Transcending Privacy: Women's Space for Learning in a Spanish Social Movement.
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On house and street - background

The division of private and public is not inevitable or natural. It has been much criticized in feminist theory, and anthropological data demonstrate that it is a matter of social and cultural construction. But in the Mediterranean area it has been seen as given, unavoidable, eternal, in the nature of things. It has worked as a basic distinction, and a strongly gendered one: according to a common Spanish saying, women are of the house, men are of the street. Whether this is actually so or not in everyday life varies of course.

In Spain today more and more women work for a salary outside the home, but they are still mostly in charge of domestic duties, and the percentage of women active in the labor market is still much lower than that of men, especially in the ages when they are likely to have small children or school children. More and more women come into politics, but men still dominate that arena in overwhelming numbers, and more so the higher up the pyramid of power you look. Most urban Spaniards would not say that politics is a male activity today - they would say that that is an old-fashioned idea, that everything has now changed, etc. But according to statistics, political activities are mostly in the hands of men.

In sum, there is still a division of labor according to gender in most areas of social life, but it is diminishing, and it is no longer quite legitimate. That is an important change in itself, of course. But from a feminist point of view, it is not enough. For working class women in urban areas the gendered separation of public and private spheres has meant restrictions on their knowledge of society and on their capacity for political action. Therefore, the division of spheres must be transcended in order for women to become active citizens. This paper will present an example of such transcendence in practice.

The "street" referred to in the old saying is not just the physical street where traffic passes by between buildings. Metaphorically, it is social life beyond family life. It is the Spanish word for "the public", one could say. This used to be the male arena. Women can and could be in the physical street, but if they were there for purposes related to family life, they were metaphorically still "in the house".

Women are now "conquering the street" - a feminist slogan from the 1980s, still sometimes heard. It refers to the struggle for the right to be in the street physically without having to suffer risks of sexual assault or comments on your looks or gossip about your morals. Women claim the right to use the street at all hours, even at night, because women, like men, participate in associations, go to evening classes, sometimes work overtime and have to return home late, etc. But the slogan also, and above all, refers to the struggle for the public sphere. To conquer the street means to transcend the gendered division of spheres.

For example, women have conquered the labor market. They are still a minority there, but not as small as it used to be. It is very difficult for women to combine family life and a career, but some do and the numbers are growing.
Women are also conquering associational life. It is no longer unusual for women to participate actively in associations of all kinds, they can even sit on the board in associations dominated by men. It is true that much associational life is gendered. Women dominate in parish activities, parent-teacher-associations and other activities related to domestic and family duties, i.e. activities that are still in some extended sense "of the house". Some of these may come close to having a certain political content, but they are not seen as such. They are women's activities, therefore by definition not political, not "of the street", and very few men participate in them. Men dominate in associations related to public life in general, such as sports, culture, human rights, ecology, and most especially in associations related to politics, like political parties and trade unions.

In other words, the world of associations as a whole is quite gendered, in spite of variations in details, and that genderization is parallel to the gendered division of life into public and private spheres. In spite of this rather clear division of labor, however, there are a few activities that are becoming gender neutral. One of the clearest examples is the so-called neighborhood movement. This is a big movement, some one and a half million members. It is clearly political. Yet half of its activists are women.

Interesting! In view of the fact that women do not participate much in other political spaces - why here? And in spite of the many women coming into it, the men are not leaving.

In an anthropological study of the movement, I have drawn on my personal almost thirty years long contact with the movement, plus participant observation during a total of 18 months in six towns and cities. I have asked such questions as: What is special about the neighborhood movement so that it attracts women? What does it mean for women to participate in it? What role does women's participation in this movement play in the transformation of the gender order of Spain as a whole, and in each local context? (Thurén 1999, 2000)

Here I will describe it as an example of how it is possible to transcend the public/private division through practical learning and how transcending that division - "getting out of the house" - women learn things that give them basic political tools and insights. Women learn the same things as men through their movement activities, e.g. parliamentary procedure and the social maps of municipal politics. But their lives are more transformed by this than men's are, and in addition they also obtain benefits that men can more easily get in other ways, e.g. self-esteem, friends, and access to wider-than-local information.

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, if they are housewives, as a majority are. In a typical street in a typical residential working class area of a city in Spain today, you see many more women than men during the day. Most of the men are at work. The housewives shop for food, walk their children to and from school, go to see their parents or parents-in-law to help them with cleaning or shopping or to accompany them to the doctor. It used to be the husband's job to see to bureaucratic matters, such as banking, paying taxes, obtaining official papers of one kind or another, but women are taking over those duties, especially in younger families.

One must also consider the similarity in the ways Spaniards relate to their barrio and to their pueblo, village. Both are places of belonging, not just a place in space but a social institution halfway between the family and society at large. Both have rather clear borders in space and rather clear norms about who belongs and who does not. In an important, culturally visible sense, the barrio is the urban pueblo.

When women leave their homes, cross the threshold of the door which marks the private off from the public, they always get dressed for the public eye. They go into the street in more than one sense. But if they are only going to move inside the barrio, clean clothes, combed hair

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1 Barrio means neighborhood, part of town, area, ward, but I will use the Spanish word, because it has strong emotional connotations of closeness and similarity of living conditions, and secondary connotations of everyday life and working class solidarity.
and reasonably good shoes are enough. When they go downtown, beyond the barrio, they wear more elegant clothes and usually also earrings and perfume. In this way they mark, symbolically, the line between private and public and treat the barrio as an intermediate space.

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, and it is full of activities that form part of family life.

An association that takes the barrio as its object of concern is thus a welcoming place for women. The decision to go into the "street" is not so momentous, since in a way they stay in or near the "house". Men recognize that women know a lot about what happens in the barrio, so they concede that women must be allowed to speak about that.²

For many women, the neighborhood association functions as a road out of the house, as a channel for information, as a social and political school, and this is possible because, even though clearly public, it is close to women's concerns in the established private/public division of labor.

**Malvarrosa did it**

To give you an idea of what this movement is like and what it can mean to women, I will tell you the story of some (unusually dramatic) events in the city of Valencia, in an area called Malvarrosa, which is a peripheral barrio of Valencia. It is a low income district with average low figures on good things like schooling and health, and average high figures on bad things like criminality and unemployment.

It was the scene in the early 1990s of violent street battles that made the nationwide headlines. There was a lot of consumption of drugs, including hard drugs, in Malvarrosa, and around 1990 the barrio had become the center of the drug market of the whole city. There had been municipal campaigns against it, with little effect. The local neighborhood association had tried to mitigate the ethnic animosities that were growing as a result of the perceived fact that most of the dealers were gypsies. Malvarrosans saw drugs changing hands in the park, in the streets, by the school... they saw addicts rob children of their winter coats, they saw snacks being torn out of the hands of children... Taxi drivers sometimes refused to enter the barrio. Housewives had to hide their money when they went shopping for food. They felt their barrio was getting a very bad reputation, and it was becoming an uncomfortable, unsafe place to live.

In late 1991, the association of store owners of Malvarrosa called a meeting to see what could be done, seeing that normal legal methods had no effect. The next day there was a first demonstration, with some 2000 persons in the street³, and they decided to continue with daily demonstrations until the problem was solved. Demonstrators tried to force the police to arrest dealers, they formed vigilante patrols, there was some street violence, etc. After about a week, the provincial governor decided to send in anti-riot forces, which attacked the demonstration by surprise one evening (Sanchis Pallarès 1998).

This - of course - did not calm people down, quite the contrary. The demonstrations were institutionalized. The central streets of Malvarrosa were "closed" by demonstrators for one hour, every evening, between 8 and 9 PM, for a whole year, including Sundays and festivities, including cold and rainy days... no exceptions. The people of Malvarrosa were determined. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of Malvarrosans gathered every evening at eight o'clock in a

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² There is no room here to tell the history of the movement, which would really be needed to contextualize fully the contents of this paper. The movement has gone through many phases since it was born in the mid 1960s. Cf Castells 1986/1983, and an earlier article of mine (ThurÈn 2000) or look out for the book-length report that I hope to publish soon.

³ That is a lot, about 20% of the adult population, since Malvarrosa has only 17,000 inhabitants in all.
central place called "the four corners". They rolled out garbage containers to stop the traffic. They had musical instruments with them, for fun and warmth. People who knew many songs became popular. Mothers and children, old and young, women and men. Some brought sandwiches and drinks. There were heated discussions on tactics and strategies, reasons and unreasons, but there was a lot of fun, too. The women of the neighborhood association told many stories about how people got to know each other, people who had perhaps lived in the same building for years and only said hello to each other, now they became friends. The women told these stories with obvious relish.

There was one story, for example, of a truck driver who pleaded to be let through, he said he had arrived a few minutes before eight, he was in a hurry, he had to make his delivery in the barrio. But they stopped him. He pleaded, he was angry, he insulted them, but in the end he sat still in his truck. "And then after one hour, when we opened the street, he got out of the truck and gave us a bottle of wine! Here ladies, to warm yourselves with, he said! He was so impressed with what we were doing!"

There were also stories of insolidary neighbors, of clothing torn or destroyed by dirt, of stones thrown, of people hurt. But the demonstrations had been mostly peaceful, they insisted. "Keep in mind that most of us were middle aged or older women. Youngsters, too, of course. But mostly women and also young mothers with babies in carriages."

After a while the police started picking up the drug pushers and taking them to the police station. But they would soon be out in the street again. So the women began going to the police station every night after "opening the street", to see to it that the traffickers were booked and held at least over night. "We would sit there for a few hours, we were never back home before one o'clock."

In late 1992, some of the claims were finally met: some buildings where drugs were sold were torn down, some dealers were taken to court, a mental health center was established which dispensed methadone, and a civic center was built.

The struggle was thus more or less successful. It took a year of intense collective commitment, but the results seem durable. "Well, of course there are still drug pushers around, but they don't dare come out in the open. The ones that operated here then, they are not around any more. A few of them are, but most of them have moved to other places. Because drugs are sold, that has not changed. But now they are in other barrios." "And the ones we have here are careful. Earlier, you see, they were not a bit scared. They would stand right under your nose and sell, nothing would happen. Drugs are being sold all over Valencia, now, but before it was all here in Malvarrosa, and that is not so any more."

Both women and men demonstrated in Malvarrosa. But many more women than men. The women of the neighborhood association felt that they were the heroes of an epic battle, in which their husbands had participated and supported them, especially when there was violence, but they themselves had done most of the work, and they felt they were much more dedicated to the cause, more energetic and efficient in the daily demonstration tasks, less likely to give up when tired or cold, and much braver. They felt women have more courage than men, even physical courage. In several collective interviews I conducted with them, they insisted that this was because they were mothers.

I do not agree with most of their discourse. But that is not the issue here. I want to tell you about what these women actually accomplished, and what they felt they learned from the experience.

They were proud of what they had done. They did it for their children, they said, but they also told many anecdotes which showed that they themselves had often had a good time during the daily demonstrations. They learned how an association works. They learned that there had to be some organization. They underlined how during the demonstrations, and later in ordinary association work, they had met a lot of people, made many new friends.
They all said Malvarrosa is a wonderful place now. "You can go out at night or in the
afternoon, it is all peaceful." When I presented a version of this text to the women, to get their
permission to publish it, they were a bit upset about my descriptions of their problems. Yes,
there were problems, of course, and there had been even worse problems in the past - but if
Malvarrosa is to be described in a book, they want it to be described as a nice place! They love it,
it is their home, they want to be proud of it. I understand their feelings. Malvarrosa is working
class, it is physically rather run down, it is far from well off - but there are lots of commercial
activities, lots of people talking to each other in the streets, there is a feeling of a socialized place
that has meaning to its residents as a place, as a home. In other words, it is a barrio.

**Women in movement**

I interviewed a group of 15-20 women several times between 1995 and 2003. They had formed a
women's committee and organized all sorts of activities for women, especially handicraft
courses. Several of them also sat on the board of the association. Women were just over half of
the members of the board.

This group constituted the core of a larger group that took over the neighborhood
association of Malvarrosa as a result of the four corners movement. Legally speaking, it was the
same association with a new board. But the women spoke in terms of the old and the new
association. They did not think of abstract structural continuity. To them "association" meant
approximately a group of people working together. So if there were new individuals, it was a
new association.

According to their version of the beginning of the events, four or five women had been
standing in a doorway, chatting, one evening, when they were reached by the rumor that there
was going to be a demonstration the next day, so they went as a group, and so did other
neighbors, and during the demonstrations, the ones that acted as leaders took on responsibilities
and formed a new board of the neighborhood association.

Luisa: "I was one of the people who came to the four corners from the start. And from
then on, I began to realize that with the neighborhood movement you can do a lot more than if
you just stay at home."

None in the group had any previous experience of organization. When I asked where
they had been before joining the neighborhood association, they exclaimed in chorus, "Nowhere!
At home!" They had never belonged to any labor union or any political party. They had little
schooling, not one of them beyond eight years. Some of them had had a job before getting
married, others had not, but in any case none of them had worked outside the home after having
children. "No, we are just ordinary housewives who got into this because we saw that our barrio
was being destroyed."

They were emphatic that what they were doing was not politics: "We know nothing about
politics!" "We don't want to have anything to do with politics!" "If you come into this association
talking politics, we will throw you out."

This is true of almost all women and most men in the neighborhood movement as a
whole. When I explained that as I saw it, any activity with the intention to influence decisions
that concern more people than your own family can be called political, Trini conceded that and
specified: "Exactly. What we are doing is a kind of politics, but without political parties."

Most of what the Malvarrosan women told me about their work in the association, their
feelings, methods, worries, etcetera, is representative of what I heard in all the six towns and
cities and the many neighborhood associations I visited. There are many kinds of women in the
neighborhood movement, but "ordinary" women - like the ones in Malvarrosa - dominate, and
their experiences are the most interesting, since they resemble each other, in spite of the many
other differences within the movement. They work hard, but they enjoy it. Once they have
become active, they seldom quit. And they say they enjoy it because it changes their lives profoundly.

I asked the Malvarrosan women why they were in the neighborhood association. There had been thousands of women in the street during the demonstrations, and most of them were now back in their homes. Those of you who are still here, what has made you continue?

They thought they had already answered that question. "To do things for Malvarrosa!" they repeated. But then one of them, whom we can call Nati, defiantly hit a new note: "And as for me also because I don't feel like staying home! That is the first thing! And now people know me, my neighbors come to me if something happens. I like that. So now I have joined another group too, working with the Health Center. And I... if there is a lecture for example... well, simply that, I enjoy it, and if we have to help, those of us who are here, on the board of the neighborhood association, if there are some papers we can arrange or..." The others agreed and gave similar arguments and examples.

These explanations could be interpreted as being about what is in other contexts called being a person: not being confined to your home, but out in the open, in public, learning, knowing what is going on, being visible, being someone others can turn to, and having the resources to respond to them, widening your horizons and helping others to widen theirs, accumulating social capital... and peppering it all with a sense of doing the Right and the Good.

At the same time, there are parallels to the traditional feminine role. The women felt good because they fitted into an institution (family or association) which defined the good life, and they felt powerful because they were aware of not just serving but shaping that institution. Dedication to one's children is replaced with dedication to one's neighbors, and consciousness of family is exchanged for consciousness of barrio, association, history. That is a momentous change on one level, because it undermines the classical analogy men : public :: women : private. But at the same time there is a continuity in dispositions. The women can continue being the same kind of forceful, imaginative individuals in charge of morals and human relationships that their education and experiences have taught them to be in the family. They can apply their habitus to a new field with little loss of symbolic, social or psychological capital. This gives them satisfaction and it gives the movement strength.

It also sets limits to what is feasible for women to do in the movement - unless their dispositions change. Which they probably will, after a while, because of the logic of reproduction of dispositions (Bourdieu 1977).

If it were not for the continuity, these women would not be able to do what they are doing. They do not have access to such middle class resources as higher education, critical mass media, child care or time to go downtown to evening school or political meetings. They work close to home but in such a way as to connect their concerns to wider issues and events.

But the old habitus does place obstacles in their path. The movement women, in Malvarrosa and elsewhere, liked to contrast themselves (who had overcome the obstacles) with women who were still caught in old habits and norms. This can be reassuring (reminding them of their own relative strength) and disturbing (casting shadows of doubt on what they have done and who they are now in the eyes of women who are very much like them). To compare becomes a necessary reflective exercise.

I asked what they imagined their neighbors thought about them. General laughter. "Fine, just fine." Lola: "But then if you talk to your neighbors (feminine form: vecinas) and comment about how they could also join, not all of them agree! (Imitating screechy voices) 'Oh no, I am fine where I am, in my home!' Or, (imitating again) 'Are you going there again?"' And then more seriously, there were tales of how some people will never understand, while there are others who just need to visit the premises once to get a feeling for the association. Many women come only for the handicraft classes, they said, but they did not think that was a bad idea. One of them said she had signed up all the women of her building! More laughter. "Sure, because once you peep into the association and see the atmosphere, that's when you feel like joining." "Yes, because
otherwise people may fear that when you come, right away, the first day they will make you read something..." Her face and tone of voice made it clear that she meant something like being forced to take a stand on some issue. The idea of reading was used metonymically for the whole prestigious world beyond everyday life, a world barrio women know exists, but in which most of them do not think they are able to act. The others filled in: You think they won't accept you, since they don't know you, or that they will ask you about something you don't know, or you don't think you will understand what is going on...

A couple of them told stories of how they had felt at first they were not "worthy," not "valuable". But then they had learned, was the moral of these stories. Trini: "Some people in here know more than others. I am one of those who know least. But I can go along with someone else who knows! In good company, I will go anywhere! And the fact is that when it comes to (she mentioned her specialty in the association work), I don't need anyone to come with me any more!" The others cheered her.

Carmen: "I remember when we moved here, I had three small children, I could not go out, I could not go anywhere." She spent many years at home, having more children. "And now that they are all older, I feel like going out, getting to know people! My neighbors tell me, why do you get into all these troubles now, when you could finally begin to take it easy?" Laughter; all the women understood both the reactions of those neighbors, and Carmen's preferences. She went on to tell how much it meant to her to go to lectures, to organize committee outings, to persuade her husband to participate in the Friday potluck dinners that the women's committee had instituted. "I like these things, so let noone tell me I can't do it!"

The women felt sure that it was a good thing to do things they enjoyed, but they were uncertain how to justify it. As the traditional female role used to be construed, there was no room for leisure in it. In real life, women have always taken time off and found space for fun, certainly, but the image of the Good Woman was one who did not, but was always at the beck and call of others, one who never rested her hands, never allowed herself to be ill, and so on. Motherhood, too, was and largely is construed as something that is not good enough if it does not take up all available time and energy (Thurén 1988).

They offered juicy examples of what some neighbors might be thinking about women in a "male" context like a neighborhood association. They themselves did not see it as male, but some barrio women do, they explained, and such women therefore doubt either the femininity or the sexual morals of the activists. In the safety of the interview situation, my informants laughed about gossip around the dubious morals of over-night trips out of town without their husbands. Naturally such gossip can hurt them, but they preferred to appear to be above paying attention to it. There was a stereotype image of the "reactionary barrio woman" against whom they wanted to contrast themselves, and it seemed that the best discourse domain to do it with was the traditional one of sexual morals.

Another good domain for that purpose was the one of cleanliness.4 "Some of those women who spend all day dusting are sure to say that there is a lot of dust in my house, but since dust means nothing to me..." Lots of laughter, jokes about dirty dishes piling up. Merche said it was a question of education, implying for one thing, that the more you know about the world, the less interesting is the issue of dust and cleaning, but also, for another, that a civic-minded person has higher moral worth than an ever so cleanliness-minded housewife.

But they certainly knew that a housewife's life is full of hard work. In one of my visits we came to talk about labor unions, and they speculated, mostly in jest, about the need for a labor union for housewives, to claim economic independence. "We should have a salary! We have earned it!" But then they shrugged it off. "Real" labor unions are not interested in housewives, they said.

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4 The two topics are not identical, but closely connected, since cleanliness has traditionally been seen, in the Mediterranean area, as a sign of correctly socialized chastity in women.
These women were learning, and they knew it. And they realized that the issues usually addressed by political parties and labor unions were different from the ones that most affected them. Party politics were abstract and ideological and could therefore be divisive in a committee like theirs, whereas they were largely in agreement among themselves about their own situation as concerned working class barrio housewives - in contrast, that is, with barrio men, middle class women or unconcerned barrio housewives.

Through their struggles they had acquired a habit of redefining problems. Their experiences in the movement had taught them that it was interesting to accept suggestions about new issues to think about, and they had also learnt from experience that they were capable of arriving at standpoints of their own.

Points to ponder

The story of the women in Malvarrosa raises a host of moral, political, philosophical and epistemological issues. The anger of the people and the deep and dense knowledge of the problems at grass roots levels, i.e. the strength, versus the weakness due to lack of concepts, experience and habits to make sense of that knowledge and translate it into desired change. The political desirability of emancipation of the directly affected versus the political danger of each one protecting their own back yard. The obscure but materially evident alliance of city, national and international financial strategies foundering on the reefs of popular resistance. The impotence of real human beings in the face of structural, human-made but larger-than-human forces of money.\(^5\)

It also raises specific feminist questions. The beauty of women feeling strong and confident and actually accomplishing something and going on to learn more from there. And enjoying the whole process! The danger of such women being caught in contradictions, having to pay a high price (broken marriages, social ostracism, lack of time for themselves). The ambivalent effects of traditional gender roles, as something the women have to overcome on the one hand in order to do anything at all, and on the other as something they build on and from which they obtain legitimacy, social support and intimate satisfaction and psychological strength.

My task here cannot be to tackle such a large complex of issues. I have described some of the discourses of the people involved, to show what those big issues look like from eye-level in a barrio and to argue that these women do learn about politics (in some sense) and that a neighborhood association is a good place for such learning, and that this process of learning forms part of a large historical process of breaking down the gendered division of public and private spheres.

I do not want to paint too rosy a picture. The neighborhood movement is no panacea, it has drawbacks and problems. But this is not the place to go into that. I have chosen to tell you the story of a small number of real women - who are representative of many others - and what their participation in the movement has meant to them. And that, as far as it goes, is very positive.

For a nucleus of women, the commitment to work for the common good had become permanent. They had stayed in the struggle, reconverting it to something constant, work in the neighborhood association. They had little schooling, and they knew this to be an obstacle, but they knew they were learning about new needs, new perspectives and new methods of struggle.

\(^5\) Malvarrosa is next to the beach. I have no proof, but it is not very far-fetched to assume that there might be some connection between the ease with which criminals could operate in Malvarrosa around 1990 and the fact that the area, previously seen as just poor and uncomfortably far from the city center, was just then being developed. A beach promenade was projected, and later built, restaurants and other businesses appeared, and middle class housing began to be built. If the working class population could be persuaded to leave, there were profits to be made.
The happy end of the tale has two parts: the struggle in itself was successful because the goals they had set up were (partially) reached; at the same time new horizons with new goals opened up, life became larger and richer. Malvarrosa became not just inhabitable but a wonderful barrio to identify with. The tale became a moral legend about how the bad luck of living in a barrio that threatened to collapse in social chaos was turned into the good luck of finding a solution and then using that solution as a stepping stone to a new style of life.

Left to themselves, the women of Malvarrosa may evolve towards feminism. They no longer accepted the traditional role of housewife at the service of the rest of the family, at least not as the exclusive meaning of life. They were beginning to construct discourses around social marginalization, larger economic and political structures and about connections that make it possible and necessary for people like themselves to try to modify their living conditions. They were savoring their new-found strengths, and reinterpreting their view of themselves and others in the light of these experiences.

In later interviews they also insisted that they had learned a lot since the first interview. They realized that they had used black-and-white language in the early days, whereas now they were able to see many shades in any arguments and express their opinions in more subtle ways. They were learning about party politics, although they still did not like it. They understood better what an association is, and as their own experience of the difficulties of daily nitty-gritty of association work grew, they understood better what the previous board had been trying to do in the days before the violent demonstrations.

They are vulnerable, because their horizons are still largely limited to their own barrio, and their access to mass media and other sources of information is rather narrow, but at the same time they believe in their own strength, and that gives them real strength.

They are in a way very dangerous. They could fall prey to reactionary populist campaigns. But they are committed to collective action for a good collective life, and as their experiences have taught them what the minimum conditions for a good life are, they are not likely to be seduced by abstract visions of the world. Their refusal to accept the world of "politics" as they understand it defends them - up to a point - against manipulation.

Their concentration on their own barrio can be interpreted as narrow-minded selfishness (as has been done in press comments on the Malvarrosa events and as is sometimes heard in general discussions on the neighborhood movement in Spain) but also as a very strong link to direct material experience. To follow political leaders or ideologies is foolishness to women like these. They work with what they know. They are selfish in the sense that they are not very interested in people they do not know personally, but they are not individually selfish; on the contrary they have clear ideas of sacrificing immediate comfort for the common good, i.e. the common good of people around them. They are careful not to introduce divisiveness in those immediate surroundings. They try to be tolerant of differences among themselves, and they are careful to state their good intentions and willingness to compromise whenever they affirm something they feel not everyone might agree to. To this same end, they hide their most idiosyncratic opinions, and they constantly probe the collective opinions and work toward consensus, but they will not adopt any strong self-repressive measures. Having taken a big step out of their traditional role, they have learned that it is sometimes good and necessary to risk criticism. They are willing to make sacrifices for the common good, but they set a limit to sacrifices, having realized the drawbacks of the ideology of the totally self-sacrificing mother.

These women do not see themselves as feminists. They reject that word almost as strongly as they reject "politics". But in cautious and practical ways, they do question the gender order. They negotiate for entrance into new spaces and for more space in them once there. They are opening up spaces, redefining political activities and showing the way for other women. Quite a lot for persons not used to seeing themselves as social actors.

What they are doing is really what the white middle class feminists of the rich countries did around 1970: starting with their own situation, not believing in anything that is told to them,
but not accepting things as they are either, they work their way towards a better life and reflect on the process along the way. Women of the neighborhood movement are leaving their houses, they are doing things and moving around in such a way that the whole traditional division of private-public is undermined. And this is a necessary step for women to become active, knowledgeable citizens. The women of the neighborhood movement are women who have had few opportunities of learning about the world beyond the family, but in the movement they learn important things, and they put them to use, and they learn to realize that that is what they are doing.

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