

“Separate and equal”?

Mujeres Libres and anarchist strategy for women’s emancipation

Martha A. Ackelsberg

1985

Anarchist insistence that revolutionary movements can develop effectively only if they speak to the specific realities of people’s lives leads logically to the conclusion that a truly revolutionary movement must accommodate itself to diversity. It must reflect an understanding of the life experiences of those who participate in it as a first step to engaging them in the revolutionary process. The need is particularly acute, and the strategic issues especially complex, in the case of women, whose daily life experiences in many societies have been, and continue to be, different from those of men.

In the early years of this century, Spanish anarchists – male and female – articulated a vision of a non-hierarchical, communitarian, society in which women and men would participate equally. And yet, in pre-Civil War Spain, most women were far from “ready” to participate equally with men in the struggle to realize that vision. Although the organised anarcho-syndicalist movement (the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo [CNT]) oriented itself primarily to workplace struggles, the majority of Spanish women were not engaged in factory work. Many of those who did engage in paid labour – mostly in the textile industry – worked at home, for piece rate wages, and were not unionised. Women who worked and had families continued to do “double duty” as housewives and mothers. The particular forms women’s oppression took in Spain kept women effectively subordinated to men even within the context of the revolutionary anarchist movement.

If women were to participate actively in social revolutionary struggle, they required special “preparation,” special attention to the realities of their subordination and to their particular life experiences. In May 1936, a group of anarchist women founded Mujeres Libres, the first autonomous, proletarian feminist organisation in Spain, specifically to achieve these ends. Its goal was to end the “triple enslavement of women, to ignorance, to capital, and to men.” While some of the founders were professional or semi-professional women, the vast majority of its members (who numbered approximately 20,000 in July 1937) were working-class women. The women of Mujeres Libres aimed both to overcome the barriers of ignorance and inexperience which prevented women from participating as equals in the struggle for a better society, and to confront the dominance of men within the anarchist movement itself.

Most mainstream anarchists’ opposed separate struggle and separate organisation for women on the grounds of a commitment to direct action and equality. Mujeres Libres advocated separate

struggle on the basis of a different interpretation of this same commitment. The difficulties they encountered within the anarchist movement highlight both the problematic role of women in revolutionary movements and the complexity of taking women's experiences fully into account in the process of envisioning and creating a new society.

Anarchists commit themselves to equality. Equality means that the experiences of one group cannot be taken as normative for all, and that, in a fully egalitarian society there can be no institutions through which some individuals exercise social, economic, or political power over others. Such a society achieves co-ordination through what one recent writer has termed "spontaneous order": people come together voluntarily to meet mutually defined needs, and co-ordinate large-scale activities through federation.¹

This anti-hierarchical perspective has important consequences for revolutionary strategy. Anarchists argue that revolutionary activity and organisation must begin with the concrete realities of people's lives, and that the process itself must be a transformative one. A commitment to equality in this context implies that the experiences of diverse groups are equally valid starting points for revolutionary activity and organisation.

In addition, anarchists insist that means are inseparable from ends. People can establish, and learn to live in, a non-hierarchical society only by engaging in non-hierarchical, egalitarian forms of revolutionary activity. In opposing claims that hierarchy is essential for order, especially in a revolutionary situation, anarchists argue that co-ordination can be achieved either through "propaganda by the deed," exemplary action which brings adherents by the power of the positive example it sets,² or by "spontaneous organisation," which implies that both the form and the goals of an organisation are set by the people whose needs it expresses.³

Finally, anarchists have recognized that people whose life circumstances deny them control and keep them in positions of subordination cannot easily transform themselves into self-confident, self-directed people. Extensive "preparation" for such participation is an essential part of the process of personal transformation which, in turn, is an aspect of the social revolutionary project. But such preparation, if it is not to take a hierarchical form, can take place only through the individual's experience of new and different forms of social organisation. The Spanish anarchist movement attempted to provide the opportunity for just such experiences. Through direct participation in activities and strikes, and through knowledge gained in informal educational settings, people would "prepare" themselves for further revolutionary transformations. To be effective, however, such preparation has to respond to the different life experiences of the people whose needs it attempts to address.

In Civil War Spain, women constituted a special group, with their own particular needs. Their subordination – both economic and cultural – was much more severe than that of men. Rates of illiteracy were higher among women than among men. Those women who did work for wages were relegated to the lowest-paying jobs in the most oppressive work conditions. Women and

¹ See Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), chaps. 2 and 4; also Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, Introduction by Noam Chomsky, translated by Mary Klopfer (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); and Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1913).

² For a powerful contemporary example of the impact of such activity, see Wini Breines' discussion of changing consciousness in the civil rights movement in the United States, "Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left, by Sara Evans: A Review Essay," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 496–506.

³ A slightly different version of the following summary and analysis was originally developed in Kathryn Pyne Parsons and Martha A. Ackelsberg, "Anarchism and Feminism," MS, 1978, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

men lived their lives in very different ways. As one woman reported, “I remember very vividly what things were like when I was a child: men were ashamed to be seen on the streets with women!... Men and women lived almost completely separate lives. Each kept to a society almost exclusively of their own sex.”⁴

Nevertheless, although those differences should have provided striking evidence of the need for a revolutionary organisation to address the specific subordination of women, the mainstream of the anarchist movement refused to acknowledge either the specificity of women’s oppression or the legitimacy of separate struggle to overcome it. Only *Mujeres Libres* actively articulated a perspective which recognized, and addressed, the particularity of women’s experience.

While committed to the creation of an egalitarian society, Spanish anarchists exhibited a complex attitude toward the subordination of women. Some argued that women’s subordination stemmed from the division of labour by sex, from women’s “domestication” and consequent exclusion from the paid labour force.⁵ To overcome it, women would have to join the labour force as workers, along with men, and struggle in unions to improve the position of all workers. Others insisted that women’s subordination was the result of broad cultural phenomena, and reflected a devaluation of women and their activities mediated through institutions such as family and church. That devaluation would end, along with those institutions, with the establishment of anarchist society.

But the subordination of women was at best a peripheral concern of the anarchist movement as a whole. Most anarchists refused to recognize the specificity of women’s subordination, and few men were willing to give up the power over women they had enjoyed for so long. As the national secretary of the CNT wrote in 1935, in response to a series of articles on the women’s issue: “We know it is more pleasant to give orders than to obey.... Between the woman and the man the same thing occurs. The male feels more satisfied having a servant to make his food, wash his clothes.... That is reality. And, in the face of that, to ask that men cede [their privileges] is to dream.”⁶

Some, probably reflective of the majority within the movement, denied that women were oppressed in ways that required particular attention. Federico Montseny, for example, the anarchist intellectual who later served as minister of health in the Republican government during the war, acknowledged that “the emancipation of women” was “a critical problem of the present time.” She insisted that the appropriate goal was not the accession of women to positions currently held by men, but the restructuring of society which would liberate all. “Feminism? Never! Humanism always!”⁷ To the extent that she recognized a specific oppression of women, she understood it essentially in individualist terms, and argued that any specific problems that existed between

⁴ Matilde, interview with author, Barcelona, 16 Feb. 1979.

⁵ See, for example, the statement of the Zaragoza Congress of the Spanish movement of 1870, cited in Anselmo Lorenzo, *El proletariado militante*, 2 vols. (Toulouse: Editorial del Movimiento Libertario Español, CNT en Francia, 1947), 2: 17–18.

⁶ Mariano R. Vazquez, “Avance: Por la elevación de la mujer,” *Solidaridad Obrera*, 10 Oct. 1935, 4; see also Jose Alvarez Junco, *La ideología política del anarquismo español, 1868–1910* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1976), 302 n. 73; and Kahos, “Mujeres, Emancipaos!” *Acracia* 2 (26 Nov. 1937): 4.

⁷ Federica Montseny, “Feminismo y humanismo,” *La revista blanca* 2 (1 Oct. 1924): 18–21; see also “Las mujeres y las elecciones inglesas,” *ibid.* 2 (15 Feb. 1924): 10–12.

women and men were rooted as much in women's "backwardness" as in men's resistance to change, and could not be resolved in or through organisational struggle."⁸

A small minority within the movement as a whole recognized that women faced sex-specific forms of subordination requiring particular attention. But many of these people insisted that the struggle to overcome that subordination, whether in society at large or within the anarchist movement, must not take place in separate organisations. As one activist stated: "We are engaged in the work of creating a new society, and that work must be done in unison. We should be engaged in union struggles, along with men, fighting for our places, demanding to be taken seriously."⁹ They found support for their position in the anarchist perspective on social change, particularly the emphasis on the unity of means and ends.

Those who opposed autonomous women's organisations argued that anarchism is incompatible not just with hierarchical forms of organisation, but with any independent organisation that might undermine the unity of the movement. In this case, because the aim of the anarchist movement was the creation of an egalitarian society in which women and men would interact as equals, struggle to achieve it should engage women and men together, as equal partners. These anarchists feared that an organisation devoted specifically to ending the subordination of women would emphasize differences between women and men rather than their similarities, and would make it more difficult to achieve an egalitarian revolutionary end. The strategy of basing organisation on lived experience did not extend so far as to justify an independent organisation oriented to the needs of women.

In short, although some groups within the organised anarchist movement recognized the specific oppression of women and the sexism of men within the movement, mainstream anarchist organisations devoted little attention to issues of concern to women, and denied the legitimacy of separate organisations to address those issues. Those women who insisted on the specificity of women's oppression and on the need for separate struggle to overcome it, created an organisation of their own: *Mujeres Libres*.

The immediate antecedents of *Mujeres Libres* can be traced at least back to 1934, when small groups of anarchist women in both Madrid and Barcelona (although independently of each other) became concerned about the relatively small numbers of women who were actively involved in the CNT. They noticed, as one recounted, that:

Quote:

...women would come to a meeting once – maybe they'd even join – or come, for example, on a Sunday excursion, or to a discussion group – they'd come once and never be seen again.... Even in industries where there were many women workers – textiles, for example – there were few women who ever spoke at union meetings. We got concerned about all the women we were losing, so we thought about creating a women's group to deal with these issues.... In 1935, we sent out a call to all women in the libertarian movement... though we focused mainly on the younger compañeras. We called our group "Grupo cultural femenino, CNT."¹⁰

⁸ Carmen Alcalde, *La mujer en la Guerra civil española* (Madrid: Editorial Cambio 16, n.d.), 176. See also Federica Montseny, "La mujer: problema del hombre," in *La revista blanca*, 2, núm 89, February 1927; and Mary Nash, "Dos intelectuales anarquistas frente al problema de la mujer: Federica Montseny y Lucía Sanchez Saornil," *Convivium* (Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona, 1975), 74–86.

⁹ Igualdad Ocaña, interview with author, Hospitalet (Barcelona), 14 Feb. 1979.

¹⁰ Soledad Estorach, interview with author, Paris, 4 Jan. 1982.

Initially, then, this group for women existed more-or-less within, or at least under the auspices of, the CNT. Its purpose was to develop more women as activists within the anarchist movement.

But within a short time, women in both Barcelona and Madrid (who, by late 1935, had been put in touch with one another) determined that developing women activists was a complex process, and that they needed autonomy if they were to reach the women they wanted to reach, in the way they wanted to reach them. In May of 1936 they established *Mujeres Libres*.

The founders of *Mujeres Libres* argued that women had to organise independently of men, both to overcome their own subordination and to struggle against male resistance to women's emancipation. The founders based their program in the same commitments to direct action and preparation that informed the broader Spanish anarchist movement, and insisted that women's preparation to engage in revolutionary activity must develop out of their own particular life experiences. The process required both that women overcome their specific subordination as women, and that they develop the knowledge and self-confidence necessary to participate in revolutionary struggle and to challenge the male domination of those organisations that failed to take them and their experiences seriously.

Emma Goldman had argued earlier that "true emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in the courts. It begins in woman's soul... Her development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself."¹¹ Commentators on other movements for women's emancipation have made similar claims. Sheila Rowbotham, for example, has pointed out the ways in which socialist and communist movements have repeatedly subordinated women's claims.¹² Ellen DuBois counts the formation of an independent women's suffrage movement as a sign of the "coming of age" of feminism in the United States, marking the point at which women took the issue of their own subordination seriously enough to struggle for their rights.¹³ The women of *Mujeres Libres* acted on a similar sense of changed consciousness. In the words of one member, "The national secretary of the CNT supported us. He once offered us all the money and support we needed – if we would agree to function as part of the CNT. But we rejected that. We wanted women to find their own freedom."¹⁴

The women's concern for independence was so great that it affected even the choice of name for the organisation. Despite the fact that most of its founders had come to political awareness through the anarcho-syndicalist movement and considered themselves "libertarians," they did not take the name *Mujeres Libertarias* (libertarian women). Instead, they chose *Mujeres Libres* (free women), to make clear that they were free of all institutional and organisation involvements, even of an involvement with the CNT.

Both the form and the program of the organisation reflected their analysis of women's subordination and of what would be necessary to overcome it. First, *Mujeres Libres* focused greatest

¹¹ Emma Goldman, "Woman Suffrage" (224) and "The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation" (211), both in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Press, 1969).

¹² Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance, and Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), and *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, England: Pelican Books, 1973).

¹³ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 78–81, 164, 190–92, 201.

¹⁴ Suceso Portales, interview with author, Móstoles (Madrid), 29 June 1979. A similar story was reported with slight variations, by Mercedes Comaposada, Soledad Estorach, and others in interviews in Paris, January 1982. The analysis to follow relies heavily on interviews and conversations I have had with Spanish anarchist women who were engaged in these debates and activities at the time of the Civil War. The interviews were conducted in Spain and France during the spring of 1979, summer 1981, and winter of 1981–82.

attention on the problems that were of particular concern to women: illiteracy, economic dependence and exploitation, and ignorance about health care, childcare, and sexuality. Second, they insisted that engagement in struggle requires a changed sense of self. Women could develop and retain such a changed consciousness only if they acted independently of men, in an organisation designed to protect new self-definitions. *Mujeres Libres* attempted to be the context for the development of such changed consciousness. Finally, they believed that a separate and independent organisation was essential to challenge the sexism and the masculinist hierarchy of the CNT and of the anarchist movement as a whole. As an organisation, *Mujeres Libres* took on that challenge.

Attention to Women's Lives

The organisation recognized three different sources of women's subordination: ignorance (illiteracy), economic exploitation, and subordination to men within the family. Although official statements did not set priorities among these factors, most activities of the organisation focused on ignorance and economic exploitation. In a revealing summary of her articles on the "woman question" in *Solidaridad Obrera* in 1935, Lucía Sanchez Saornil, a founder of *Mujeres Libres*, explained: "Most definitely, I believe that the only solution to women's sexual problems is to be found in the solution to the economic problem. In the revolution. Nothing more. Anything else would only continue the same enslavement under a new name."¹⁵

Programmatically, the organisation focused most of its attention on "ignorance," which they believed contributed to women's subordination in every sphere of life. *Mujeres Libres* mounted a massive literacy drive to provide the foundation necessary for an "enculturation" of women. Literacy would enable women better to understand their society and their place in it, and to struggle to improve it.¹⁶ They organised three levels of classes: for the illiterate, for those who could read a little, and for those who read well, but wanted "to immerse themselves in more complex issues." They did not equate illiteracy with lack of understanding of social reality; rather, they insisted that embarrassment about their "cultural backwardness" prevented many women from active engagement in the struggle for revolutionary change. Literacy became a tool to develop their self-confidence as well as to facilitate their full participation in society and social change.

To address the roots of subordination in economic dependence, *Mujeres Libres* developed a comprehensive employment program with a heavy focus on education. The organisers insisted that women's dependence resulted from an extreme sexual division of labour that relegated them to the lowest-paying jobs, under the most oppressive conditions. *Mujeres Libres* welcomed the war-related movement of women out of the house and into the paid labour force as more than a temporary arrangement, and expressed the hope that woman's incorporation into the labour force would become permanent, and contribute to her economic independence.¹⁷

Mujeres Libres' employment program addressed the specific problems confronting working-class women and attempted to prepare them to take their places as equals in production. They worked closely with CNT unions, and co-sponsored and organised support, training, and apprenticeship programs for women entering the paid labour force. In rural areas, they sponsored agricultural training programs. In addition, they advocated, set up, and supported childcare facilities, both in neighbourhoods and in factories, to allow women the time away from their children necessary to work. And they fought for equalization of salaries between women and men.

¹⁵ Lucía Sanchez Saornil, "La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios, 5," *Solidaridad Obrera*, 30 Oct. 1935, 2.

¹⁶ "Mujeres Libres': La mujer ante el presente y futuro social," in *Sidero-metalurgia* (Revista del sindicato de la Industria Sidero-metalúrgica de Barcelona) 5 (November 1937): 9.

¹⁷ Mary Nash, ed., "*Mujeres Libres*" *España, 1936-39*, Serie los libertarios (Barcelona: Tusquets editor, 1976), 21.

Nevertheless, they directed little attention to the sexual division of labour itself. Nor did they explore the implications for sexual equality of the stereotyping of some work as women's and some as men's. Much recent feminist analysis has examined the relationship between monogamy, childbirth, childrearing, and differential labour force participation, and pointed out the implications of these relationships for the subordination of women.¹⁸ Neither *Mujeres Libres*, nor any other anarchist or feminist organisation in Spain at the time, however, questioned the assumption that primary responsibility for childrearing and domestic activities would remain with women.

In fact, *Mujeres Libres*' approach to the "cultural" subordination of women within male-dominated society was ambiguous. Some members argued that bourgeois morality treats women as property. Amparo Poch y Gascón, who became a founder of *Mujeres Libres*, criticized both monogamy and the assumption that marriages could be "contracted, in practice, for always." She insisted that neither marriage nor family should negate the possibility of "cultivating outside of it other... loves."¹⁹ The majority of women in *Mujeres Libres* probably disagreed with her rejection of marriage and monogamy. But the organisation did criticize extreme forms of male dominance in the family. Lucía Sanchez Saornil, for example, rejected society's definition of women solely as mothers and argued that that role definition contributed to women's continued subordination: "The concept of mother is absorbing that of woman, the function is annihilating the individual."²⁰

Members of the organisation found more ready agreement on other manifestations of women's "cultural" subordination. In their view, prostitution expressed most clearly the connections between economic and sexual subordination, contributing to the degradation both of the women who engaged in it, and of sexuality more generally. Ideally, sex ought not to be viewed as a commodity; both women and men should be able to experience their sexuality fully and freely. This analysis led them to one of their more innovative ideas: a plan (never actually implemented because of the constraints of the wartime situation) to set up liberatorios de prostitución, centres where former prostitutes could be supported while they "retrained" themselves for better lives. [Their hope that the social revolution would radically change the character of paid work – including factory labour – underlay the assumption that "productive" work was, in fact, less degrading than commercial sex.] The organisation also issued appeals to anarchist men not to patronize prostitutes, and pointed out that to do so was to continue patterns of exploitation they were, presumably, committed to overcome.²¹

¹⁸ See, among others, Verena Stolcke, "Women's Labours," in *Of Marriage and the Market*, ed. Kate Young, Carol Wolkowitz, and Roslyn McCullagh (London: CSE Books, 1981); Jean Gardiner, "Political Economy of Domestic Labour in Capitalist Society," in *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage*, ed. D.L. Barker and S. Allen (New York: Longman, 1976), 109–20; Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (67–88) and Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview" (17–42), in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974). For particular discussion of the impact of woman-only mothering, see Isaac Balbus, *Marxism and Domination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); and Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).

¹⁹ Amparo Poch y Gascón, "La autoridad en el amor y en la sociedad," *Solidaridad Obrera*, 27 Sept. 1935, 1; see also her *La vida sexual de la mujer*, Cuadernos de cultura: Fisiología e higiene, no. 4 (Valencia: 1932): 32.

²⁰ Lucía Sanchez Saornil, "La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios, 4," *Solidaridad Obrera*, 15 Oct. 1935, 2; for a contemporary parallel, see Rich.

²¹ For an example of an appeal, see Nash, "*Mujeres Libres*," 186–87.

Mujeres Libres also focused on health care. They trained nurses to work in hospitals and replace the nuns who had previously had a monopoly on nursing care. They mounted extensive educational and hygiene programs in maternity hospitals, especially in Barcelona, and attempted to overcome women's ignorance both about their own bodies and about the care and development of their children. More generally, they attempted to overcome women's ignorance about their sexuality, an ignorance which they perceived as yet another source of women's sexual subordination. Amparo Poch y Gascón, for example, pointed to ignorance about bodily functions and contraception as factors contributing to women's supposed difficulty in experiencing sexual pleasure. She coupled her plea for greater openness in this area with the claim that the sexual repression of women also served to maintain the dominance of males.²²

Educational programs to overcome cultural subordination extended to children as well as to adult women. Mujeres Libres sponsored childrearing courses for mothers to enable them better to prepare their children for life in a libertarian society. They developed new forms of education for children, designed to challenge bourgeois and patriarchal values and prepare children to develop a critical conscience of their own. Finally, they contributed to the development of a new core of teachers and new curricula as well as new, non-hierarchical structures for teaching and learning.

Although the general thrust of all these programs is clear, Mujeres Libres' programs reflected an ambivalence about women's role in society and in revolutionary struggle. Despite an insistence that women's subordination was a problem that could be addressed most effectively by women and deserved legitimacy and recognition within the anarchist movement as a whole, Mujeres Libres at times presented itself as a glorified support organisation.²³ There was an ambivalence, too, even in their challenge to traditional family roles. At least some of the appeals to women to go to work and to take advantage of the daycare facilities set up at the factories suggest that this "sacrifice" was to be only temporary.²⁴

Nevertheless, Mujeres Libres' propaganda was different from that of other women's organisations in Spain at the time. Most of these were, in fact, merely the "women's auxiliary" of various party organisations, encouraging women to assume traditional support roles, and appealing to them to take over factories until the time when their men could return.²⁵ By contrast, Mujeres Libres reminded readers, "In the midst of all the sacrifices, with the ultimate will and persistence, we are working to find ourselves, and to situate ourselves in an atmosphere which, until today, has been denied us: social action."²⁶ Mujeres Libres continued to argue that women's emancipa-

²² Poch y Gascón, *La vida sexual*, 10–26.

²³ See Alcalde, 122–40; and Nash, "Mujeres Libres," 76–78.

²⁴ Nash, "Mujeres Libres," 86, 96, 205–6.

²⁵ See Alcalde, 142–43; "Estatutos de la Agrupación Mujeres Antifascistas," Bernacalep, 26 May 1938 (document from Archivo de Servicios Documentales, Salamanca, Spain, Sección político-social de Madrid, Carpeta 159, Legajo 1520); and Mary Nash, "La mujer en las organizaciones de izquierda en España, 1931–1939" (Ph.D. diss., Universidad de Barcelona, 1977); chap. 9. Parallels with the experience of women in the United States, and elsewhere in Western Europe, during both the First and Second World Wars are, of course, evident. Similar experiences in the contemporary period have convinced many women of the necessity of separate organisations committed to women's emancipation, which will not subordinate the needs of women to those of the men with whom they are, presumably engaged in joint struggle. See, for example, Margaret Cerrullo, "Autonomy and the Limits of Organisation: A Socialist-Feminist Response to Harry Boyte," *Socialist Review* 9 (January-February 1979): 91–101; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); and Ellen Kay Trimmerger, "Women in the Old and New Left: The Evolution of a Politics of Personal Life," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 432–50.

²⁶ Cited in Alcalde, 154.

tion need not await the conclusion of the war, and that women could best help both themselves and the war effort by insisting on their equality and participating as fully as possible in the ongoing struggle.²⁷

In all, through attacks on illiteracy, economic dependence, and sexual-cultural exploitation, and even within the peculiar context of the war, *Mujeres Libres*' program addressed the particular sources of women's subordination in Spanish society. In their view, only direct challenge to these problems would permit women to overcome their subordination and to participate fully in a social revolutionary movement. And only an organisation of women, for women, had the interest, concern, and ability to mount such an attack.

Changing Women's Consciousness of Self

To overcome woman's subordination and make possible her full participation in revolutionary struggle required more than an attack on the sources of subordination. Women's self-consciousness had to be changed, so that they could begin to see themselves as independent, effective actors in the social arena.

Mujeres Libres's program reflected the belief that, because of women's long-standing subordination, most women were not prepared to take a fully equal role in the ongoing social revolution. Their "preparation" required that they participate in a libertarian but explicitly women's organisation that had, as its major function, the "capacitation" or empowerment of women.²⁸ Such participation would empower women in two senses: first, to overcome the basic deficits of information that prevented them from active involvement; and, second, to overcome the lack of self-confidence that accompanied their subordination. Once prepared in this second sense, women could address the independent problem of women's subordination both within society and within the anarchist movement, and could fight for the recognition of the legitimacy of these issues within the anarchist movement as a whole.

Initially, as one activist recounted, "we only wanted to make anarchists." But they soon realized that, if women were to become anarchist activists, they had to deal "with their own issues." They had to move "out of the house," and to take themselves seriously enough to engage in union activity. "Consciousness-raising" was, therefore, an essential aspect of the program of *Mujeres Libres*; and the organisers lost few opportunities to engage women in the process. They set up talks and discussion groups, through which they enabled women to become used to hearing the sound of their own voices in public, and encouraged them to overcome their reticence to speak and participate. But *preparación social* became an element of every project they undertook. Groups of women from *Mujeres Libres*, for example, visited factories, ostensibly to support unionization and to encourage women to become active – and, at the same time, gave "little lessons," whether about anarcho-syndicalism or about the need for women to become more active. In Barcelona, the "Grupo Cultural Femenino" set up *guarderías volantes*, (flying daycare centres): women went to others' homes to care for children so that the mothers could attend union meetings. And when the mothers returned home, they'd often be greeted with brief, informal conversations about *comunismo libertario*, anarcho-syndicalism, or the like.

²⁷ In this respect, *Mujeres Libres*' position seems exactly to parallel the position of the anarchist movement with respect to the social revolution and the war more generally: the anarchists differed from the Communist party, for example, in insisting that social revolutionary gains need not await the end of the Civil War.

²⁸ "Capacitation" is not, obviously, a normal English word. It does capture the sense of developing potential which is connoted by the Spanish *capacitación*. "Empowerment" is another possible translation.

Having a separate organisation allowed these women the freedom to develop independent programming that appealed to the specific needs of women, and to address, directly, the issue of their subordination. They insisted that women faced a “double struggle” when they attempted to engage in revolutionary activity, and that only a separate and independent organisation (though one which, at the same time, worked closely with other organs of the anarcho-sindicalist movement) could provide the context and support necessary to address the issue of self-confidence. In the words of one member:

Quote:

“Revolutionary men who are struggling for their freedom fight only against the outside world, against a world opposed to desires for freedom, equality and social justice. Revolutionary women, on the other hand, have to fight on two levels. First they must fight for their external freedom. In this struggle men are their allies in the same ideals in an identical cause. But women also have to fight for their inner freedom which men have enjoyed for centuries. And in this struggle women are on their own.”²⁹

In our own day, some have argued that separate organisations are not necessary for consciousness raising. Wini Breines has suggested, for example, that one lesson of the civil rights and anti-war movements in the United States is that women’s consciousness can begin to change even within “mixed” organisations which perpetuate women’s subordination.³⁰ Many studies attest to the truth of that claim.³¹ On the other hand, Estelle Freedman has argued that without separate “female institution building” such changed consciousness may easily dissipate.³² Although the women of *Mujeres Libres* did not offer arguments as direct as these for the necessity of “female institution building,” many of their concerns are echoed in these contemporary debates. It is clear that they felt that a changed consciousness on the part of women – which was essential to any participation in revolutionary social action – could be developed and sustained only within the context of an organisation established by and for women, and which addressed these concerns.

Challenge to the Anarchist Movement

Finally, aside from addressing the specific life experiences of women, and providing a context for a new consciousness of self, *Mujeres Libres* challenged the sexism of anarchist movement organisations. *Mujeres Libres* arose in response to what its founders perceived to be the insensitivity of many men within the anarchist movement to the specific problems of women.³³ In addition, *Mujeres Libres* challenged the organisations, themselves, to take their women members seriously. As one activist recalled: “The men, too, noticed that there weren’t many women

²⁹ Ilse, “La doble lucha de la mujer,” *Mujeres Libres*, 8 mes de la Revolución, cited in Nash, “The Debate over Feminism in the Spanish Anarchist Movement,” MS, Universidad de Barcelona, 1980.

³⁰ Breines, 496–97, 504.

³¹ See, for example, Evans, on which Breines draws; also William Chafe, *Women and Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

³² Estelle Freedman, “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 514–15, 524–26.

³³ For details on the early development of *Mujeres Libres* see Nash, “*Mujeres Libres*,” 12–16; Temma Kaplan, “Spanish Anarchism and Women’s Liberation,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 6 (1971): 101–10; and Kaplan, “Other Scenarios: Women and Spanish Anarchism,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Claudia R. Koonz and Renate Bridenthal (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 400–422.

who were activists. But it didn't bother them. In fact, most were just as happy to have a *compañerita* who didn't know as much as they. That bothered me a lot – made me furious. Practically turned me into a raving feminist!"³⁴ Others challenged the sexism of CNT members in even stronger terms. "Those disguised troglodytes of anarchists, those cowards who – well-armed – attack from behind, those 'valiant ones' who raise their voices and gestures in front of women, they are revealing their true fascist colours, and they must be unmasked."³⁵

Although many anarchist men might have been committed, in theory, to a sexually egalitarian movement (and, ultimately, to an egalitarian society), for too many of them commitments ended at the door of the home or at the entrance to the union hall. As one woman, who had been born and brought up in an anarchist household lamented: "When things reached the house, we were no better than anyone else.... There was much talk about the liberation of women, free love, and all that. Men spoke from platforms about it. But there were very very few who actually adopted women's struggle as their own, in practice.... Inside their own homes they forgot about it."³⁶

One of the founders of *Mujeres Libres* recalled that, in 1933, she had been asked to attend a meeting at one of the CNT union offices. Local unionists wanted her to teach a mini-course, and to help with the "preparation" of the workers. "But, it was impossible, because of the attitudes of some *compañeros*. They didn't take women seriously. They thought that all women needed to do was cook and sew.... No, it was impossible. Women barely dared to speak in that context."³⁷ Unless these practices ended – and anarchist men began taking women and their issues seriously – no anarchist strategy or program could hope to be successful, especially not in appealing to women. This was one area in which the movement's practice seemed "out of sync" with its theory.

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement was sensitive, for example, to the need to "prepare" people to participate in revolutionary activity. But, in the case of women, that perspective was often forgotten. Women who attended discussion and study sessions often were ignored or ridiculed. (In fact, it was experiencing precisely that sort of ridicule that had spurred a number of women to establish *Mujeres Libres* in the first place.) Informal education can be a powerful goad to the development of self-confidence, but only when those who engage in the process treat others with respect. If they do not, then informal educational gatherings may become just one more arena for the subordination of women.

Mujeres Libres was created by women whose experience taught them that they could not expect such sensitivity from the organised anarchist movement. The only way to assure that women would be taken seriously was to establish an independent organisation that could challenge those attitudes and behaviours, from a position of strength. Their experiences have been repeated, and reported, by women in revolutionary organisations down to our own day. The problem is certainly not limited to Spanish society. And it may be even more acute in those organisations claiming to have a coherent "party line." In the latter case, the hierarchy of male over female is often compounded by a presumed hierarchy of ideological "knowledge."³⁸

³⁴ Soledad Estorach, interview, Paris, 6 Jan. 1982. The word *compañerita* is the diminutive form of *compañera*, meaning "comrade," or "companion." In this context, it indicates an attitude of condescension on the part of the male.

³⁵ Cited in Nash, "*Mujeres Libres*," 101.

³⁶ Azucena (Fernandez Saavedra) Barba, interview, Perpignan, France, 27 Dec. 1981.

³⁷ Mercedes Comaposada, interview, Paris, 5 Jan. 1982.

³⁸ Kathryn Pyne (Parsons) Addelson has found similar patterns, for example, in her study of a Chicago "marxist-leninist" organisation, *Rising Up Angry*. See also Evans; Trimberger; and Jane Alpert, *Growing Up Underground* (New York: Morrow, 1981).

Mujeres Libres' challenge to the anarchist movement was organisational in another sense, as well. In October 1938, it requested recognition as an autonomous branch of the libertarian movement, equivalent to such organisations as the FAI or the FIJL.³⁹ The movement's response was complex. As Mary Nash reports, the women's proposal was rejected, on the grounds that "a specifically women's organisation would inject an element of disunion and inequality within the libertarian movement, and would have negative consequences for the development of working class interests."⁴⁰ Parallels with the experiences of women in the nineteenth-century suffrage movement in the United States and in contemporary political movements should be clear. It is important, too, to note the distressing parallels with the way black and third world women – and members of other groups with particular needs and perspectives – have all-too-often been treated within the contemporary women's movement.⁴¹

The women of Mujeres Libres were puzzled by this response. They saw themselves as analogous to the Libertarian Youth (FIJL), and expected to be welcomed with open arms. They did not understand why the movement should accept an autonomous organisation in one instance and not in the other. The refusal to recognize Mujeres Libres – which had the effect of denying Mujeres Libres members access to the ensuing national congress as delegates of the organisation, although some went as delegates of CNT unions – confirmed Mujeres Libres' perception of the necessity of a separate organisation to confront such issues on a continuing basis.⁴²

Our analysis enables us to offer an additional interpretation. The claim that an organisation specifically devoted to the needs of women is inappropriate to an anarchist movement contradicts the movement's explicit commitment to direct action. Specifically, it negates the policy that organisation derives from the individual's lived experiences and perceived needs. If organisation is based on the experiences of people's lives, then we can expect different experiences to lead to separate organisations. Leaders of the movement seemed willing to accept this conclusion in the case of young people, and they supported an autonomous youth organisation. But they were not willing to do so in the case of women. Why?

The crucial difference between the two cases seems to be the focus of the organisation, rather than the nature of its membership. Although the FIJL addressed itself only to young people, its project was the anarchist project, in both the short and the long term. Mujeres Libres, as an autonomous women's organisation, was different. Not only did it address itself specifically to women, but it also set up a separate and independent set of goals. Its challenge to the male dominance within the anarchist movement threatened, at least in the short run, to upset the structure and practice of existing anarchist organisations.⁴³

³⁹ The "libertarian movement" was another, more general, name for the anarcho-syndicalist movement. The term came into common usage only in 1937 and 38. The larger movement included within its ranks the CNT (the anarcho-syndicalist labour confederation), the FAI (the Iberian Anarchist Federation), and the FIJL (the youth organisation).

⁴⁰ Nash, "Mujeres Libres," 19.

⁴¹ On the issue of diversity within the contemporary women's movement, see especially Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," and "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984).

⁴² See Nash, *Mujer y movimiento obrero en España, 1931–1939* (Barcelona: Editorial Fontamara, 1981), especially 99–106; and interviews with members of Mujeres Libres.

⁴³ It should be noted that the Spanish anarchist movement had never been free of what might be termed "organisational fetishism." The movement had often been split by controversy in earlier periods, and continues to be so today. A concern for "organisational loyalty," then, was not unique to the opposition to Mujeres Libres. I wish to thank Paul

In 1937, for example, Mercedes Comaposada, then a leader of *Mujeres Libres*, went with Lucía Sanchez Saornil (national secretary of the organisation) to meet with “Marianet” (Mariano Vazquez, national secretary of the CNT, and effective leader of the libertarian movement) to discuss recognition of *Mujeres Libres* as an autonomous organisation within the movement. In her words, “we explained again and again what we were doing: that we were not trying to pull women away from the CNT but, in fact, trying to create a situation in which they could deal with their specific issues as women so that they could then be effective activists in the libertarian movement.” But, ultimately, the project was clearly too threatening. As she recollects the conversation:

Finally, he said, “O.K., you can have all that you want – even millions of pesetas [for organising, education, etc.] because our treasury is full – on the condition that you also work on issues that are of interest to us, and not just on women’s matters.” At that, Lucía jumped up and said “No. That would put us back into exactly the position we started from – the reason why we started this organisation in the first place!” And I agreed with her – I still do. The autonomy was essential. If they wouldn’t allow that, then we would have lost the main purpose of the organisation.”⁴⁴

Conclusions

The women of *Mujeres Libres* agreed with other anarchists that a commitment to direct action meant opposition to hierarchical forms of organisation. But they chose to focus on the other element of the direct action strategy: that which we have termed spontaneous order. People do, and will, organise themselves around those issues that are of immediate concern to their lives. Once they begin to make changes in these areas, and to recognize their own powers and capacities, they will be more “prepared” to engage in other activities for social change. The women of *Mujeres Libres* insisted that, at least in the case of women, separate organisations may be essential to this task.

That perspective seems particularly appropriate to the Spanish case. A large proportion of Spanish women would not have been touched, in any way, by the trade union strategy of the CNT. They were not working in the factories; or, if they were, they had little or no time to engage in union battles because of their responsibilities in the home. We might note that many men, as well – those engaged in non-unionized occupations – would have been excluded from active participation in the anarchist movement for parallel sorts of reasons. *Mujeres Libres* pinpointed in the case of women a problem that has much larger ramifications for a strategy of revolutionary organisation.

The women found support for their views within the anarchist tradition. But their advocacy of separate struggle stemmed from more than a commitment to direct action and to meeting people’s needs on their own terms. It developed from an analysis of the particular nature of Spanish society and its impact on the anarchist movement. *Mujeres Libres* insisted that, within the context of Spanish society, joint action between women and men would only perpetuate existing patterns of male dominance. Separate struggle was particularly necessary in this case because it was the only way both to make possible the effective preparation of women and to challenge the sexism of anarchist men.

Mattick, Molly Nolan, and other participants in the Study Group on Women in Advanced Industrial Societies of the Centre for European Studies, Harvard University, with whom I discussed these issues at a seminar on 9 May 1980.

⁴⁴ Comaposada interview.

Not only did Mujeres Libres attempt to empower women, but it also posed a constant challenge to anarchist men. Its existence reminded them of the need to overcome male dominance within the movement. Most of Mujeres Libres' activities were directed at women. But they did confront individual anarchist men, and the organised anarchist movement, on numerous occasions. Mujeres Libres attempted to force the men (and women!) to recognize both the legitimacy and the importance of issues of special concern to women. That the organisation existed gives evidence of the potential autonomous power of women. The degree of opposition Mujeres Libres aroused within the movement suggests that at least some members of the CNT took that potential power seriously.⁴⁵ The program and experience of Mujeres Libres support the claim that the logic and practice of direct action may require a (temporary) separate "gathering of forces." As we have seen, the women of Mujeres Libres defined themselves not as a group of women who were struggling against men, but as one of what might be many potential groups participating in a vast coalition for social change.⁴⁶

Revolutionary change requires alliances of women with men. But unless there is equality within that coalition, there is no guarantee of an egalitarian revolutionary process, or of an egalitarian society. Commitment to direct action and equality means just that. As contemporary U.S. feminists have begun to recognize in the case of class, ethnic, and cultural differences, there can be no "acting for" another, even in the context of a revolutionary organisation. Revolutionary activity must recognize the specificity of lived experiences. Mujeres Libres hoped to make unity possible. True to their interpretation of the anarchist tradition, they insisted that the strategy to achieve such unity requires a recognition of diversity.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Donna Divine for clarifying this point for me.

⁴⁶ Compare the debate over black power in the United States, especially Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York: Random House, 1967); and Bayard Rustin, "Black Power and Coalition Politics," *Commentary* 42 (September 1966): 35–40.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Martha A. Ackelsberg
“Separate and equal”?
Mujeres Libres and anarchist strategy for women’s emancipation
1985

Retrieved on 2020-07-19 from <https://libcom.org/history/separate-equal-mujeres-libres-anarchist-strategy-womens-emancipation>

Research for this paper was funded, in part, by an American Association of University Women postdoctoral research grant and, in part, by the Project on Women and Social Change, Smith College. Final revisions were completed while I was in residence as a fellow of the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, to which I am indebted both for time and colleagues. While many people have read and commented on earlier drafts of this manuscript, I am particularly grateful for the help of Feminist Studies readers, as well as of Kathryn Pyne (Parsons) Addelson, Donna Robinson Divine, Temma Kaplan, Frances Fox Piven, and Verena Stolcke.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net