

Working women in the factories and home workshops of Catalonia in the 19th and first third of the 20th centuries

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ABSTRACT

The contribution of female labour to Catalan industrialisation was very important in both the textile industry and the garment-making industry. Likewise, in the early 20th century, the tertiary sector offered women new chances for salaried jobs. This article offers an overview of the evolution of female labour at factories and home-based workshops with its specific problems, the resistances it had to overcome, the influence of the purportedly protective legislation and the consequences of women joining the workforce from the 19th century to the 1930s.

KEYWORDS: industrial female labour, female labour in home-based workshops, women's labour conditions, labour laws on female workers, standard of living and female salaried work, trade unions and female labour

FEMALE FACTORY WORKERS DURING THE 19TH CENTURY

In 1905, 5,111 men, 16,466 women, 2,197 boys and 3,195 girls worked in all the textile industries in the city of Barcelona. Eighty-five percent of the workforce in the cotton industry specifically, which had the greatest relative weight within Catalan industry, was made up of women.¹ Women had a notable presence in other industrial sectors as well. There can be no doubt about the importance of women's contribution to the process of industrialisation in Catalonia. Mechanisation enabled less qualified workers to be hired and promoted the entry of women in factories at salaries lower than those paid men. Even though women's work was regarded as supplementary to the head of household's salary, not to mention inferior and temporary – even though it often lasted an entire lifetime – women's work outside the home was indispensable for the survival of the working-class family, and in some trades female workers were more highly valued than men. It has been noted that in the textile towns in Catalonia with a high proportion of female workers, the rate of single women was clearly higher. This refutes the thesis that female salaries supplemented the wages of the men in the family, which was used to justify their lower pay.

Frowned upon by the male workers themselves, who had to send their wives and daughters to work to ensure

the family's subsistence, female work was associated with mere need, and women were asked to also shoulder all the unpaid household chores after a full day at the factory. Women's subordinate position in the family, business owners' workplace segmentation according to sex, and efforts by male workers and their organisations to exclude working women meant that female workers were viewed as secondary, less stable and complementary to males. In factories, women occupied the same inferior position as they did in society and the family, while their chances at job promotion were minuscule.

In around 1900, the sexual segmentation of labour kept the sectors with higher qualifications and better pay in the hands of men, including dyeing and finishing in the cotton textile sector, called the *ram de l'aigua*, while spinning was in the hands of the women, supervised by foremen and watched over by overseers and stewards, all of them men. Not only did women not occupy even the most modest leadership jobs at the factories, which were reserved for men, but they also tended to be absent on the boards of directors of resistance-orientated working-class organisations, even in the fields where they were in the majority. Despite this, salaried work outside the home strengthened the role of working women within the family and consolidated a culture of female work outside the home which was conveyed to subsequent generations, for whom work as identity would come to replace work as a necessity. The docility and less assertive spirit attributed to working women is belied by their leading role in the general textile strikes of 1913 and 1916 in Barcelona, as

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well as their agitation against the shortages and scarceness of sustenance in January 1918. During these events, there were women speakers, agitators and leaders who were known by the female workers.

The system of separate ownership of property during marriage in traditional Catalan civil law guaranteed that married women could administer their own assets and income, as opposed to the system of joint ownership in the Spanish legal system, which was codified as Spanish civil law in 1889. Yet it should be borne in mind that in working-class families in Catalonia, the application of separate ownership – in terms of salaries – still seemed to be problematic and rarely practised.

Female labour in manufacturing was not a new development prompted by the factory system; rather it dated from far earlier. For this reason, we cannot lose sight of the precedents from the preindustrial, artisan period of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Spinning was a woman's job, while the weavers were exclusively men. The sexual segmentation of labour already existed in the preindustrial period, as did the attitude that female labour was complementary, subordinate and cheaper.

In Barcelona in the late 18th century, when the guilds still regulated manufacturing and restricted competition between the workshops of master artisans, the salaried workers – called tradesmen, since they had a trade – took up resistance against female workers with lawsuits and actions which sometimes became violent. At the same time, the exclusion of girls from official education justified kicking women out of the traditional workshops, with the exception of widows of masters and the women of their family.² In their resistance against working women, the tradesmen in the guilds had the support of the more modest masters, who depended upon commissions from the masters who took on female labour and were adapting to capitalistic competition.

Female labour did not dwindle as a result; instead, women were relegated to working in the first calico factories – which were not yet mechanised – and at home, without the protection of the guild rules. The putting-out system, called *treball a mans* or handwork in Catalan, also spread. This system had primarily been used in rural settings on commissions from a businessman to take advantage of the seasonal idleness in the countryside. In fact, it aided in the subsistence of small farms that would later become unviable.

With the 1836 liquidation of the regulating power of the guilds, the freedom of industry along with mechanisation via steam or hydraulic energy meant that women who used to work at scattered home-based workshops came to be concentrated in factories. The new development consisted of a clear separation between salaried manufacturing work and unsalaried social reproduction work. It was more difficult than before to combine childcare and household chores, which were much more toilsome than today, with paid work. During the progressive two-year period of 1854-1856, the calls for daycare cen-

tres for the children of working women attest to this problem,³ as they did not always have a grandparent or neighbour available to care for the children.

The first workers' association to resist capital, the *Asociació Mútua de Teixidors* (Mutual Weavers' Association), dating from 1840, had mostly male members, the hand-weavers, the heirs to the old guild tradition but now only an association of tradesmen who often had to organise secretly. Cotton spinning became mechanised more quickly than weaving. By 1860, spinning was wholly mechanised; in contrast, weaving would take yet another 20 years to reach the same point.⁴ With the introduction of mule-jennies in the 1840s, men worked at spinning in the factories, a job that used to be for women, while women began to operate mechanical looms, although the manual looms were still operated only by men, who kept the most artisanal jobs that required the most training for themselves.⁵

The trigger of Barcelona's 1854 Luddite Mutiny against self acting, which began to replace mule-jennies in cotton spinning, was the fact that in the towns around Barcelona women were running the self acting, which were more productive than the mule-jennies, and therefore their operators were paid more. In 1856, 66% of the cotton spinning was done by men in Barcelona, while 38% of the machine weaving was in women's hands. The salaries were virtually identical in the men's and women's trades, according to the study by Ildefons Cerdà in 1856.⁶ However, the women who operated self acting earned 3.70 pesetas less per week than their male counterparts.

In any event, the assumption that men were supposed to be the family breadwinners had not weakened. Thus, male workers' subsequent claims for equal salaries between men and women for the same job aimed to put an end to business owners' preference for hiring women if their wages were no lower than men's. The largest integrated cotton textile industry, *La España Industrial*, located in the Sants district of Barcelona, had planned to only hire 18% men, but in 1866 men accounted for 65% of its workforce, while this figure was 43% in the second largest company in the same town, Joan Güell's *El Vapor Vell*.⁷

In the late 19th century, men worked the spinning machines with 300 to 590 teeth, while the women operated the ones with 240 to 300 teeth, with the corresponding salary difference. The *ram de l'aigua*, which included dyeing and finishing, was where men were clearly in the majority at 74%, with a minority of women who never exceeded the number of children with whom they worked. This was the best-paid sector within the cotton industry. This horizontal workplace segmentation, just like vertical segmentation, worked against women and justified the salary differences between the sexes.

At the first *Congrés Obrer Espanyol* (Spanish Workers' Congress) held in Barcelona in 1870, with the birth of the *Federació Regional Espanyola de la Primera Internacional* (Spanish Regional Federation [FRE] of the First International [AIT]), there were few differences between the

diverse trends with regard to female workers. Not a single woman was present at this congress despite their numerical importance in the textile industry and despite the fact that the federation of mechanical cotton spinning, weaving and finishing workers, *Les Tres Classes de Vapor*, had existed since 1869. The laws protecting women which were called for ultimately aspired to remove them and children from the factories. The FRE of the AIT preached the incorporation of women into workers' resistance groups, a clear sign that they were not a part of them at that time.

A first – fleeting – step seemed to arise ideologically in the second congress of the FRE of the AIT in Zaragoza in 1872, which was against female dependence and in favour of women working outside the home as a means of personal promotion. However, at the same time it was declared that in the capitalist system this was the root of “vast immoralities” and the cause of the “degeneration of the race”, although all of this would change when collectivism was imposed. The image of the female worker subjected to sexual harassment from owners and stewards was deeply rooted in the male workers' mindset. Even though there were real cases of harassment, what these enduring clichés revealed was the head of the family's fear of losing total dominance over women at home, as these men experienced a feeling of insecurity because of the woman's absence from the home for most of the day.

Starting the 1880s, ring spinning machines began to replace mules because they produced more thread per tooth and required less maintenance and care. The introduction of these machines was associated with the replacement of male spinners with female spinners. At the same time, the textile factories in the Llobregat and Ter river basins, the *La Muntanya* (Mountain) factories according to the manufacturers' names, began to pose serious competition to the coastal and pre-coastal factories located on what was called *El Pla* (the Plain), because they harnessed hydraulic energy, which was cheaper than coal, which was imported by sea, and they therefore paid lower salaries, especially in the industrial colonies, where the manufacturers owned homes for the workers' families to live in, often with a patch of land to be farmed as a vegetable garden near the factory.⁸ Control over labour was greater in the industrial colonies located riverside. There, the work continued at night as well, not only to compensate for the rivers' ebbs but also because in this way the investments were amortised far more quickly. Sometimes the men remained in farming while the women and daughters went to work at the riverside factories.

The replacement of self acting with continuous spinning machines and the predominance of women operating them in the penultimate decade of the 19th century were spurred by the *fin de siècle* economic crisis and the loss of the colonial markets of Cuba and Puerto Rico in



FIGURE 1. *La Fàbrica* by Santiago Rusiñol (1889)

1898. However, the feminisation of this work met with stiff resistance by the workers in the Ter River basin, especially in Manlleu and Roda de Ter, where there were few job alternatives and where the disappearance of the manual looms had left unemployment in its wake.⁹

The 1890 strike of Les Tres Classes de Vapor in Manresa, which sought to equalise the salaries in La Muntanya and El Pla, had been a debacle because of the lockout ordered by the owners. Thus began the decline of that moderate workers' federation based on the pre-eminence of men in the trade.

In 1891, Teresa Claramunt, an anarchist textile worker from Sabadell, began an association of women working in all the trades that was highly critical of Les Tres Classes de Vapor and its male management.¹⁰ This association came to have 47 groups and sections of seamstresses, shoemakers, female tailors and workers in diverse fields. Teresa Claramunt claimed the need for female self-emancipation against the cultural, professional and political hegemony of men, and in this vein she published her leaflet *La mujer, consideraciones sobre su estado ante las prerrogativas del hombre* in 1903. In 1902, this anarchist and feminist was the leading figure in the general strike of Barcelona that year, which led to her banishment in Zaragoza. That women's workers association was somehow the forerunner of La Constància, a new society of spinning, weaving and finishing workers founded in 1912 which managed to achieve large-scale female membership.

FEMALE FACTORY WORKERS IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The first law that protected women and children factory workers was passed in March 1900 by the conservative government at the behest of the Minister of Governance, Eduardo Dato. It banned minors under the age of ten from working and stipulated a reduction in the workdays of minors under the age of fourteen, along with maternity leave after working women gave birth.¹¹ In this sense, it had been preceded by the law dated in June 1873 during the First Republic, which had never been implemented, as it was as fleeting as the regime that enacted it. The 1900 law was motivated by the persistent illiteracy among workers, the neglect in which the working-class children grew up and the infant mortality rates during the first two years of life, which was a full one-fourth of the children born in Barcelona in the early 20th century, although this rate soared to 44% in the working class neighbourhoods among children under the age of five.

The 1900 law stipulated four weeks of leave after childbirth and one hour per day for nursing, divided into two half-hours. That year, too, witnessed the establishment of indemnifications for workplace accidents to be paid by the company's insurance policy. In contrast, maternity leave only guaranteed that the woman's job would be saved, but it came with no subsidy, which is why leaves

were not taken until 1919, when the Catalan business owners created insurance companies to pay female workers a stipend during their maternity leave.¹² However, it should be noted that women working at home and in domestic service were not protected by this law.

The 1900 law also forbade night shifts for women under the age of 28, and for older women it stipulated a maximum night shift of eight hours. The opposition from the factory owners and their spokesmen in the Congress of Deputies was harsh. Joan Sallarès i Pla, the president of the Manufacturers' Guild of Sabadell and of Foment del Treball Nacional (National Employment Promotion), warned that in Catalonia, half the cotton thread was manufactured at night and that 80% of the night-shift staff was made up of girls under the age of 19, such that the consequences of a law like this one could be catastrophic.

The business owners managed to get the local social reform boards to keep watch over and sanction infractions, as these boards had a strong management presence, along with the intervention of the mayors. The ineffectiveness of these boards was notorious, even after a corps of labour inspectors was created in 1906. The latter condemned the fact that the local social reform boards rarely collaborated with their undertaking and waived the fines for business owners who incurred infractions.¹³

It is worthwhile to study the evolution of salaries in the wool textile industry in Sabadell between 1904 and 1925 compared to the basic cost of living of a typical working-class family, made up of the parents and three children.¹⁴ The trades assigned to them for our purposes are theoretical, but they were the most common ones. In 1904, the salaries of the father (weaver), 27 pesetas, and the mother (warper), 13 pesetas, did not reach the minimum household budget of 65.5 pesetas. To reach this amount, the elder daughter (roving frame operator) had to work at a salary of 12.5 pesetas, as did the younger daughter (bobbin winder), who earned 7.5 pesetas, and the young son (hanger boy), who earned 11 pesetas.¹⁵ Working-class families with small children too young to work in the factories faced enormous difficulties earning the income they needed, and this explains why many children had to go to work as young as possible despite the ban stipulated in the 1900 law. With the father, mother and elder daughter working, the same was true in 1913, although it was not entirely necessary for the youngest son to work. By 1919, the father earned 43.6 pesetas, the mother 26 pesetas and the elder daughter 23.8 pesetas, and the two smaller children no longer had to work to reach the minimum household budget of 95 pesetas. The workweek was 65 hours in 1896, and the major change came with the implementation of the 46-hour workweek at the same salary in 1919, rendering it no longer necessary for small children to work in order to cover the basic needs of a working-class family in the wool industry in Sabadell. The improvement in the quality of life was more important than the legislation aimed at ending child labour.

Regarding the relationship between lifecycle and factory work for working-class women, we can see that as the 20th century progressed, there was an increased presence of women older than 35 and therefore of married women, given the ban on child labour, compulsory schooling and the decline in the birth rate. Thus, in 15 Catalan municipalities, the female employment rate ranged from between 32% and 78% in around 1920, and the rate of married women who worked was between 56% and 86%.¹⁶

The stagnation and even backsliding in real salaries in Barcelona took place during the first fourteen years of the 20th century. Not only did the publications from the period censure this downswing, but it has also been confirmed by studying the payrolls of two companies, the cotton manufacturer Toldrà and the knitwear company Marfà. In contrast, the salaries rose between ten and twenty percent during the two-year period from 1918 to 1919, a time of intense labour conflicts. Later, those improvements remained in place with only minor increases between 1919 and 1935. We can also note that the salary gap between male and female blue-collar workers grew larger with the consolidation of gender-segmented labour after 1914.¹⁷

The new spinning and weaving union, La Constància, which was founded in 1912 with 2,000 members, was the leading actor in the general textile strike in Barcelona and its surroundings held from the 30th of July to the 15th of September 1913.¹⁸ La Constància drew nearer to the union CNT, which had an anarcho-syndicalist bent and had been founded the previous year but was forced to go underground until 1915. La Constància managed to get women to join en masse, although it was still run by workers from the *ram de l'aigua* – rollers and finishers – who had opened their union to the women in their industry in 1911. It was not a simple trade strike; rather it expressed the working-class women's and their families' opposition to working conditions that were clearly inferior to those of many men's trades. Not only metallurgists but the rollers, dyers and finishers within the textile industry itself had ten-hour workdays, while female workers in the other branches of the textile industry worked between eleven and twelve hours per day, in addition to having to carry the entire burden of housework and childcare. Thus, they noted how their husbands, brothers and sons in other trades worked two or three hours less every day.

The detonator was the failure to observe the maximum length of eight-hour nightshifts according to the 1900 law, while they also called for a 50-hour workweek with Saturday afternoons free to tend to the household chores, along with a 25% rise in income, demanded after a long period of stagnation as money lost value. Sixty-three thousand people from Barcelona and its surroundings ended up joining the strike. There were demonstrations by working women who personally took their demands to the Civil Government. For the first time, the dyeing and finishing workers – the ones from the *ram de l'aigua* – backed the strike of the women who worked as spinners

and weavers. At the rallies, well-known working women spoke alongside the male leaders, including Rosalia and Encarnació Dulcet, Marta Sans, Francesca Rivera, Maria Costa, Conxa Bosch and Mercè Rovelló. The women showed proof of their combativeness and tenacity. By the end of the strike, La Constància had 18,000 members, both male and female. Maria Prats was the leader who convinced the women strikers to return to work when the government declared that the working week would be set at 60 hours, with Saturday afternoon free and the gradual elimination of night shifts for women, beginning immediately with married women and widows with children and then continuing with other women until 1920, by which time they were to be totally eliminated. The reduction in the workweek was offset by a higher pace of work and the elimination of half the holidays during the week.

The ambiguities of the declaration, its lack of implementation in the counties of Ter and Alt Llobregat and the new circumstances triggered by World War I, which brought about inflation that lowered the real salaries but offered sound prospects for the export and consumption of cotton textiles, led to a second general strike in July and August 1916. The strikers demanded a 50% salary increase and a nine-hour workday. The rollers and dyers were less supportive than in 1913. Once again women participated in the strikes on the streets. A total of 17,225 workers from the sectors involved participated in the strike – 3,446 men and 13,759 women – out of the total of



FIGURE 2. Woman working at the spinning mill in around 1913. Museu de la Ciència i de la Tècnica de Catalunya of Terrassa.

23,780 workers in Barcelona's cotton industry. However, the strike, which dovetailed with the railway strike, ended in defeat and La Constància was disbanded.

The mobilisation of working women had lasted only briefly, but the same tended to happen with their male counterparts. Counter to gender unity, the complaint that women were operating double-width looms that should have been reserved for men persisted. Women's participation on the union boards seems to have been somewhat exceptional, but there is proof, for example, that during that same period that the president of the cotton union in Sabadell was the aforementioned Encarnació Dulcet, the vice secretary was Agustina Vila and the treasurer Paulina Altamira, while the other officers were men.

The strike left a conflict among the foremen unresolved, namely that they wanted the workweeks corresponding to the time that the workers' strike had lasted to be paid. The trade organisation El Radium, which included this working-class "aristocracy", had not taken sides with the workers but had rejected the consequences of this posture. A majority of manufacturers accepted this demand, but some of the leading cotton companies in Barcelona not only did not accept them but also fired the unionised foremen, given that they were considered the owners' confidence men and did not want to be associated with them. In the autumn of 1917, there were attacks against supervisors and owners and against the new workers who had replaced the fired workers. This marked the onset of a period of violent social conflicts which would last until 1923, the age of *pistolerisme* (the use of thugs to intimidate active unionists), and in our case it occurred among a circle, the foremen of El Radium, which was initially quite far removed from anarcho-syndicalism.¹⁹

In January of 1918, a movement broke out against the rising price of sustenance. The unions had not managed to fully rally after the repression of the CNT and UGT's general strike against the monarchic regime in August 1917, a political strike that had been harshly repressed by the army. Under those circumstances, inflation and the shortage of basic foodstuffs and coal led to a mobilisation of working-class women in Barcelona, with demonstrations to the Civil Government claiming that the set prices be respected. There were attacks on grocery stores, coal sellers and market stalls. On the whole it was reminiscent of the old subsistence mutinies from the preindustrial period, in which women had also played a prominent role. A state of war was declared and the markets were protected by the Civil Guard.

By the time the CRT congress was held in Catalonia in June 1918 – called the Congrès de Sants – La Constància had pulled itself together again; it had 11,000 members, both male and female, and it joined the Single Union for fabric and textiles within the new structure in which the trade unions were absorbed by the Single Unions by category, encompassing the entire industry. The male textile trade unions resisted this merger, while the women were

left outside the leadership despite the principle that the CNT had declared in 1918 that the mixed unions or unions with a female majority had to be made up of both men and women in order to ensure women's identification with the union struggle, which would become quite harsh over the next five years. However, gender unity was not achieved with the Single Union. Factors contributing to this were the alternating phases of government tolerance and repression of the CNT, which was tangled up with the *pistolerisme* and terrorist violence of the years preceding the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, which lasted from September 1923 until January 1930 and illegalised the core run by the anarcho-syndicalists.

In the glass industry, women accounted for 10% of the workforce, but there were female trades, such as electric light bulb manufacturing, glass decorating and the pitcher decoration sector. Through their exclusion from the learning process, women remained shut out of the best paid and most highly qualified trades, namely glass-blowing and oven-stoking. And even though the working women showed their combativeness in the labour conflicts of 1919-1920, they were not included in the union leadership and their demands were postponed, such that their inclusion in the union was fleeting.²⁰

HOUSEHOLD MANUFACTURING AND FEMALE LABOUR

In the fields of spinning and weaving, industrialisation put an end to household manufacturing. Yet in contrast, garment-making at home rose starting in the late 19th century. The widespread expansion of this sector was driven by increasing job specialisation and women working outside the home, with the concomitant reduction in the amount of garments sewn at home for family consumption. Other factors contributing to this development were the spread of sewing machines and the use of patterns and models that allowed semi-skilled labour to be used. The garments were largely sewn via home manufacturing, without the investments and facilities entailed in large workshops. As this was a job that was still primarily manual, many of the business owners preferred to use disperse, piecework labour performed by women who worked in their homes on assignment by an intermediary operating between the worker and retailer with a clothing shop open to the public.

The exploitation to which these female workers were subjected meant that in the English-speaking countries this was called the sweatshop system. In Spain, the social legislation explicitly left these household workers outside its coverage, and therefore capitalism could take full advantage of the commercial concentration inherent in a large industry without any of its burdens and responsibilities. There was neither rent, nor electricity, nor amortisation of the sewing machines, nor limitations on the workday, nor problems during times when the demand

was low or unemployment rampant, nor claims for better salaries for isolated, secluded and defenceless female workers. In the home workshop, child labour survived just as it was being pursued and was gradually disappearing from the factories.²¹ Each clothing shop required an average of six workers.

Despite the difficulties in quantifying this phenomenon, we can calculate that in 1917 there were around 8,000 home-based workers in Barcelona out of a total of around 10,000 women earning a living by sewing garments. The majority of these seamstresses who worked at home earned the equivalent of 60% of the salary of a factory worker, and just a handful earned 75%. To offset the periods with no work, they were required to put in exhausting days of thirteen to fifteen hours in the peak seasons. Their daily fee for piecework in an eleven-hour workday in 1914 was one peseta and ten cents, at a time when the daily cost of living for a working-class family was 5.75 pesetas. This home-based work via a contractor was often the only income in the household when the women had no husband, when the husband was unemployed or ill or when the woman was the family breadwinner.

Wherever home-based work predominated, unions were weak, even among employees of workshops of a certain size. Thus, in 1908, of the 1,200 male and female tailors in Barcelona, only 200 were members of the corresponding union, and between 1903 and 1914 there was only one tailor strike, in 1908. They managed to secure a nine-hour work week, but the majority of workshops continued operating ten hours per day because of the competition from outside Barcelona and from the home-based workers in the same city. Nor was there a union worth note in the leather goods sector, especially gloves, most of which were produced by home-based workers.

The objective testimonies from the period note the proliferation of tuberculosis in the unhygienic households of home-based workers. In Barcelona, of the 2,500 cases of working-class women with tuberculosis, 1,600 were seamstresses. The treadle sewing machine was particularly harmful for pregnant women. The *Lliga de Compradores* (League of Women Purchasers), which published whitelists of the retailers that treated their female suppliers the best, warned that when purchasing clothing at extremely low prices the tuberculosis germ could also be brought home.

Conservative moralists had considered home-based workshops, which seemed to be compatible with housework and care of the children and husband, highly recommendable for women, while they condemned female factory work, as some considered factories “schools of rebellion and immorality” for women. However, in view of the real conditions, even the most conservative among them soon ended up admitting that it was much preferable for women to work in factories.

In surveys from that period, home-based workers complained about competition from the women from the

least stable and lowest echelons of the middle class, who secretly sewed at home for a contractor. They did not understand that some of these lower-middle class women needed this clandestine income and that others, by working to pay for the clothing they needed to find a husband and escape the threat of poverty, did so because they had no other prospects than marriage, given their lack of career training. Female workers also complained about competition from convents, asylums, hospices, reformatories and correctional centres, where the interns worked in exchange for food without having to pay for rent or the other expenses that the free workers had at home. Women’s large-scale participation in the burning of the convents in the Tragic Week of July 1909 may have been partly motivated by working-class women’s hostility towards this competition.

Faced with almost insurmountable difficulties in associating with each other and defending themselves, and isolated in their homes, these workers remained on the sidelines of unionism, both radical and moderate. Instead, only the Catholic social reformism promoted by women from the wealthier classes was concerned with the plight of the home-based workers.

There is no doubt about the failure of the union circles in Catalonia caused by the management control to which they were subjected, as well as the Catholic unionism that was theoretically in the hands of the workers themselves but actually under Church stewardship given its denominational nature. At that time, a minority of bourgeois intellectuals, who believed it necessary to nurture the spirit of the defence of the oppressed within Catholicism, focused its attention on creating institutions to improve the plight of the home-based workers. In 1910, the *Sindicat de l’Agulla* (Needle Union) was created in Barcelona, inspired by similar unions in Bordeaux and Paris. The female president of the board that sought to promote this union was the Catalan novelist and poet Dolors Monserdà de Macià, who identified with the Catalanist movement. The impact of the Tragic Week the year before was not foreign to this initiative.

Dolors Monserdà published several leaflets, articles and speeches on this topic. However, the most effective means she used was most certainly the publication of a novel in which she described the situation of the home-based worker: *Maria Glòria*, published in 1917.²² According to Dolors Monserdà, the board was just a temporary crutch until the female workers could take over the *Sindicat de l’Agulla* themselves. The board began operating with 1,500 pesetas in capital instead of the 15,000 which it had deemed necessary. It employed the female workers during the annual three-month layoff period; it paid their work between 30 and 50 percent over the current rates; and it supplied thread at more competitive rates. In 1912, it employed 287 female workers, which rose to 410 by 1916; this latter year it spent 8,000 pesetas on labour and 5,150 pesetas on materials. It also had a job placement service. However, the growth of the *Sindicat de l’Agulla*

was nonexistent, given that by 1934 it only had 310 members. The *Lliga de Compradores* was also created to raise the public's awareness so that they would not collaborate in the exploitation of female home-based workers, and it published lists of the retailers that offered these workers the best conditions.

In 1912, Maria Domènech de Cañellas created the *Federació Sindical d'Obreres* (Union Federation of Female Workers) with 159 members, which had risen to 1,539 by the year 1917, all of them from Barcelona. The members included 240 shop clerks, 300 seamstresses, 125 female tailors, 159 linen sewers and 600 workshop employees.²³ Therefore, the sewing workers accounted for a total of 584 members, a small proportion of all the workers in the sector. By 1928, 17 years after it was founded, the *Federació Sindical d'Obreres* had 1,929 members. That same year, the members elected their delegates to the joint committees, which had been established a few years earlier to mediate in labour conflicts. Despite the fact that the presidents of the union sections were working-class women, the existence of a board gave the *Federació Sindical d'Obreres* the aura of a charitable institution governed by altruistic members of the bourgeoisie.

Alongside the *Sindicat de l'Agulla* and the *Federació Sindical d'Obreres*, an educational effort arose independently which shared the same Catholic and Catalanist social reform mission: the *Institut de Cultura i Biblioteca Popular per a la Dona* (Institute of Culture and Popular

Library for Women). It was created and led by Francesca Bonnemaïson, a widow of one of the men who had founded the *Lliga Regionalista de Catalunya* back in 1901, Narcís Verdager i Callís, who had employed the lawyer Francesc Cambó, the future leader of the party, as a clerk in his office when Cambó was still a young man.²⁴ This institution was a resounding success. In view of the evidence that the exploitation of women at work was a problem largely stemming from the lack of education and professional training, "La Cultura", as the girls of Barcelona called it, provided free classes in languages, trade, stenography and typing, along with the traditional classes in sewing and household work. At the same time, it provided general education with a Catholic bent. In 1909, it had 320 members, and by 1916 this number had risen to 3,190. In 1910, 300 young women were enrolled in its courses, but by 1916 this figure had risen to 2,173. Six years later, when it moved to its new site in Barcelona on Carrer de Sant Pere Més Baix, it had 5,334 members. Of the average of 2,200 girls from the ages of twelve to fifteen who took their courses every year between the years 1911 and 1935, an average of 817 per year found work through the institution. The institute's prestige explains the efficacy of its job placement service.

The *Institut de Cultura i Biblioteca Popular per a la Dona* not only attracted working-class and artisan girls, it also held appeal for the middle class. It thus managed to evade the appearance of being a charitable organisation.



FIGURE 3. Staff at the Domingo Mata (1910-1915) wax factory. Brangulí Collection - Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya.

It was superior to most of the parochial schools for girls in terms of its modernity and efficacy, as they rarely offered baccalaureate courses either.

The problem of the home-based workers concerned political authorities as they sought to compare their situation with those of female factory workers. The Museu Social of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya organised the First Congress on Home-based Work in Barcelona on the 17th and 18th of May 1917. In Madrid, in 1918 the Instituto de Reformas Sociales published a draft law on home-based work with all the information that had been gathered.

Both Dolors Monserdà and Francesca Bonnemaïson found it very difficult to combine a woman's responsibilities as a wife and especially as a mother with the exercise of a profession, and they believed that girls had to be trained to earn a decent living in case they remained single, claiming that this was as worthy a status as being a bachelor was for men. They rejected the belief that there were only two honourable fates for women: wife or nun. Despite being somewhat conservative in nature, Catholic and Catalanist social reformism did entail a step forward.

The old school of Christian charity had been – and still was – occupied with improving the fate of individual cases. Catholic reformism sought to defend a specific group within the working class, the most defenceless group, and for this reason it did not prompt the fear that was triggered by working-class women in factories, especially in view of the unionist surge from 1916 to 1923 over the backdrop of the Bolshevik Revolution. However, by failing to present a global plan or managing to alter the hierarchical relationship between the classes – protective ladies and protected workers – it was too similar to the earlier charities that it aimed to replace. At least it did manage to get home-based workers to be considered equal in the labour laws passed on the 26th of July 1926 and the regulation enacted on the 12th of October 1927, even though the effectiveness of these laws was quite dubious.

THE FRAILTY OF FEMINISM, THE NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN THE TERTIARY SECTOR AND THE REPUBLICAN POLITICAL CHANGE

Dolors Monserdà used to say that feminism was a necessity for working-class women and a humanitarian act for wealthy women. She did not encourage middle-class women to ask for the vote or legal equality; rather she sought to protect women in the lower social echelons. It was a curious sort of feminism which was more widely accepted than the minority feminism that flourished in Barcelona in the early 20th century as part of the free-thinking movement, which encompassed masons, republicans, anarchists and spiritualists. This latter was a more radical vein of feminism, but it began to wane in 1912. Both kinds

of feminism, leftist and conservative, shared a lack of interest in women's suffrage and participation in politics, while they both attached importance to education and vocational training as a means for women to achieve autonomy.

With the advent of the Republic, women were given the right to vote in 1931 based on the principle of equal rights, not the existence of a suffragist movement. Only in Catalonia was civil equality between the sexes established at that time. Women used the right to divorce, another Republican reform, rarely. Many of the women who filed for divorce – 30% of them – had been separated by mutual agreement for more than three years, while 38% of them had been abandoned by their husbands.

One sphere where there was little progress in the brief five-year period of the Republic was in equal salaries for men and women. The working conditions that the textile workers submitted to management on the 30th of December 1931 demanded that the vacancies of weavers gradually be filled with men and that the companies where women operated large looms and men small looms have the sexes exchange roles because they believed that men should operate the large looms, given that higher production meant a higher salary. In late 1934, the workers' delegates opposed installing continuous yarn spinning machines with 400 teeth because the company wanted women to operate them and these machines were reserved for men, according to a union agreement.

On the 26th of May 1931, the Minister of Labour, the socialist Francisco Largo Caballero, established an insurance policy to pay a subsidy for maternity and thus to implement the 1900 law. Home-based and temporary workers were included, and only domestic service was excluded. However, in Catalonia the female workers protested paying their share, which was to be subtracted from their salary. They believed that the employer should pay the entire fee, not just part of it. There was a variety of reasons behind this opposition: the already low level of female wages, the fact that there were already employer insurance policies which had been paying a subsidy during maternity leave since 1919-1920, and finally opposition to state interventionism in this issue by the anarcho-syndicalists who controlled the CNT, which was in the majority in Catalonia and was against the policies of the socialists in the central-left coalition government.²⁵

Unlike in other countries, where compulsory social insurance for illness already existed, its nonexistence in Spain in the 1930s made this decree difficult to implement. The only base of support was the workers' retirement insurance implemented in 1919. In February 1932, according to the director of the Caixa de Pensions per a la Vellesa i d'Estalvis de Catalunya, a total of 201,046 female workers were enrolled in the retirement insurance by their employers, while 97,622 women paid for their own maternity insurance. A total of 1,445 births were aided and defrayed by the insurance fund. In 1936, before the outbreak of the Civil War, 237,030 female work-



FIGURE 4. Operators at a telephone exchange (in around 1914).

ers out of the total of 470,000 calculated to exist in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands were enrolled in the maternity insurance.

Female illiteracy was considerably higher than male illiteracy. Even in the early 1930s, there were two female illiterates for every male in the city of Barcelona. Over the course of the first third of the 20th century, the overall illiteracy rates dropped, but the difference between the male and female rates did not. Unequal opportunities started at primary school. Since girls had to prepare themselves for marriage and housekeeping, and working-class girls had to help their mothers, families paid much less attention and placed fewer demands on their daughters' education than on their sons. Even as late as 1932, girls accounted for 46% of primary schoolchildren in the province of Barcelona compared with 54% boys. This unquestionably showed progress compared to the situation in 1860, when girls only accounted for 38% of the primary school students, yet the gap was still significant. On the other extreme, in higher education, a decree was required in on the 4th of September 1910 to ensure women's right to study at the university, and during that same period they were able to begin studying for their baccalaureate at a public school in Barcelona, at a time when private education, beginning with parochial schools, did not offer baccalaureate programmes even to the girls from the wealthier classes. In all five faculties at the Universitat de Barcelona, women accounted for only 6.2% of the official enrolment in academic year 1916-1917, and this had risen slightly to just short of 9% by academic year 1934-1935.²⁶

However, in the 1930s the range of new opportunities for women continued to expand in offices and in the third sector in general, continuing a process that had begun in

the 1920s. In certain sectors, female professions had even been created, as Mancomunitat de Catalunya did with the Escola de Bibliotecàries (School of [Female] Librarians) in 1915 and with the Escola de Infermeres (Nursing School) in 1917.²⁷

At the same time, certain professions were being feminised, as the Compañía Telefónica Nacional de España did when it secured the monopoly on telephone service; it replaced the male staff of the companies that had been absorbed with female staff working as operators and the sales force. The feminisation of this company took place at the same time as the work intensified and the staff was cut due to partial automation. However, the downside of this new development with female operators, which was framed as a cutting-edge scheme to promote women, was that they were compelled to leave when they married, a rule that was overturned by the Republic. Before that there had been a harsh telephone strike in the summer of 1931 promoted by the anarcho-syndicalists and lost by the strikers.²⁸

In 1924, girls accounted for 18.3% of the students at the Escola de Comerç de Barcelona (Trade School of Barcelona), and they made up 78% of the student body in teacher training programmes. Typists, telephone operators, nurses and librarians were the new female professionals in the service sector, just as market vendors and midwives had been in the past. We cannot yet speak about the tertiarisation of the active population in the first third of the 20th century given that the service sector only accounted for 22% of the economy of Catalonia in 1930. However, in the tertiary sector in the province of Barcelona, the proportional growth of women was much higher than men. At the same time, the proportion of married women and widows within the total number of working

women rose, and this meant that the percentage of those who did not stop working after marriage was also on the rise. Before the Civil War, the success of the first famous female journalists – Aurora Bertrana, Rosa Maria Arquimbau, Irene Polo – revealed a modern model of woman, although the vast majority of women remained quite distant from this model.

The revolution that followed Catalonia's failed military uprising against the Republic on the 19th of July 1936 led to changes in the public presence of women. However, the image of the female militia member, so visible at the beginning of the war, was more a propaganda icon than a signal of a change in women's status. Women were withdrawn from the Aragón front early by the anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti. They were sent to the second line and incorporated into the rearguard services, which were more similar to their traditional roles, as illustrated in the posters from 1937. The collectivisation of companies did not seem to make strides in advancing equal pay between the sexes, an inequality that labour segmentation had consolidated. The agricultural collectives promoted by the anarchists in the eastern part of Aragon maintained higher salaries for men.

The fact that the Catalan anarchist Frederica Montseny occupied the post of Minister of Health and Social Services in the government of the Republic between November 1936 and May 1937 – the first female minister in Europe – and that she was the author of the provision that allowed for abortion for the first time in the Western world, has been upheld as a sign of the changes in women's position. However, Frederica Montseny herself did not share the feminism of the anarchist women's organisation Mujeres Libres founded in April 1936. This organisation managed to recruit 20,000 members, 30% of them in Catalonia, and it struggled for labour, political and cultural equality.²⁹

With the victory of the enemies of the Republic in 1939, the social and political condition of women retreated back to a point that it had overcome years earlier. After the Civil War, in an era of autarchy and shortages, the industrial colonies, where so many women worked, experienced a favourable period, but their inexorable decline began in the 1960s, and they all ceased operating as industrial companies.³⁰

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