premises, meeting at different times. But the women’s groups did not want to be redefined as women’s committees of the neighbourhood associations. They feared that would limit their freedom of action and subordinate them to the men.

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22 In other parts of Spain, there is usually a barrier between feminist groups and women in barrio groups. In part, it is a matter of social distance; feminists tend to be middle class and have higher formal education, on the average. It is also a matter of strategy: most feminists prefer to work only with feminist issues, often considering everything else a waste of time and/or a risk of being manipulated by male interests; women in the neighbourhood movement are mainly interested in barrio issues. Barrio women are often under the erroneous impression that feminists hate men and despise housewives. Feminists are often under the erroneous impression that barrio women do not criticize the hegemonic gender order at all. Barrio women are sometimes feminists but think they will be more politically effective if they do not confess that; feminists sometimes think they ought to work with barrio women to help them elevate their consciousness, but they fear that this would be paternalistic behaviour and they feel that they have to clarify their own ideas first, before they can teach anything to anyone else. All of these barriers and difficulties seemed somehow irrelevant in Cordova. I am sure they must have been present, but they were not evident, and they did not impede the collaboration I describe.
We could sum up (simplifying, of course, for the sake of argument), saying that whatever else they were doing in the movement, the women in all three places also made efforts to redefine gender. Minimally, they had to refuse to stay 'in the house' if they wanted to be in the movement at all. Implicitly, they wanted more equality in the sense of similarity, since they wanted women and men to work in the same spaces. But usually they bracketed the question of what degree of similarity might be possible, in order to work for equality in the sense of justice.

The women of the three towns differed from each other in what they identified as most urgent, or most easily attainable, and what tactics to use. In Elda, the women felt that they had already become similar to men in the most decisive domain, the labour market. Their implicit theory was rather Marxian: if there is equality in economic activity, other inequalities will disappear. They were therefore confident that, with or without special efforts on their part, more and more women would enter the movement, that the men would welcome them there, that more and more husbands would begin helping at home, and so on. Unemployment was the greatest danger to the process.

The women of Linares, too, wanted to enter men’s spaces. Perhaps through employment, but that was a lost cause, as there were no jobs for women and the ones for men were dwindling. A more realistic goal was to enter social life in the same way as men. If asked, most of them would say that they thought women and men were very different kinds of beings deep down, and they wanted to remain 'real women.' But this was not an issue for debate. Their 'feminine identity' was not under threat at all; on the contrary, it was being used as a weapon against them, to keep them 'in the house.' So they wanted to diminish difference because they could see no other way of moving towards justice.

In Cordova, too, the women felt that decreased gender differences were desirable. They had been working on this for some time, but their experience was rather negative. There was resistance from many quarters, centred on the mixing of unrelated women and men, so they had found an alternative in separate organizations. They did not really believe in segregation, because much of their struggle was precisely aimed at abolishing rigid definitions of what is fitting for each gender, but they found that segregation was the best strategy under the circumstances. Equality in the sense of similarity had to give way to equality in the sense of justice.

So, to use the key analogy of women/house and men/street, while the women in Elda felt the men ought to start knocking on the kitchen door any time now, wanting to come in, and the women in Linares knocked their knuckles bloody on the inside of their front doors, wanting to get out, the women in Cordova had opened the front doors, kept the kitchen doors closed until further notice, and built new walls in the public arena in order to be able to use at least parts of it for their own purposes.
A fourth example, Vigo, can be described as a case of women already outside the 'house' calling for other women to come out, and doing it in such a way as to make the walls themselves blur.

Vigo: lace-making or feminism?

Vigo, in the northwestern region of Galicia, is of about the same size as Cordova. Its traditional activities are fishing, canning industries, ship-building and the port. There is also a large automobile factory. There has been much immigration from the surrounding countryside. The climate is mild and humid and the earth fertile, and Galicians feel close to the soil, so most of the workers have chosen to live on the outskirts of the city, in spite of deficient transportation, in order to have houses of their own with small plots of land, where the women grow potatoes and vegetables, keep a few chicken and perhaps a pig.

Galician women are used to making their own decisions, because their men have often been away for long periods, as fishermen, sailors or emigrants to America. But they say they have to let their husbands believe they are the bosses, because otherwise their masculinity would suffer. The traditional-minded women of the old part of Vigo were very active in their neighbourhood association, but they refused to occupy formal positions. 'We women just argue with each other. A woman president would try to order everyone around. Things work much more smoothly if men are in command.'

Galician working class women used not to take part in political life at all. They had too much to do: the house, the family, the garden plot and the animals, and many of them also had jobs outside the household, in the canneries or selling fish or cleaning the homes of the well-to-do middle class of Vigo. Middle class women of Vigo, on the other hand, had lots of activities and much freedom of movement.

Around 1990, a feminist was elected to the city council (for a Galician-nationalist party). She decided to make a special effort to 'get women out of their homes,' which she considered a strategic move to empower women. She chose the neighbourhood movement as her main instrument. She summoned the few women activists and offered special resources to the associations that would set up women’s committees.

As the women paraphrased the councillor, she told them: 'Work for getting women out of the house. Don’t be content with being just a few of you. Most women of your barrio probably do not want to be active in the association itself, but let them at least know that it exists and if

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23 This has sometimes been interpreted as a matriarchy. Most Spanish feminists do not agree, nor do I. My empirical description here constitutes an implicit argument. Cf Méndez 1988 for more data and explicit anthropological arguments.
possible understand what it is about. Make them come to the premises. One way to make them come is to give them things they like.' Her department offered lists of subsidized courses for the committees to choose from.

Unsurprisingly, the women chose the kind of things traditionally defined as women´s skills: embroidery, porcelain painting, woodwork and lacework. Some committees also organized literacy courses, while others offered such courses for both women and men. The courses subsidized by the women´s department were not open to men, and this caused some irritation, even though everyone recognized that no man would want to do lacework anyway. Among the course participants there were some protests because they had to sign up as members of the association to take the courses, and some movement activists also felt hesitant about 'forced' recruiting.

But the success was enormous. In just a few years women had joined the movement in huge numbers. Satisfied women told each other about the courses. It was clearly proved that women are best reached through their own networks. By 1994 there were women´s committees in practically every barrio.

Logically enough the men felt somewhat disturbed. They usually expressed these feelings cautiously; they talked about how women 'need to learn,' how the men were 'trying to help' but with care 'not to meddle,' how the women 'should be grateful for everything we are giving them' and so on. But they also joked a lot about how women´s meetings are 'a pain in the neck,' there is so much chatter that one cannot enter the room without getting a headache, there are never any clear decisions, the women make many mistakes that the men then have to help them correct and cover up, and so on.

The men said they were not machistas , meaning they did not want to restrain women to traditional roles, but they claimed the women have to learn more before they can be given ordinary association responsibilities, and so far they seem to prefer lacemaking anyway. As a matter of fact, most regular movement activities in Vigo continued to be run by men.

Women in the feminist movement or in political parties and trade unions were very sceptical about these developments. So were movement activists, men and women, in other federations where the Vigo experiment was discussed. It was generally agreed that a lot of women had been brought out of their homes, women whose whole lives used to be only their family, and that these women derived great satisfaction from their new activities. It was evident that they were spreading the word, attracting ever more of their kind to the associations. But it was also felt that these women did not understand what the neighbourhood movement was all about. Nor were their lives really changed. They continued doing 'feminine' things. 'They might as well get
together in Church! This changes nothing!' one skeptic said. In fact, the Vigo program was sometimes interpreted as one of a growing number of attempts to neutralize the movement, diverting its energies from "real politics" and undermining its revolutionary potential.

There was also support for the experiment. The arguments on this side stressed step-by-step tactics. You cannot tell women what to do, that is not democratic, they said, and you cannot ask people without any experience of life outside the home to take an interest in formal politics or become feminists right away. The first step is to get them out of their homes, to meet each other, to lose their fear of being in an association. If they do not take that first step, nothing at all can happen. Once they have done that, they will learn. Already many women dare to insist that they want to go out when their husbands want to stop them. Their self-esteem is growing, they are building networks. Soon they may start discussing barrio issues while they sit there with their handicraft work. Besides, the most popular courses are actually the literacy ones. Women are learning new things! And this is the only workable method. It may be slow, but things will change, concluded these debaters.

My opinion is that both sides were right, but both had partial views. The women did come out of their houses and they did join the associations, that much was beyond doubt, and they did have fun, that was what they themselves stressed. They enjoyed having a place to go to do work they liked. It was work they were familiar with, but they were learning more about it, and they were given space and time of their own to do it. And the fringe benefits were very appetizing: getting out of the house with a safe excuse, meeting many other women, forming friendships. Most courses organized lunches or dinners and soon groups of women in bars and restaurants were a common feature of barrio life in a way it had never been before.

The women themselves told enthusiastic stories. 'I used to sit in the house being bored, but now I have a place to go to and meet friends.' 'It is easier for women to leave the house if they come back with an object they have made, something for the house, because then the husband will not be so suspicious.' Such statements speak of something beyond the traditional pleasure of women’s crafts. They speak of small rebellions, small changes, small new ideas. Too small to satisfy intellectual feminists or radical politicians, but small enough to be viable in the context of barrio women’s lives, and therefore perhaps more effective in the long run. Association leaders said that there were always one or two women in each course who asked if they could help in organizing more courses. That is, women who took the typical first step of asking if they could contribute in some way.

The situation in Vigo can be seen as a practical experiment with what Young calls gynocentric feminism, and the debates about it can be seen as a local expression of the tensions between gynocentric and humanist feminism (Young 1990:73-91), or as a practical version of the general
feminist debate on essentialism versus constructivism. In Young’s terminology, humanist feminism is that which builds on Western Enlightenment values. The fundamental idea is that patriarchal society oppresses women because it hinders them from developing their potential as human beings. The goal is a society where gender differences do not count. These ideas are reflected in the so-called progressive discourse on gender in Spain. Gynocentric feminism, on the other hand, defines women’s oppression as the devaluation and repression of women’s experience by a masculinist culture that exalts violence and individualism. Women should not be seen as passive, weak, the Other, say the gynocentric feminists, since they have contributed to civilization, resisted oppression, enjoyed their bodies, cultivated the values of care and nurture and communication, and so on. This position has been called 'the feminism of difference' in Spain and usually criticized for being essentialist.

A gynocentric feminist would approve of the Vigo experiment. Here was an ambitious political program with evident practical results based on the idea that women can change their lives without entering spaces dominated by men. The program celebrated women’s products instead of devaluing them. It liberated women’s energies and fuelled their self-confidence. As many women in Vigo expressed it: 'This is what women like!' - pronounced not in resignation but with pride.

The experiment does maintain established gender categorization and related division of labour, responsibilities, and therefore also of power. The hidden agenda of the Vigo program must be added to the picture for there to be any feminism in it at all. The hopes of the feminists on the city council were that emancipatory messages would percolate somehow, and that the women in the courses would start talking among themselves about their problems. Something akin to the consciousness raising groups in the feminist movement.

That had not happened, according to near-unanimous accounts. And the agenda remained hidden. Many of the women who organized the courses were themselves uncertain about what they were doing. How can one distinguish 'what women like' from 'what keeps women in their place?' they wondered.

Both gynocentric and humanist feminism challenge present power structures, and both fail to be radical enough in the eyes of the believers in the other one. Therefore, some criterion for comparison is needed. The most effective challenge might be recognized in that it is what present powers find most threatening. (Young 1990:89) In Vigo, a woman president of a neighbourhood association was a true threat, especially if she was also a feminist. A woman town councillor with a feminist program was even more of a threat. Such women, even though they were few, were sneered at by both women and men in the anti-feminist camp. Hundreds or even thousands
of women, attending handicraft courses, on the other hand, were seen as a somewhat unusual but still charming and inoffensive phenomenon.

But, if these women were truly doing something new that would lead them on to other activities, thoughts and values, then the dichotomy gynocentrism-humanism might be transcended. One could say that the Vigo program was gynocentric in the short run as a means, and humanist in the long run as a goal. But a humanist feminism that incorporates a more thorough critique of our civilization. To distinguish between means and ends, or rather, to adapt strategies to circumstances, is necessary, if we consider that gender is a social construction, not an essence, but recognize that as things stand, women and men in Spain today - and in most parts of the world - do live different kinds of lives and experience differently everything from everyday tasks, dress and relationships to ideas of body, self and place in the world. So women are different from men, truly, in practice. But this is not a necessary arrangement. It is evidently changing, in Spain, and it is changing towards greater similarity.

Some areas of life, such as the labour market, are being degendered to some extent, even though more in ideology than in practice. Others such as education, have already been quite degendered. Politics is an area that resists; it is still strongly gender-marked in practice and to a lesser extent in ideology. But this fits ill with the general tendencies towards degenderization of crucial social activities. The neighbourhood movement is a political activity that is defined, in part and by some, as non-political. This has made it possible for women to join, and once inside they learn new things. Many of them redefine the idea of politics after a while; others continue denying that they are involved in politics. In either case, the neighbourhood movement makes it possible for women to enter a male activity without having to solve first the contradiction between their 'femininity' and the 'masculinity' of what they want to do. They can let time pass, allowing their practice to undermine slowly the fixed gender markers.

**Conclusion**

Gender orders do not change easily or quickly. Issues are seldom clear-cut. The Vigo example demonstrates that the dichotomy of difference and similarity in feminist debates must be transcended. All four examples show that the organization of gender in many parts of Spain continues to create formidable obstacles for those people, of any gender, who would like to see women and men working together in the same organizations for similar goals. The details vary, and so does the amount of difficulty, therefore also the methods and solutions. But gender hierarchy and resulting democratic deficit are generalized, and just as general is the fact that

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24 A recent and very clear argument for the need of transcending this type of dichotomies is Fraser 1996. See also Fraser 1992 for arguments about how the analysis of discursive struggles can illuminate the cultural aspects of political engagement.
growing numbers of urban Spanish women question the gender order they live with and are finding new ways of working to change it.

The concept of *barrio* is a crucial one for analyses of everyday life, political institutions and the organization of gender in Spain. It is a mediator between the culturally central ideas of private and public and their gendered meanings. It is a principal context of daily life for a large portion of the Spanish population, and it is a setting where women, more than men, live and work, and where women can act more forcefully and independently than in other public contexts.

Because the *barrio* has this significance, the neighbourhood associations can serve as culturally specific instruments for the redefinition of politics in the direction of issues closer to women’s concerns and the redefinition of democracy towards more direct participation. And for the construction of woman-friendly contexts for political work.

I do not claim that the neighbourhood movement is a feminist panacea. If anything, doing fieldwork in it decreased my former activist optimism, and in other texts I plan to analyse the limitations and risks inherent in it. But I do want to claim that it demonstrates some unusual combinations of opportunities for change of and adaptation to social and cultural facts, including the gender order, and that it is producing small but real and viable results for *barrio* women.

The women of the neighbourhood movement are not feminists. Or rather, most of them do not accept that label. Their political practice is directed towards the immediate environment. It concerns the social and material conditions of the *barrio*, i.e. of the possibilities for the people they care about to obtain what they (variously) define as a good life. But as they adapt to changing times, searching for new forms of activity, they upset the gender order, and they notice that and define the results as good. In this sense they do become feminists, with or without the label. They negotiate for entrance into new spaces and for more space in them once there. Their success varies, and they make mistakes, but their actions undermine the key analogy of woman : house :: man : street.

The steps they take may look small, and they themselves think they are. To see the importance of what happens, one must look to the aggregate consequences. The breadth and depth of the changes these women create come from the fact that they are not a vanguard minority in the usual sense. Activist women are a minority in their *barrios*, certainly, but they are so-called ‘ordinary’ women, they represent a majority when it comes to experiences and life styles. What they do is visible and understandable (though not always acceptable) for many more. They push at the naturalized definitions of women and men, private and public, possible and impossible, individual and collective, and pushing they demonstrate that what seemed solid actually yields. To people not accustomed to see themselves as agents of social change, this is important news.
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