“I beat her because she was mine”

Domestic violence in Spanish culture

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Abstract

Domestic violence against women is deeply rooted in the Spanish culture and is still prevalent today. Spanish men are notorious for their machista attitude, and though certainly not all men behave in this manner, the stereotype does depict the attitude of many Spanish men of various generations. This paper analyzes the problem of domestic violence from a historical and cultural standpoint and discusses what Spain’s leaders and other organizations are doing to curb domestic violence.

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Introduction

Lo rompi porque era mía. Literal translation: “I broke it because it was mine.” This statement seems harmless enough—that is, until one learns the colloquial translation, the true meaning behind this simple phrase and how it relates to a daunting cultural problem in Spain. Lo rompi porque era mía: “I beat her because she was mine.”

This old Spanish dicho, or saying, embodies the definition of machismo. Spain was, after all, the nation that gave the world the word “macho.” The cultural acceptance of domestic violence against women has been prevalent in Spanish culture even before Spain was an actual country. This essay, however, will only tackle the issue beginning in the 1930s, in relation to the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Francisco Franco. It will chronicle the role of domestic violence in Spanish culture up until today, almost a decade into the 21st century.

Changes in social norms and attitudes are not always consistent with changes in the law. The current legislation against domestic violence has yet to eliminate the Spanish machista mentality. Domestic violence continues to have a place in Spanish culture because the main factors that enabled it to exist in the first place — gender identity roles and stereotyping, the Spanish mentality that a machista attitude is attractive, and the financial insecurity of women, among others—still exist, even in the presence of laws intended to foster gender equality and protect women from the hands of their abusers.

The Second Republic and the Spanish Civil War

The Second Republic, a forward-thinking, democratic government that believed in gender equality, came into power in 1931 after the former ruler, King Alfonso XIII, fled
Spain. Alfonso XIII had inherited the throne at birth, due to his father's death while his mother was pregnant with him. His mother ruled in his place when he was a child, but he began actively ruling in 1902 at the age of 16. His reign was marked by political unrest, especially since he appointed and supported the unpopular Spanish prime minister and dictator, Miguel Primo de Rivera. In 1930 Primo de Rivera fell from power and fled to Paris, where he died just weeks later. In 1931, municipal elections were held, and the initial counts showed the Spanish people heavily favoring the Republican Party, whom Alfonso detested. Amidst mounting hostility, Alfonso XIII fled to France without waiting to hear the official poll results. He later moved to Rome, where he lived in exile until his death in 1941 (Ribeiro de Meneses 14).

With their unfavorable king gone and former dictator dead, the Spanish people rejoiced. The Republicans did indeed sweep the election, and the Second Republic was born. In *Franco and the Spanish Civil War*, author Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses says that "the new Republic, when it appeared, was bathed in optimism, and there seemed to be a universal acceptance of the government's reform program." (14).

Ribeiro de Meneses says, however, that the feeling of acceptance was a deceptive impression, because the conservative citizens had not converted to the beliefs of the now-ruling Republicans. He says conservatism "had merely — and momentarily — lost its voice" (14). So while the nation entered an era of new rights and opportunities, strong opposition to the Second Republic boiled beneath the peaceful surface.

Much of this opposition came from two regions of Spain that fiercely lobbied for its independence but whose desire to separate were ignored by the new government. The residents of the Catalonia and Basque autonomous communities felt that the traditions,
language and culture of their respective regions set them apart from the rest of the nation. They wished to break apart from Spain and be accepted and respected as a separate nation. The Second Republic, however, was not about to permit two of the 19 autonomous communities to break apart from Spain, and the cries for independence were silenced by threats of violence on behalf of the Republic (Causes 1).

The Second Republic was in power for five years before the Civil War started in 1936. During this time, the new government tried to improve gender equality through legislation. Some of the laws they passed were considered radical for the 1930s. For example, they legalized abortion and divorce. Women could vote and own property for the first time in Spanish history (Pardell 1). Also, the 1931 Equal Pay Law mandated equal pay for men and women in the same positions in the workplace. The first five years of the Second Republic was a time of liberation for the women of Spain. This was the first Spanish government to give women a voice and to see them as equal citizens to men, and the women of Spain seized the opportunity. Not much explanation is documented as to why the president of the Second Republic, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora y Torres, granted these new liberations to women. It seems that he simply viewed all Spaniards as deserving equal rights, regardless of gender.

However, as mentioned before, not everyone was happy with Spain’s quick transition into a modern, democratic nation. The Second Republic had, for the first time, demanded a separation between Church and state, thereby ending the Catholic Church’s influence and control over education. The Republic pushed for this reform because its leaders believed in free speech and freedom of religion, ideals which were not plausible as long as the Church was controlling the country’s educational system. The conservative
citizens and the Spanish elite were appalled by this decision. In their minds, Spain was losing its true Catholic essence—its identity as a strong Catholic nation with conservative beliefs and norms. Francisco Franco, who had been moving up through the army ranks with what author J.P. Fusi called “meteoric” speed, was one of the most vocal leaders against the new Republican government (Fusi 2).

The Spanish Civil War began on July 17, 1936 after two political assassinations caused an uprising of the followers of the respective parties. Tensions had been building in the streets of the cities and pueblos of Spain already, but the murders increased that tension exponentially. The first assassination took place on July 12, 1936, when Lieutenant José Castillo was killed by the Falange political party. Franco was the head of the Falange party, which was a subgroup of the Nationalist side during the Civil War (“Causes 1”).

Castillo had been an important member of the Republican Antifascist Military Union, a far-right group that associated with the Second Republic. The following day, the Republican Antifascists retaliated by assassinating José Calvo Sotelo, an influential Falange member who had been forced into exile when the Second Republic came into power but had returned to Spain in 1934. On July 13, 1936, Calvo Sotelo was presented with a fake warrant for his arrest in his home, dragged from his wife and children, and shot and beaten to death. These murders between vying political groups proved to be the final catalysts in setting the Spanish Civil War into motion (“Causes 1”).

At this time Franco was not only the head of the Falange party, but had been newly appointed to lead the conservative Nationalist army. He promised to rid the country of the evils the Second Republic had cast upon it with its progressive laws and its move away from Catholicism. Author Ribeiro de Meneses said, “Franco never spoke of a civil war:
what was taking place in Spain was a crusade against a foreign enemy, a spiritual conflict both to rid Spain of foreigners and their corrupting ideals and to uphold the primacy of the Catholic Church in Spain's social arrangements" (14).

The Nationalists strongly advocated the idea that women belonged in the home, as this aligned with their strong Catholic convictions. However, they were smart enough to acknowledge that desperate times called for desperate measures. They needed as many hands as possible working toward a Nationalist victory. “Women could, in exceptional times such as war, work and provide assistance; but it was understood that once the war was over they would return to the domestic sphere—and the Civil War would result in a dramatic step backwards in the status of women in Spain,” says author Ribeiro de Meneses (102).

Thousands of women supported the Nationalists by joining the Sección Femenina (Women’s Section) during the civil war. The group’s primary tasks were sewing flags, caring for prisoners and wounded soldiers, and spreading propaganda (Carbayo-Abengózar 79). As soon as the war was over and the services of the women were no longer needed, however, Franco dismissed them from their duties with barely a “thank-you.”

As Riberiro de Meneses said, the end of the civil war marked a regression for Spanish women. Almost all Spanish women had experienced, on some level and for some short time, a feeling of liberation in the recent past. The conservative Nationalist women had felt useful during their work with the Sección Femenina, while the more liberal women had cherished the years of the Second Republic. Once Franco and his Nationalist army defeated the Republicans and the civil war ended, he was quick to undo virtually everything the Second Republic had instated. He was especially disgusted with the
freedoms women had enjoyed during the Republic, and he was wholly dedicated to taking
women off the streets and out of the workplace and placing them firmly back into the
home. This was part of his crusade to restore Spain to the Catholic purity that he said it had
lost in former years.

**Francisco Franco, Dictator**

During the Franco regime, women were considered the legal property of men
(“Spain hits” 1). Women could not apply for a passport, open a bank account, or get a job
without their husband’s permission (“Violence” 1). The *machista* phrase “I beat her
because she was mine,” was technically true, as men could do what they wished with (or
to) their own property. Domestic violence was not illegal or even considered wrong by
most male leaders. Couples were not to discuss their marital problems—namely, domestic
violence—with anyone else. Such a matter was not only considered deeply private but also
a taboo subject.

Franco felt that a woman’s main aspirations in life should be to care for her
husband and children, and to serve God and be a good Catholic (Carbayo-Abengózar 81).
Pilar Primo de Rivera, the head of *Sección Femenina*, described the Nationalists’ idea of
the perfect Spanish wife. The group thought women throughout Spain should learn “to take
care of the house and to love manual tasks and music (81). Primo de Rivera also said that a
woman’s job was to make her husband’s family life so pleasant that he would not need to
frequent bars and casinos in order to find happiness (81). This implies that if a man was
unhappy, it was his wife’s fault. Thus, domestic violence could be seen as a man’s way of
punishing his wife for making him unhappy and for driving him to use alcohol or to
gamble.
It isn’t hard to see how repressive and controlling of a leader Franco was. He personally censored and influenced all forms of media so that it coincided with his Catholic beliefs, and he did not allow any other religions to be openly practiced but Catholicism. He is remembered in Spain today as a cruel leader who had great military skills but no heart. During his rule, he had thousands of people jailed or executed who had fought against him in the civil war, and almost every living Spaniard knows someone—a parent, a teacher, a neighbor—who was punished by Franco.

Franco left his mark on Spain in many ways, but one of the most lasting and pervasive is the way in which he treated women as second-class citizens not deserving of the same rights and privileges as men. Even men who hated Franco did, in some ways, behave like the dictator in their own homes. They made their wives do all the housework; they did not allow them to have separate finances or to have a job. They beat them for talking back, or for no real reason at all, because that was socially acceptable and legally permitted. For 39 years he suffocated the Spanish people with his beliefs and left no room for opposition without consequence. As hard as the Franco years were for all Spaniards, the oppression was multiplied for women because they were not only controlled by Franco and his government, but by their husbands as well.

Life After Franco

Francisco Franco ruled as dictator until he died on Nov. 20, 1975, after a long period of hospitalization. With him died his repressive regime. From 1975 until 1978 there was a period of transition, and while women’s rights were restored and they were given full citizenship once again, it was a time of political indecisiveness, of social limbo (Pardell 1). Women had more freedom of expression and there was a rise in Spanish feminism, but at
the same time the subject of domestic violence was still considered taboo.

The Constitution of 1978 proclaimed all Spaniards equal under the law and it outlawed discrimination (Pardell 1). Democracy was established in the first free elections since before the civil war in the 1930s. The dark, oppressive cloud that had been lingering over the country for almost four decades was gone, and the future looked bright for Spaniards, and especially for women.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, women enjoyed their newly reinstalled rights. Divorce and birth control were legalized and women were given equal authority with their husbands over their children. They were allowed to join the armed forces and were no longer required to obtain their husbands' permission to open a bank account or to travel. Abortion was legal, but only in cases of rape or when the mother’s life was in danger (Riding 1). Spanish women seemed more confident, and had a desire to enter the workforce and establish their own lives aside from their duties as a wife and mother. By 1989, 50 percent of college students were female. This was seen as quite a feat by women’s groups, as females were not even permitted in Spanish universities until 1900 (Riding 1).

Yet it was still a man’s world. While women were permitted to work outside the home again, they were not treated equally. On average, women made 82 percent of what males earned for the same job (Riding 1). Women were not given managerial or executive positions, and the business world seemed to hold onto the Francoist notions about women being inferior. While this is not a problem unique to Spain, it is important to recognize it as part of the social issue of gender inequality still plaguing the country today.

While women showed enthusiasm for the new rights and freedoms they were granted, some men were resistant to women’s changing role in society. Many did not feel it
was right for women to work outside the home. Those that did support their wife having a job still expected her to do all the housework. Carmen Martinez Ten, head of the government's Institute of Women in 1989, said this on the subject: "Men say they accept the new equality, but few share responsibilities at home. This means that working women in fact have two jobs. For them, liberation comes at a high price." The new freedoms did not change the social acceptance of domestic violence, and the trend continued through the 1980s and 90s. It was not yet being discussed in the media, as it was still a delicate subject that people did not quite know how to handle. But in 1997 a woman named Ana Orantes forever changed the discussion of domestic violence when her death brought the issue out from the shadows and into the public spotlight.

**Ana Orantes**

Daytime talk shows are a platform for people to divulge their deepest, darkest secrets about their personal lives. Some, no doubt, air their dirty laundry for the chance to be on television, to experience their 15 minutes of fame. Others, however, appear on these programs and share private—often painful—personal stories in order to raise awareness, to discuss warning signs and treatment, and above all to help others who are in or potentially could be in a similar situation.

In 1997, Ana Orantes, a 60-year-old woman and mother of 11, appeared on a Spanish talk show to discuss a life of suffering under the perpetual abuse of her ex-husband. She also talked about her struggle to obtain a restraining order against him; apparently she had filed for one dozens of times without success and without any form of help from the police (Clark 1).

On Dec. 17, 1997, a few days after the show aired, Orantes' ex-husband appeared at
her home, very upset that she had shared their personal problems with the world. He beat
her. He threw her over the balcony. He tied her to a chair. He doused her with gasoline. He
burned her alive (Catan 1).

When word of Orantes’ brutal murder spread, there was public outcry and increased
pressure on government officials to protect women who come forward with revelations of
abusive relationships. The two leading political parties in Spain, the governing Popular
Party and the opposing Socialist Party, both called for Parliament to implement stricter
federal laws against domestic violence. For the first time, the media openly discussed the
issue of domestic violence and the media’s commentary may have also influenced the
government to take action to protect women.

Ten years later, in November 2007, a similar situation to Orantes’s occurred.
Svetlana Orlova, a 30-year-old Russian immigrant living in Spain, was summoned to
appear on Patricia’s Daily Show, a daytime talk show with about 2 million viewers (Catan 1). Orlova had no idea why she was invited to the show, and witnesses say she looked
uncomfortable when she suddenly came face-to-face with her ex-boyfriend, Ricardo
Navarro, whom she had a restraining order against.

Navarro told the host that they had broken up over financial disputes; Orlova insisted there many other reasons, but refused to elaborate when Patricia
prodded for more details. Suddenly, Navarro got down on one knee and asked Orlova to
marry him. As the oblivious audience of women sighed a collective “awww,” Orlova shook
her head slightly in response to the proposal. Photographs posted online from this episode
show the fear in Orlova’s eyes as she sits next to her former abuser (Catan 1).
Five days after Orlova rejected her ex-boyfriend in front of more than two million viewers, she suffered the same tragic fate as Ana Orantes — murder. She was stabbed in the neck repeatedly by Navarro and later died in the hospital. Patricia’s Daily Show insisted it was not responsible for the murder, saying privacy laws prohibited the producers from investigating guests’ background. The show insisted the couple left the studio together and that neither seemed tense (Catan 1). There was a period of public backlash against the talk show, as various women’s groups unsuccessfully called for it to be taken off the air for putting Orlova in this dangerous situation.

Orantes’s brutal murder first brought the issue of domestic violence into the public spotlight and into the media in 1997, and the issue has stayed in the media since then. It makes the news when José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, president and prime minister of Spain, introduces new legislation to combat domestic violence, but more often it’s in the news because another woman has been murdered. In 2007, 71 women were murdered in domestic violence cases, and in 2008, 70 women were murdered (H.B. 1). The Spanish Ministry for Equality said that 30 percent of the alleged murders in the 2008 domestic violence cases had been previously reported as abusers to the police (1).

Feb. 26, 2008 was the most tragic day of 2008 in terms of domestic violence victims, as four women died at the hands of their abusers that day (M.P. 1). The first was a 22-year-old Bolivian woman who was stabbed three times by her boyfriend in the apartment they shared in Madrid. The next was a 49-year-old woman in Cádiz who was stabbed four times in the back by her husband after they had an argument in the street. The third victim was a 44-year-old woman in Valencia who was shot by her ex-partner while sitting at an outdoor café with friends. The last victim was a mother of four in Valladolid.
who was shot by her estranged husband, who then committed suicide. These four deaths raised the number of domestic violence deaths in 2008 to 16, on only Feb. 26 (M.P. 1).

**Tackling Spain’s “Worst Shame”**

How can Spain resolve a problem that President Zapatero has dubbed the nation’s “worst shame” (Clark 1)? It will be no easy task, as the Spanish cultural norms have long been accepting of male domination and the machista attitude. One of Zapatero’s methods is to lead by example. Upon his first election in 2004, he appointed women to eight of the 16 cabinet positions, including vice president. María Teresa Fernández de la Vega is Spain’s first female vice president (Clark 1).

When Zapatero was re-elected in March of 2008 he appointed more women than men to his presidential cabinet. His most bold and controversial decision, however, was the selection of Carme Chacón as defense minister, or head of the military. Many were surprised that he chose a woman with no military experience — and who is in fact is considered a pacifist — to head up the military (“Spain wages” 1). The truly shocking part for many Spaniards, however, was that the new leader of the Spanish military was a 37-year-old woman who was seven months pregnant. The image of Chacón reviewing her troops, with her stomach bulging from beneath her maternity clothes, was splashed all over the media both in Spain and around the world. Spanish feminists rejoiced at Zapatero’s decision to appoint a woman as head of the military, and Maria Sotelo, president of Madrid’s Women’s Foundation, said the shock value of Chacón being seven months pregnant made an even bigger statement for women "It's an important image precisely because it conveys
normality," she said. "It serves a pedagogic function: it shows that women can be and are everywhere" (Abend 1).

Zapatero said he was glad to appoint more men than women to his cabinet, calling it a "modern and strong government" ("Spain wages" 1). Some say Zapatero appointed Chacón to bring a new, softer image to the Spanish military and to make it appear more humanitarian.

Zapatero has made a deliberate effort to shake up the traditional gender roles in Spain and to promote equality, starting with his own administration. During the Franco years there was stark inequality between the sexes, and the Spanish culture can be sluggish in shedding notions of eras gone by. Zapatero says he feels it is time for Spain to become truly modern in the sense that gender equality is finally practiced in all walks of life throughout Spain. He has not given any personal reasons as to why he is so passionate about working toward gender equality, but this quote seems to sum up his stance: "One thing that really awakens my rebellious streak is 20 centuries of one sex dominating the other," he said (Moore 2).

Equal rights, especially referring to gender, has been Zapatero’s platform since he first ran for office in 2004. He surely recognized that women’s groups had been lobbying unsuccessfully for equal rights and saw a chance to capitalize on others’ shortcomings, but his aggressive and continuous attacks on the issue suggests he truly believes in the cause and did not just advocate it in order to get elected.

Gender inequality is one of the factors of the continuing problem of domestic violence, especially in the pigeonholed roles of husbands and wives. Spanish girls have traditionally been taught from a young age by their mothers and grandmothers that it will
be their duty as wives and mothers to do all the housework and to care for the children. Though girls are told today that they can go to college and have a career, it is still that they will be in charge of the housework and caring for the children. Boys continue to learn, both from their fathers and grandfathers and from popular culture, that they will be the breadwinner and the authority figure of the family.

Today, as more Spanish women are working outside the home than ever before, they indeed continue to do almost all of the household work. In 2000, a study done by the Centre for Sociological Investigation found that Spanish fathers spend an average of 13 minutes a day caring for their children ("Housework" 2). The study also found that only 19 percent of Spanish men thought it appropriate for mothers of dependent children to work full-time outside the home (2). This is likely a lingering influence of the Franco era, when the dictator insisted a woman’s place was in the home.

A law passed in 2005 attempts to foster more cooperation and equality in the Spanish household, starting with the housework itself. This law, commonly referred to as the "housework law," requires that all men entering into marriage and civil ceremonies must commit to doing half of the household chores ("Housework" 2). Couples sign a marriage contract agreeing to split the housework and childcare duties, and failure to adhere to the contract will affect the terms of divorce settlement should the couple ever wish to split up. This appears to be the only repercussion, as no fines or other penalties have been announced in regard to this law.

While the law seems good in theory, many question whether any changes will actually come from it. Almudena Rodriguez del Llano, a spokesperson for the group Women for Democracy, said, "This law is ridiculous and impossible to enforce. What is a
woman going to do if her husband doesn’t help her at home? March to the local police station and report him?” (“Housework” 3).

A woman named Berta, who described herself as an exasperated housewife, knows that the new law won’t affect her since she is already married. She doubts, however, that the contract would have been upheld in her house even if she and her husband had signed such an agreement. “My husband wouldn’t iron a shirt to save his life,” she said. “It’s not that he can’t. It’s just that he won’t. He’ll never change” (“Housework”3). Such is the situation in households across Spain, and there is doubt that the housework law will have any impact.

Not all Spanish women are lobbying for the rise of the domesticated, attentive man. A woman named Patricia, a teacher and a wife, said she opposes the new housework law. “I love macho men,” she said. “They are more masculine and I don’t care about doing some housework” (“Housework” 3).

Fatal Attraction

The problem of domestic violence stems in large part from the Spanish mentality that machista men are exciting, dangerous and attractive. This frame of mind is passed down through the generations and is also portrayed in the media. This fatal attraction plays host to the parasite that is domestic violence. Today’s high school generation is continuing the trend, and though domestic violence murder cases makes the headlines on a weekly basis, young women still swoon for the macho men who are more likely to abuse them. The young Spanish machista is the ultimate bad boy: aggressive, rebellious, and controlling.

In 2008, a group of professors at the University of Barcelona conducted a study regarding gender violence among Spanish teenagers and young adults. The professors
wanted to explore how teenagers form their values, tastes in dating preferences and attraction patterns. The group says the most important result from the study was the fact that these teenagers link violence with attractiveness, “grounded in aspects of the hegemonic model of masculinity such as domination, aggressiveness, lack of sensitivity, and power relationships” (Valls 768).

The high school girls said they are generally attracted to boys they described as “bastards, machos, and show-offs” (Valls 768). The girls interviewed said, in general, that they are attracted to guys who ignore them and make them feel emotionally tormented. One girl, 16-year-old Judith, said, “I guess there should be a little suffering. When it is too easy, it loses interest” (Valls 769). Some girls responded that being with a “bastard” or someone who is controlling makes them feel special or chosen (769). When these boys ignore them, they suffer; then when these boys give them affection or attention, they feel singled-out and worthy. To these Spanish high school girls, the suffering is worth the feeling of being chosen by a rebel machista.

This attraction to machistas seems to manifest itself at a young age. By the time girls are old enough to date, they have decided that the men most likely to abuse them are precisely the ones they wish to date. Some girls said in the study that they wished to date a bad boy during high school but wanted to end up marrying a nice guy when they get older. What tends to happen more often than not, however, is that these girls who find teenage machistas irresistible continue the cycle and become the disgruntled housewives who married a “bastard.” They become another domestic violence statistic.

**Reasons for Silence**

One daunting statistic relating to domestic violence is the number of domestic
violence cases that are never reported. It is difficult to gauge exactly how many victims remain silent and never turn in their abusers, but reports indicate that in 2008 only between 10 and 20 percent of the more than 400,000 domestic violence victims in Spain reported the abuse (H.B.1) The ones who do come forth do so after an average of 10 years of domestic abuse (Andrews 1).

   It begs the question, why not report it? What would possess a woman to not seek help in escaping an abusive relationship?

   There are several factors that keep Spanish women from reporting domestic violence. One is that some women cannot even recognize that they are involved in an abusive situation, most likely because they have grown up in a culture accepting of domestic violence and gender inequality. A study indicates that in 2008, 14 percent of the 400,000 women in abusive relationships did not consider themselves domestic violence victims ("Study" 1). Sadly, these women seem to think that being physically or emotionally abused simply comes with the territory of being married to a Spanish man.

   Another major factor that keeps women in abusive relationships is financial insecurity. Married women largely depend on the income of their husbands, even if they have a job outside of the home. Men and women are not treated equally in the business world. The Spanish vice president is female, as are the CEOs of Spain’s IBM, Google and Microsoft; however, throughout Spain women are included in less than 5 percent of corporate boards. The private sector of Spanish business is known as one of, if not the, most “chauvinistic” in Europe (Moore 2). However, Zapatero and his Socialist administration have recently begun requiring companies to fill 40 percent of corporate board seats with females (Moore 1).
Wage inequality is another problem in Spanish business. On average, women make 30 percent less than their male coworkers (2). In comparison, as mentioned before, in 1989 reports indicated that Spanish women made 18 percent less than their male counterparts (Riding 2). Zapatero is working to break women’s chain of dependence on abusive partners by improving employment options, promoting equal pay, and offering more childcare options for working mothers.

True to its patriarchal nature, it is extremely rare that any of a couple’s possessions, such as the home or car, would be in the wife’s name. Women fear they will not be able to support themselves if they leave their husbands, especially if they have children they plan to take with them. They do not want their children to suffer financially because of their decision to leave.

One study found that a main reason women give for remaining in abusive situations is they do not believe the abuse is severe enough to warrant leaving (Ruiz-Pérez 1158). And as mentioned before, many abused women do not even consider themselves victims. This is a dangerous physiological part of cycle of domestic violence: women either believe their man can change or that they somehow deserve the abuse (1158). “Justification for violence against women is so deep in our culture,” said film director Icíar Bollain, who co-wrote and directed “Te Doy Mis Ojos” (Take My Eyes), a film about domestic violence (“Spain hits” 4).

Another commonly cited reason that women stay in abusive relationships is lack of support from friends, family and law enforcement (Ruiz-Pérez 1157). How a woman is treated when she reaches out to others can determine her behavior in the future. If she files for a restraining order that is never granted, she may be discouraged and not try again. If
her friends and family tell her to try to save her marriage, she might stay.

Divorce is still looked down upon by many older Catholics in Spain, so some women are afraid their devoutly religious parents or grandparents will not empathize with them and will pressure them to work out their marital problems. This sentiment also lingers from the Franco era. “There was the heavy weight of the church, saying ‘women, stay with your man and keep going, whatever happens,” said Bollain (“Spain’s” 1). In 2004, a group of Roman Catholic bishops caused public backlash in Spain when they suggested that the women’s sexual liberation movement, which began underground in the 1960s, is the reason more men beat their wives today (Adler 2).

Spanish law enforcement has long been criticized for not taking domestic violence complaints seriously and for ignoring women’s requests for restraining orders against abusive partners. Some women claim that police officers do this because they inwardly blame the women or think it is still acceptable to discipline one’s wife. Whether or not this is true, it has been proven that courts often ignore requests for restraining orders, and sometimes those women end up dead at the hands of their abusive husbands. Lourdes Muñoz, leader of the government’s women’s issues department, said that of the domestic violence cases taken to court, only half of the men are punished, and sometimes the police do not even bother to enforce punishments (Andrews 1). This issue was brought into the public spotlight in 2003 when a Barcelona judge was investigated after a woman was murdered. Ana Maria Fabregas had filed domestic violence complaints 13 times against her abusive husband (Clark 1). Fabregas dared to reach out for help, only to be ignored by the judge and by police. Her husband beat her to death with a hammer (1). Sometimes when judges do dole out punishments, they are ineffective and not thought out. For example, one
abusive husband was sentenced to house arrest and he continued to beat his wife while he served his time at home (Andrews 2).

Another reason women stay in situations of domestic violence is because they simply have nowhere else to go; this is related to the financial insecurity of married women and also to the insufficient number of safe houses and treatment centers for domestic violence victims. There is a general consensus among experts and women’s advocacy groups that not enough safe houses exist for victims. Muñoz said the federal women’s issues department believes there need to be more safe houses or emergency houses where women can go to escape an abusive situation. She said they need to be equipped to care for children as well, since a woman with children is likely to bring them with her.

Once a woman decides to escape an abusive situation, it is imperative that she act quickly, as controlling, macho husbands are often angered by the prospect of their wives leaving. Maria, a survivor of 15 years of domestic violence, said, "When a woman decides to leave, the man sees that he doesn't have as much control over her as he thought, and often, he'll become even more violent" (Andrews 1). Maria finally decided to break the cycle of violence and to flee after her abusive husband threatened her with a knife in front of her child.

Usually a woman does not discuss her plans to leave with her husband, for fear of more abuse. Rather, it is more common for women to flee when their husbands or partners are at work or out of the house. This also relates to why it is dangerous for law enforcement officers to ignore a woman’s complaints: when her complaint is ignored, she stays or returns to the abusive situation, and if her husband finds out she went to the police he could become even more abusive than before.
Eliminating Gender Stereotypes

Zapatero has said the problem of domestic violence extends beyond just abusers and victims; the ways in which men and women are presented in the media allow domestic violence and inequality to remain in Spanish culture (Adler 2). He said it is especially dangerous for children to learn gender stereotypes through the media, because impressionable young children can carry those stereotypes with them throughout their lives.

Research done over the past 30 years show that magazines, advertisements, children’s books and children’s television shows reinforce traditional gender stereotypes in Spain (Royo 3). TV programs and commercials today have shed some of the stereotypes of the 1960s and 70s, when women were almost exclusively shown in the home or caring for their families. Today, women can be seen in advertisements for the military, universities, and high-profile businesses. While this move away from just showing a demure housewife is a step in the right direction, some say a new stereotype is now being portrayed in the media.

In a report on women in Spanish media, a group of professors referred to this new stereotype as the “superwomen image” (Conde 6). “She works at home but also has a job,” the professors said in the report. “She is in charge of many responsibilities at work but she is also in charge of the activities at home and taking care of the children” (6). This portrayal of the business-savvy yet domesticated woman gives the impression that if girls want to have a job outside the home, they must make sure they do not let their duties at home become an inferior priority. These advertisements and TV shows fail to demonstrate the husband helping with any housework; they just show the woman working twice as hard
to achieve balance and please everyone. Zapatero has called for Spanish advertising companies to re-evaluate the way they portray women, as he said he thinks women’s roles continue to be pigeonholed in many advertisements (Adler 2).

Two films in the past decade have helped bring the issue of domestic violence into public debate and have been praised for doing so. “Solo Mia” (Only Mine) was released in 2001 and received 2 awards and 9 other nominations. “Te Doy Mis Ojos” (Take My Eyes), which was released in 2003, has garnered 39 awards and 17 other nominations. Among the prestigious awards are seven Goya awards, including Best Picture and Best Director (IMDB). The recognition these films received, especially “Te Doy Mis Ojos” and its 39 awards, have taken the issue of domestic violence and presented it on a global scale, informing others about a Spanish cultural problem that remains persistent today.

Zapatero’s Continuing Efforts

Since his initial election in 2004, Zapatero has fully dedicated himself to the problem of domestic violence in Spain. He does not take the issue lightly and continues to instate new laws and regulations to try to eliminate this cultural dilemma. Vice President Fernandez de la Vega said this of Zapatero’s efforts on behalf of women: “We have a prime minister who not only says he’s a feminist—he acts like a feminist” (Moore 1).

Shortly after his election in 2004, Zapatero’s administration created new laws mandating the implication of equality classes in all state schools (“Spain hits” 3). His administration hopes that educators can help young Spaniards to be more open-minded about gender roles and to learn to view men and women as equals. As with the worry over gender stereotyping in the media, the government fears children are developing narrow-minded ideas about gender roles at a young age.
Zapatero and his government have also come up with an idea to reach out to the abusers themselves. In 2008, Spanish Equality Minister Bibiana Aido announced that Spain was planning to implement a hotline system for men who are tempted to abuse their spouses or partners (Anti-domestic 1). “We are talking about a telephone line for men, to help them resolve their doubts, because these days our men feel lost due to the beginning of the end of the patriarchal system,” said Aido. Some critics scoff at this idea, saying a man who is compelled to beat his wife will not pause to call a hotline. Others say that the Spanish male ego, which for many fuels the desire to abuse in the first place, will prohibit these machista men from admitting they have a problem and seeking help. As of April 2009 no hotline had been established yet.

Some critics—especially those aligned with the Catholic Church—accuse Zapatero of trying to push Spain toward the liberal side too much with his legalization of gay marriage and abortion. Others accuse Zapatero of spreading himself too thin on his issues; they say he creates the gender-equality initiatives but then fails to reform them if they do not succeed.

One of the most controversial criticisms of Zapatero’s gender-equality efforts came from Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in April 2008. When asked by an Italian radio station to comment on Zapatero’s selection of nine female cabinet members, Berlusconi replied: "Now he's asked for it. He'll have problems leading them" (Govan 1). He concluded his criticism by saying, “Zapatero has formed a government that is too pink, something which we cannot do in Italy because there is a prevalence of men in politics and it isn't easy to find women who are qualified for government” (1). Berlusconi’s comments caused public backlash against him by women’s groups and government representatives of
both Italy and Spain.

There are always critics scrutinizing the work of political leaders, and with Zapatero it’s no different. But the attacks of Zapatero’s critics have little validation, and it seems that the majority of the country is impressed and supportive of Zapatero’s efforts thus far.

Other Advocates

Numerous women’s rights groups in Spain are working to change public attitudes about domestic violence and to help women in danger. Amnesty International is one of the larger groups pushing for social and political action concerning this issue. In a November 2009 statement to the UN, the organization raised concerns about domestic violence against illegal immigrant women in Spain. It said that illegal immigrants often do not report domestic violence to the police for fear of their illegal status being discovered. Amnesty International says there needs to be some sort of pardoning law created in Spain which would assure illegal immigrants that they can seek help and legal action against their abusers without fear of arrest or deportation (“Submission” 1).

Amnesty International has also been running print campaigns against domestic violence in Spain, with images such as the one shown here (“Spain hits” 1). The image’s headline appears to be an advertisement for makeup, but the image itself shows that the picture carries a deeper meaning about domestic violence and women remaining silent about their abuse and hiding the evidence. The message surely loses much of the intended meaning, however, since it is written in English instead of...
Spanish.

Others groups spreading awareness about domestic violence include the Observatory Against Domestic and Gender Violence, the Federation of Progressive Women and the Federation of Separated and Divorced Women. These groups have lobbyists representing their interests and have active members who work to initiate a change in social perspective. The Federation of Separated and Divorced Women, for example, helps women who are trying to leave their husbands because of domestic violence but do not have the financial means to do so alone.

UNICEF has a journal called *Innocenti Digest*, and in 2000 it dedicated its June issue exclusively to domestic violence. Though the publication is almost 10 years old now, it clearly outlines the organization’s position concerning the issue of domestic violence. UNICEF advocates legal action against marital rape, which it recognizes as a serious form of both psychological and physical domestic violence (“Violence” 3). It listed Spain as a nation that had begun to instill legislation against marital rape. The publication also discussed UNICEF’s belief that some key factors to ending domestic violence include more education for women, better healthcare, and stricter enforcement of laws against violence (8). Since the domestic violence edition of *Innocenti Digest* was published in 2000, UNICEF has continued its efforts to stop domestic violence, not only in Spain but around the world.

**Conclusion**

Spain is a living, breathing paradox. On one hand, part of Spain’s charm is its traditional feel. There is small-town resistance to globalization, to McDonald’s and shopping malls. Many educated Spaniards have no idea what Wal-Mart is. Businesses and
stores still close for a few hours during the afternoon so workers can eat lunch with their families and take a siesta. Then on the other hand, Spain is also a progressive democracy. In 2005 it became one of the only nations in the world to grant full legal status to same-sex couples, including complete adoption eligibility and insurance benefits (Woolls 1).

Much of the world views Spain as a strong Catholic nation and the Spaniards seem to like having this reputation. While between 80 and 90 percent of Spaniards declare themselves Catholic, only about 20 percent actually attend church on a regular basis (Woolls 1). This only adds to the paradoxical nature of the country. Its people are in a cultural tug-of-war between wanting to be modern and forward-thinking and wanting to cling to the familiar and traditional. Part of this is surely due to the fact that the people of Spain lived in an isolated state of traditionalism and suppression for 39 years under Franco. The traditional, Catholic beliefs are still very ingrained in the culture, but now that the sting of Franco has started to wear off, the country is becoming more modernized and globally connected every year.

This still-present sense of tradition and resistance to change is the source that allows women to continue to be treated as second-class citizens by their husbands and partners, and in some instances, by law enforcement officers who ignore their cries for help. Spain is still largely a patriarchal society, as for a period of time up until just 34 years ago women were their husband’s property by law. Women are legally equal to men these days, but we’ve witnessed in our own country how even after laws change, attitudes and social acceptance of those laws can lag.

For an American reader to understand how the social implications of domestic violence have lingered in the Spanish culture, a comparison to the American Civil Rights
Movement of the 1950s and 60s is appropriate. Even after laws were instated that gave African Americans full access to the same places (restaurants, schools, etc) as white citizens, some rejected the idea of integration for a long time. Today our society has evolved exponentially, but even with the election of the first African American president some argue that racism is still present in America, more than half a century after the Civil Rights Movement. It's a similar situation with domestic violence in Spain: they've come a long way, but there's still a long way to go.

Domestic violence is not a problem unique to Spain. It's present in every country, and women of every race, ethnicity and religion have been victims. What makes domestic violence such a serious problem in Spain is the long-standing machismo culture and, in recent history, the 39-year span when women were not considered full citizens. For centuries, the machista aspect of Spanish culture has assured men that it is acceptable to take out their aggression on their wives or partners. Laws are now in place to protect women, and Zapatero deserves much credit for his efforts to stop domestic violence.

But Zapatero can't do it alone. Domestic violence will remain prominent in society until the Spanish people collectively decide that it is wrong. Judges and police officers need to take domestic violence complaints seriously. Men need to learn to channel and control their anger. Women need to learn how to recognize and escape abusive relationships, and more importantly that they do not deserve to be abused, no matter what. Also, children and young adults need to be taught by parents, educators, and role models, such as actors and athletes, that violence is not an option to solve disputes or to deal with relationship problems. If contributing members of society work together to change social norms and
educate the next generation, Spain may someday become a nation in which the phrase "I beat her because she was mine" is never uttered again.
Works Cited


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