From Confrontation to Avoidance: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilization in Spain

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Introduction

In 2018, Spain could be defined as "an increasingly feminist country" (Barreiro, 2018). The Barometer on Feminism conducted by the research agency 40db showed that more than half of the Spanish population considered themselves as feminists and that an overwhelming majority recognized the inequality between women and men with respect to their social, political, and/or economic rights. Only 6% disagreed with this statement (Barreiro, 2018). More recent surveys illustrate, however, a very different

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picture, at least among the younger generation. In January 2024, the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) published a study showing the rise of anti-feminist and anti-gender positions among young men between 16 and 24, stating that 51% of them believe that feminism has gone too far, unfairly discriminating against men (CIS, 2024). Another survey by 40db highlighted the gap in how young women and men identify themselves in terms of gender equality. Among the oldest (59 and over), 47% of men and 55% of women consider themselves to be very or fairly feminist. Among Generation Z, the range is much wider: 35% of young men between 18 and 26 consider themselves feminist, while among women this figure rises to 66% (Valdes, 2024). What lies behind such a divide?

In this chapter we aim to explain the dynamic interactions between the feminist movement and the anti-gender mobilization. While in other surrounding countries (see the chapter on Italy in this book) the recent rise of the feminist movement can be understood as a reaction to the influence of anti-gender actors in the social and political system, the Spanish case somehow reverses the pattern. In other words, the emergence and consolidation of anti-gender actors in recent years can be explained as a reaction to the approval of certain laws, rules, and regulations related to gender equality and LGBT+ rights, as well as to the growing strength and visibility of feminism in the struggle to maintain and extend these advances.

Social movement action is not always directed against the state or corporations, but sometimes emerges in opposition to other social movements. Researchers have highlighted the importance of this interaction between movements and counter-movements as a fundamental aspect of the political process and democratization (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Dillard, 2013). Social movements often create the conditions for the emergence of counter-movements, whose bases see their interests threatened by the results of the opposing party's actions. Thus, some authors have suggested that the rise of the radical right since the 1990s can be understood as a backlash against the cultural changes promoted by the New Left movements that arose in the 1960s (Oesch, 2012). The movement and its counter-movement maintain a dynamic that influences the elaboration of tactics and strategies, the making of frames and ideologies, and the success or failure of each side. Political authorities often mediate these interactions. This mediation varies according to the issues and goals of the actors involved, the type and structure of government, and the

interaction with other levels of governance through scale shifts brought about by the movements or their counter-movements.

Research has contributed to a better understanding of movement/counter-movement dynamics, including longitudinal analyses that focus on the evolution of each side's mobilization patterns (see, e.g., McCright & Dunlap, 2000; Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020). However, this type of analysis is scarce in the Spanish case.[1] This chapter aims to contribute to filling this gap through an in-depth study of the development of the anti-gender mobilization in recent years in Spain, the evolution of the patterns of interaction that this counter-movement has maintained with the feminist movement, and the relationship between both actors with the state. In analyzing these issues, we will use concepts and approaches from social movement studies, such as the political opportunity structure (della Porta, 2024), collective action frames (Snow et al., 2019), and tactical repertoires (Tilly, 2008).

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first provides an overview of anti-gender mobilization in twenty-first-century Spain, distinguishing two waves with different characteristics. The analysis of these contentious waves focuses on, namely, their main actors, the conflicts around which they mobilize, and the forms of action they use in their mobilization. The second section looks at the responses that feminists have articulated to confront the mobilization of anti-gender actors, separating them into two main groups: confrontational and non-confrontational actions.[2] The chapter ends with a final section of conclusions, which summarizes the main findings and discusses the relevance of the Spanish case in understanding movement/counter-movement dynamics.

[1] Exceptions are, for example, Alonso and Paleo (2017), Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo (2017), and Bonet-Marti et al. (2023).

[2] The analysis of the feminist responses incorporates materials extracted from secondary data sources and the field work of the project FIERCE, Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe, in the framework of which 30 in-depth semi structured interviews (20 with feminist activists with different stances toward institutions, and 10 with feminist political representatives from center-left and left-wing parties) were conducted between March and July 2024. This chapter is part of the development of FIERCE as well as the project ECOPOL, Evolution of Political Contention in Spain, which is supported by the Spanish State Research Agency [grant number PID2019-104078GB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033].

The Anti-Gender Mobilization: A Tale of Two Waves

In recent decades, the anti-gender mobilization in Spain has developed in two waves, each with its own characteristics. The first wave arose in 2004 in opposition to the laws passed by the government of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the then president, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, lasting well into the following decade. This wave was driven by the Catholic Church and allied organizations, with abortion and same-sex marriage as battle horses (Aguilar, 2012). The second wave involves the secularization of the movement around Vox, a recently created far-right political party that has led the opposition to the PSOE-Unidas Podemos (UP) coalition government since 2019 on issues of gender identity, gender-based violences, and abortion.

The initial surge of the anti-gender movement between 2004 and 2010 followed the legal recognition of gender-based violence (2004), same-sex marriage (2005), electoral parity (2007), gender identity (2007), and abortion (2010) rights by the Socialist governments of the time (Blázquez et al., 2018). It also coincided with the repositioning in the political landscape of a revitalized and LGBT+-sensitive feminist movement (Platero & Ortega-Arjonilla, 2016). At the time, the LGBT+ movement's support of the new PSOE—and its leader Rodríguez Zapatero—was reciprocated by a more sympathetic attitude of the Socialists to their demands (Calvo, 2007). Women were also instrumental in the passage of new reforms and legislation. Driven by women's activism within the Socialist Party as well as pressure from the feminist movement, the Zapatero government institutionally promoted and consolidated gender equality policies. One example is the 2004 law on integral protection measures against gender-based violence, which responded to a demand from the Spanish feminist movement, which had been mobilizing since the late 1990s to put the fight against gender-based violence as a priority on the political agenda (Lombardo & León, 2014).

Catholic actors were prominent in the reaction to these legal changes. The adversarial role played by the Catholic Church in the anti-gender mobilization and the diffusion of "gender ideology" as a master frame allied this institution with the more conservative churches but distanced it from mainstream religious institutions in Europe (Aguilar, 2011, 2012). The Bishops' Conference, which initially played a dominant role in anti-gender contention, gradually gave way to a "lay Catholic activism" (Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2018, p. 524) composed of a network of

organizations led by Hazte Oír and Foro de la Familia. These actors used strategies such as lobbying through political connections—especially with the right-wing Partido Popular (PP)—engaging with public opinion and the media, and organizing demonstrations and protests. During this period, the PP government of Esperanza Aguirre in the region of Madrid (2003–2012) became "the great laboratory of the neocon," financing "profusely anti-abortion or religious organizations linked to the most fundamentalist sectors of the Church and the media close to it with public money" (Alabao, 2021, p. 506).

The anti-gender mobilization that emerged in the 2000s facilitated the push by then PP president Mariano Rajoy (2011–2016) to abolish the abortion law of 2010. In late 2013, his party put forth a new bill entitled for the *Protection of the Life of the Conceived Child and the Rights of Pregnant Women*.[3] The bill allowed for abortion up to the 22nd week of pregnancy in only two circumstances: rape or in the case of "significant and lasting impairment" to the physical and mental health of the woman or the fetus. To proceed with an abortion, women first needed the consent of at least three doctors, then had to be given verbal information about alternative options, and finally had to consider and wait for seven days—rather than three—before the procedure could be carried out. Unlike the 2010 law, the new bill made it illegal for minors between 16 and 18 years old to have an abortion without the consent of their parents or legal guardian(s). The bill allowed for the criminal prosecution of women and doctors who did not meet these requirements and banned any medical facility from advertising the provision of abortion procedures. As we will see, the introduction of this bill triggered widespread feminist organizing, leading to a series of massive mobilizations that persisted for months. It is important to note that polls showed that a majority of citizens, including PP voters, were opposed to the proposal (Campillo, 2019). As a result, the Minister of Justice, who had championed the bill, eventually resigned, and the conservative government amended the 2010 abortion law instead. The amendment, which was finally introduced in 2015, included a requirement for parental consent for abortions for minors between the ages of 16 and 18. In a similar fashion, although the government did not proceed with the repeal of same-sex marriage as originally announced, it did grant the anti-gender organization Hazte Oír the status of a public utility

[3] https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/paginas/enlaces/201213enlaceaborto.aspx/.

association. This entitled the organization to tax benefits, economic advantages, and free legal aid.

The failure of Mariano Rajoy's conservative government to take decisive action against the perceived threat of "gender ideology" led to a rift between the Partido Popular and the lay Catholic activists that has been allied with them in the past, namely organizations such as Hazte Oír and Foro de la Familia. Since 2014, the anti-gender organization Foro de la Familia has organized demonstrations under slogans such as "Every Life Matters," mainly targeting abortion and, more recently, euthanasia. However, the turnout for these demonstrations has been lower than it was in the period of 2004–2010. In 2014, Hazte Oír launched the #YoRompoConRajoy campaign, a telephone harassment initiative aimed at both disrupting phone lines and flooding the PP headquarters with complaints about the government's tolerance of gender laws enacted by the previous Socialist government.

In this context, the far-right party Vox was founded in 2013 by former members of PP, with significant financial support from CitizenGo, an international anti-gender lobby founded by the president of Hazte Oír. Vox effectively attracted disillusioned neoconservative and anti-gender factions within PP, thereby contributing to the growth of the anti-gender movement in Spain. The emergence of Vox marked a significant turning point in the development of the anti-gender movement, as it emerged as its most prominent representative, successfully expanding its audience and gaining legitimacy (Espacio Público, 2021; Rivas, 2021; Alcaide, 2022; Cabezas Fernández, 2022a, 2022b; Bernárdez-Rodal et al., 2022).

Vox was at the forefront of a new, more recent wave of anti-gender mobilization in Spain which, like the previous one, was motivated by certain institutional advances in gender and equality that had been vigorously promoted and defended by the feminist movement. The austerity policies initiated by the Socialist government of Rodríguez Zapatero in 2010 and continued and expanded by successive conservative governments from the following year marked a significant break in what had until then been a clear upward trajectory of equality policies (Lombardo & León, 2014). These policies received a new impetus in 2019 with the first coalition government in Spanish history, formed by PSOE-UP, which re-established the Ministry of Equality.[4] Under the leadership of Irene Montero (UP),

[4] The first Ministry of Equality was created in 2008 during the second legislature of the social democratic government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. In 2010, during a government restructuring, it was integrated into the new Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality.

this ministry drafted three major laws that marked the government: the law of *Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom* (also known as the "Only yes is yes" law) (2022), a new law on *Sexual and Reproductive Health and Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy* (2023), and the law for *the Real and Effective Equality of Trans People and for the Guarantee of LGTBI rights* (popularly known as the "Trans law") (2023).

While Spanish ultranationalism played a key role in Vox's entry into the electoral sphere—coinciding with the creation of the coalition government of PSOE-UP and their emphasis on equality policies—, anti-gender activities have become the party's main focus: "For Vox, feminism represents the core of the evils of modern society and the decadence of a Spain in conflict. Therefore, its anti-feminist stance and opposition to 'gender ideology' are intertwined with ultra-nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, the defense of traditional values, and anything that questions the territorial, identity, and ideological unity of its Spanish 'essence.'" (Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez, 2021, p. 2).

The new anti-gender wave led by Vox implies in some way the secularization of mobilization (Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez, 2021) and to a large extent also its institutionalization. Through various means, and making use of its position in political institutions, Vox fostered an anti-gender environment and disseminated criticism of feminism and feminist movements and policies. The party led the "opposition to public policies that address the phenomenon of violence against women" and the "direct delegitimization of the feminist movement as blind, authoritarian and supremacist" (Cabezas Fernández, 2022a, p. 320). Certain local and regional governments where Vox participates or provides external support, such as the Andalusian Parliament, the government of Castilla y León, the autonomous region of Madrid, or Murcia, have attempted, sometimes successfully, to repeal or dismantle certain LGBT+ or gender-related laws.

However, the clash between governments at different levels over gender and equality policies is not new. In the previous anti-gender wave, anti-abortion organizations such as Red Madre (which emerged from Foro de la Familia and aims at supporting mothers with unplanned, unwanted, or problematic pregnancies) mobilized to pressure conservative regional governments to approve regulations restricting women's rights to freely terminate their pregnancy. They did so "taking advantage of the political opportunity structure offered by the Spanish quasi-federal model, thanks to which the advances promoted [in sexual and

reproductive health] by the Socialist government at the national level could be counteracted at the regional one, where the PP still had an overt dominance" (Alonso & Paleo, 2017, p. 66).

Without abandoning the master frame of gender ideology, Vox has disseminated another core idea: the so-called "demographic winter", which presents the culturally Spanish society as incapable of sustaining itself over time and under threat of being demographically substituted or replaced by a culturally different social composition. The term was introduced long ago by transnational anti-gender groups to denounce that sexuality and gender-related rights were provoking a "societal suicide" in the Global North (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023, p. 21). Those responsible for this state of social, cultural, and biological decadence are basically immigrants (especially Muslims), feminists (who defend abortion rights), and progressive politicians (who allow and encourage illegal immigration). In electoral campaigns, Vox has employed the discourse of the "Reconquest of Spain" against these and other enemies, in a frame that "reveals how nativism, authoritarianism and masculism are intertwined in [a] de-democratizing project" (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b, p. 209). Gender "has allowed Vox to establish its identity, markedly masculinist, and differentiate itself from competing center-right parties" while "defining feminism as the enemy of the nation, with unprecedented virulence" (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b, p. 210). Some of Vox's solutions to the "demographic winter" are similar to those advocated against "gender ideology," such as the defense of life (repealing abortion laws to make the procedure more restrictive) and the defense of the traditional family (promoting a State pact for the family that implies the protection of large families, increases in bonuses for children, and the creation of a universal benefit of 100 euros for each child, similar to the policies of Law and Justice in Poland).

The second wave of anti-gender mobilization has incorporated more institutional forms of action into its tactical repertoire, with Vox using counter-actions and boycotts of institutional actions to express their rejection of feminist demands and of the general consensus against gender-based violence. For example, during the 8M protest in 2020, Vox organized a rally at the Palacio de Vistalegre in Madrid, where its leaders labeled the feminist demonstrations of that day a "coven." On several occasions, Vox representatives have opposed the realization of a moment of silence or the acts of homage to the victims of gender-based violence, even counteracting with homages to "all victims." Another one of their mobilization strategies has been the attempt to appropriate (or even

redefine) feminism. Vox has developed a "parasitic-opportunistic appropriation of feminism: parasitic because it aims to damage feminism by appropriating its legitimacy; opportunistic because this appropriation was used to counterattack feminism at a moment of recent support and legitimacy" (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b, pp. 206–207). However, in comparison with other countries such as France or Germany, anti-gender political actors in Spain (particularly Vox) have made little use of this strategic resource (Franzé & Fernández-Vázquez, 2021: p. 179; Sprengholz, 2021, pp. 491–496; Shurts, 2024, pp. 73–75).

The second anti-gender wave has utilized two additional arenas of mobilization: digital communities and the judiciary. The use of these spheres in terms of social movements is not new, but they have been employed more often in recent years, especially for anti-gender groups. The growth of anti-gender sentiments has been facilitated by digital communication, specifically through the establishment of new ultraconservative media outlets, the visibility of anti-gender influencers and YouTubers, and the presence of online channels, forums, and discussion groups where misogynistic and anti-gender discourses have proliferated (Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2020; Núñez Puente et al., 2021; Villar-Aguilés & Pecourt, 2021). Misogynist Internet communities—the so-called Spanish manosphere—have contributed to disseminating frames and concepts among the younger population, especially in relation to gender violence: ideas such as that violence has no gender, that gender violence is an ideological invention, or that feminism has gone too far (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2022).

Finally, as a lawyer and feminist activist underlined in our interview, the reach of the anti-gender movement pervades into state institutions, including the judiciary (I11). Indeed, certain judges have made controversial decisions that the feminist movement has understood as expressions of "judicial misogyny" (Gimeno, 2022): a form of institutional violence against women that takes multiple forms, including the way in which crimes against women are considered. This can be observed in the vote and ruling of the Court of Justice of Navarra in the case of La Manada,[5]

[5] The case refers to the gang rape of an 18-year-old girl by five men on 7 July 2016 in Pamplona during the San Fermín festival. The rapists were members of a WhatsApp group called "La Manada." The case, which was considered as sexual abuse in two courts (at provincial and regional level), had significant media and social media coverage. At the provincial court, one of the three judges issued a separate ruling in favor of the acquittal of the defendants. The case was finally reviewed and sentenced by the Supreme Court on 21 June 2019, which considered it a rape.

which provoked "a feminist social outburst related to sexual violence and its legislative and judicial handling" (Gimeno, 2022, p. 208). Legal changes related to the issue of consent, such as the approval of the "Only yes is yes" law, cannot be understood without this mobilization. At the same time, the implementation of the aforementioned law itself has been strongly contested, namely, some judges have downwardly appealed the sentences of some convicted sex offenders as a result of their interpretation of the law. The policy's leading advocate, Minister of Equality Irene Montero, accused these judges of being sexist and of not enforcing the law correctly. The far-right organization Manos Limpias denounced the Minister (and the Government Delegate against Gender Violence) for her criticism. The complaint was eventually dismissed by the Supreme Court.

Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilization

The reaction to anti-gender mobilizations is considered as one of the triggers for the resurgence of feminist movements on a global scale. In this sense, it is important to mention the Argentine Ni Una Menos movement against gender-based violence in 2015, as well as the feminist mobilizations in Poland in 2016 and Argentina in 2018 against the attacks on abortion rights, as the key global episodes of this feminist upsurge. However, the resurgence of feminist politics in Spain predates those mobilizations and can be considered as one of the reasons for the development of the anti-gender movement in the period 2004–2011, which served as an example to other anti-gender movements in Europe (Paternotte, 2015, cited in Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2017).

As we have seen above, the first wave of the anti-gender movement managed to "hybridize" the PP as some of its members were anti-gender actors (Tarrow, 2021). PP filed an appeal of unconstitutionality against the same-sex marriage law in 2005 and, when it came to government in 2011, put forth a very restrictive abortion bill, for the *Protection of the Life of the Conceived Child and the Rights of Pregnant Women*. The bill triggered a huge response from the feminist movement as soon as it was announced in 2012, intensifying all over Spain throughout 2013 and 2014, when the bill was finally approved by the Council of Ministers. This mobilization marked the beginning of a new cycle of feminist-led protest (Campillo, 2019; Romanos et al., 2022), which was somewhat institutionalized through the local governments of the so-called cities of change

(2015–2019) and especially through the national government of PSOE-UP (2019–2023):

> I believe that the arrival of the coalition government cannot be understood without the continuity of the feminist movement. The feminist movement in the streets is very, very, very powerful, but also in political and parliamentary terms. It is the movement and the axis that has achieved the most agreements. The State Pact against male violence is the only State Pact […] The feminist laws that we have brought out – the abortion law, the law 'Only yes is yes' – were the laws with more consensus within the Parliament, [and] they are thanks, not to the Ministry of Equality, but to the feminist movement and its ability to place itself in the center. (I8, political advisor)

In this sense, the Spanish case deserves particular attention, as it offers a longer trajectory of movement/counter-movement interactions, their fluidity, and how each movement adjusts and adapts its strategies and tactics as the other succeeds or fails.

Today, although anti-gender actors are not in the national government and do not hold central positions in regional administrations, their role and influence appear to be much greater than in the past. Most feminist activists and political representatives interviewed in the framework of our project identify the anti-gender backlash or "denialist obstructionism" (I4, autonomous feminist)[6] as one of the main and more pressing problems facing feminism in Spain:

> Right now there is an unprecedented reaction. There are consensuses that we believed were already [established], the consensus of the human rights framework and so on, which are like absolutely minimal consensuses. And that is no longer there. (I7, political advisor)
>
> The main problem we face today [is] the reactionary turn, the feeling among our kids and also among some of our comrades in the neighborhoods and among the popular classes, that feminism was coming to take something away from them and that it was necessary for them to take its place. (I9, political representative)

[6] Respondents are numbered sequentially according to when the interviews were conducted (Interviewee 1 [I1], Interviewee 2 [I2], etc.) and by adding the type to which they correspond within the sample.

Besides, some of our interviewees underline that the extreme-right anti-gender actors are, in fact, those who have the best insight into what the feminist movement really defends:

> The extreme right [...] has identified feminism as its main enemy in recent times, and I think they do that because they are able to understand precisely the transforming power of feminism. In fact, the extreme right or the right understands it better than the left in some occasions [...] the extreme right has, let's say, the capacity of leadership, the ideological hegemony, to point out the feminist movement, but especially also the Ministry of Equality as their main enemy. But in this offensive they are accompanied, of course, by the judiciary, not all, but a good part, and the media, which have dedicated themselves to make a permanent offensive against feminist advances. (I8, political advisor)

In this section, we will focus on the different strategies that the Spanish feminist movements have adopted in reaction to anti-gender mobilization in the course of the last 15 years. Following the analytical scheme laid out by Lavizzari, Barone, and Bonu (in this volume), we identify two main types of strategies, confrontational and non-confrontational, which may have varying degrees of structure and organization. Confrontational tactics include public protests and counter-actions, whereas non-confrontational tactics consist of avoidance, cultural initiatives, and the use of institutional channels. The choice of strategy depends on the type of attack, the networks involved, the context, the goal of the mobilization, and the character of the collective or organization (Tarrow, 1993; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Jasper, 2004; McAdam & Tarrow, 2018).

Confrontational Tactics

As Lavizzari, Barone, and Bonu stress in this volume, "Confrontational tactics are actions oriented to directly address, denounce, and attack claims, events, and protests of the anti-gender movement." They can adopt different forms, both spatially and temporally. The dimension of space refers to the setting where the confrontational action takes place (neighborhood, city, region, country, online) and the dynamics of the interactions between movements (from direct face-to-face interaction to action at a distance). By contrast, the dimension of time refers to the fact that some actions are more immediate or taken at short notice (e.g.,

making graffiti, boycotting a public event, rallying in reaction to court rulings), while others are organized over a much longer period of time and therefore usually involve more organization, resources, and coalition-building work (e.g., statewide demonstrations in Madrid, coordinated protests).

Broad Alliances Take to the Streets

Over the last 15 years, most feminist groups and organizations have developed more structured, organized, and sustained confrontational actions when faced with the anti-gender movement's new access to power (whether at the state, regional, or local level) and their subsequent promotion (or ability to promote) anti-rights legislation. These actions taken by feminist groups include the organization of coordinated and thoroughly planned nationwide public protests, mainly in the form of demonstrations, marches, and rallies. To carry out this repertoire, which requires a significant amount of resources and a high level of planning, the feminist movement has needed to coordinate both internally and with external actors to form broad, strong alliances.

The feminist response to the law for the *Protection of the Life of the Conceived Child and the Rights of Pregnant Women* illustrates the alliance-building dynamic. In 2012, 135 feminist groups and organizations all over the country created the *Decidir nos hace libres – Plataforma Estatal en Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos* (Deciding makes us free – State Platform in Defence of Sexual and Reproductive Rights), which earned the support of left-wing parties, trade unions, and progressive organizations. From 2012 to 2014, the protests held on 28 September—"which are usually attended by far fewer people (than the 8 March celebrations), reached its peak when the [Ruiz-]Gallardón affair" (I5, institutional feminist) – while the 8 March were mainly dedicated to maintaining the right to choose. Indeed, in 2013, for the first time since its emergence in the 1970s, the feminist movement decided to change the traditional itinerary of the 8 March demonstration in Madrid—from Jacinto Benavente Square to Atocha—and march through the main boulevards of the city (Puerta del Sol, Calle Alcalá), an action usually reserved for major social mobilizations (First of May, 15M movement). Since then, there has been no turning back, and the 8M demonstrations in this city have always filled its central avenues.

In December 2013, after almost two years of centralized lobbying and decentralized—but coordinated—protests in several Spanish cities, two

Asturian feminist associations close to PSOE organized a nationwide demonstration in Madrid for 1 February 2014, under the title *El tren de la libertad* (The Freedom Train). Their initial plan was to pay for 150 train seats to help Asturian women travel to Madrid. However, as their call to action was joined by the above-mentioned State Platform and women's organizations in general—as well as supported by left-wing parties and trade unions—they realized that they had to increase seats. According to police sources, the demonstration gathered around 100,000 people (Quintanal, 2024), ending at the Congress of Deputies, where a group of feminist activists read the manifesto *Porque yo decido* (Because I decide). At the time, *El tren de la libertad* was the most significant feminist protest ever recorded in Spain, and motivated feminist activists to call for other ambitious nationwide mobilizations, which would turn out to be even more successful (7N; feminist strikes).

On the other hand, during the most recent wave of anti-gender activism, which started in 2019, the broadest confrontational actions in terms of coalition-building and organization have been more limited in terms of space and time investment. The key reason for this is the transformation of the political context: since 2019, the national government is in the hands of a progressive, self-defined feminist coalition (PSOE-UP until 2023, and PSOE-Sumar since 2023) that has passed several laws based, to some extent, on the demands of the feminist and LGBT+ movements (reproductive rights and abortion, sexual violence and LGBT+ rights, especially trans rights).

Faced with the loss of influence in the central government, anti-gender actors have capitalized on the structure of Spain's quasi-federal system to exert pressure on (or from) governments at the local and regional levels—a clear political opportunity for these entities. Vox has implemented the following strategy: first, externally supporting PP regional or local governments (as in the autonomous communities of Andalucía, Murcia, and Madrid since 2018) and, since the 2019 elections, forcing their entrance into regional governments, which has happened in places such as Castilla y León, Comunidad Valenciana, and Aragón. The feminist movement, in coalition with other actors (mainly the LGBT+ movement), has organized public protests against Vox's new influence in regional administrations and its anti-feminist policies. One of our interviewees explained the urgency of convening these actions and the positive response they received in terms of participation:

> Shortly after entering the Parliament of Andalusia [in 2018], Vox began to ask for the names of the people who worked in the services related to gender violence, meaning that they had this objective [the persecution of feminism] from the very beginning. [From the] Forum [of Feminist Politics] we said: we spread the word, we notify the government delegation and whoever wants to go [to the demonstration]. We filled Puerta del Sol, [...] we found a lot of people who thought the same, that what was happening was really serious. (I5, institutional feminist)

More recently, in Castilla y León, the feminists in the region organized a march in Valladolid against the Vox proposals in their regional government under the slogan "Ni un paso atrás en nuestros derechos" (Not one step backwards for our rights) (De la Calle Fernández, 2022). In 2023, Castilla y León's administration presented a plan on "birth promotion and support for families" which forced doctors to offer counseling, access to fetal heartbeat monitoring, and 4D ultrasound scans to women seeking abortions. Feminist activists deemed the plan a patriarchal reaction to the recent approval of the *Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, which gave back the right to choose to have an abortion for women between the ages of 16 and 17, eliminated the three days of reflection, and promoted the creation of a register of objecting doctors in each autonomous community in order to guarantee that voluntary terminations of pregnancy were offered in public centers. The feminist reaction against the birth promotion plan in Castilla y León led the national government to modify Article 24 on "institutional responsibility" of the above-mentioned law to prevent any public administration from implementing actions that alter the choice of women. Another example of regional feminist movements organizing confrontational actions against their regional administration can be found in Valencia, where the Coordinadora Feminista called for a protest against PP and Vox's 2023 regional government pact (Martínez, 2023).

Occasionally, the feminist movement has joined forces with the LGBT+ movement in its fight against anti-gender actors and reforms, with some protests being led by the latter. For example, this is the case of the mobilizations against the most conservative PP regional governments, such as that of Isabel Díaz Ayuso in Madrid, which has been the first regional government to curtail LGBT+ and trans laws (passed in 2016 by PP itself). After the announcement of a proposal in this sense, which was finally approved in November 2023, 35 regional organizations of the LGBT+ movement created the platform *Ni un paso atrás Madrid* (Not one step

backwards Madrid), which later organized a rally (Honorato, 2023) and a demonstration (Puentes, 2023). According to one of our interviewees, it is no coincidence that this cutback in the regional law was passed when the national trans law was already approved and established a series of obligations and rights that could not be contravened by regional governments:

> Look at Madrid, which suddenly goes and reverses what it had already approved, or intends to reverse it, because there is also a lot of posturing going on there, because you look it up in detailed and there is probably less repealed than it seems. (I7, political advisor)

Boycotts, Escraches, and Counter-Protests

Throughout the two waves of anti-gender mobilization, the feminist movement has combined more structured confrontational actions with other more loose, immediate. and local ones. These actions have generally focused on disrupting events staged by anti-gender actors, in order to draw public attention to the curtailment of rights, and to name and shame those who support such curtailment. During the campaign against Ruiz-Gallardón's abortion bill (2012–2014), coalition-building, lobbying, and nationwide coordinated or unitary protests were combined with other smaller-scale but more disruptive confrontational actions, such as the boycotting of public anti-gender events. The Spanish section of the transnational feminist organization FEMEN, which practices direct confrontational action, was created in 2013, amid that campaign. Their first action consisted in five activists, naked from the waist up and with their faces made up like skulls, bursting into a march called "For life, women and motherhood," which was led in March 2013 by the Foro de la Familia, Fundación Red Madre, and Hazte Oír and counted on the support of hundreds of pro-life organizations (EFE, 2014a). Later that year, FEMEN activists broke into the Congress of Deputies during a session in which Minister Ruiz-Gallardón was present and shouted "abortion is sacred," a slogan that was also painted on their bodies (Díez, 2013). In 2014, two of them chained themselves to a crucifix in the Almudena Cathedral in Madrid (EFE, 2014b).

The choice of a confrontational, direct action by FEMEN activists is linked to its own character as an organization and the profile of the actors that they target, but other feminist groups have also employed direct actions, on certain occasions to name and shame their enemies. For

example, in May 2013, after a rally in front of the national headquarters of PP, some 300 activists carried out an *escrache* against Ruiz-Gallardón in his own house. The *escrache* is a form of protest which consists of the public condemnation of those responsible for an injustice with the objective of exposing and upsetting them (Romanos, 2014).[7] Other disruptive and signaling actions include the group Feministas Autónomas' collective boycott of a public event of the Minister of Health (Europa Press, 2015); similarly, on different occasions graffiti with feminist slogans has appeared in university chapels (Ollero & Durán, 2016) and churches (De Buján, 2018).

Another less structured and immediate confrontational action deployed by the feminist movements has been to use social media to organize rallies to react to court rulings. Indeed, before the #MeToo global movement, a large-scale movement of support emerged in 2017 regarding the treatment that victims are given both by the judge and the media during trials for sexual assault and rape. On the day of the judgment against La Manada, in which the gang was found guilty only of sexual abuse and not of rape, there were massive, public protests in every Spanish city under the slogan #yosítecreo (#Idobelieveyou). The "Only yes is yes" law on sexual violence, which put women's consent at the core of the law, can be seen as a result of the success of those mobilizations.

As for the most recent wave of anti-gender mobilization since the late 2010s, less structured actions at the local level have also taken different forms. An example is the counterprotests organized on the occasion of vigils held by anti-gender actors in clinics where abortions are performed. Groups and platforms such as Feminismos Tetuán, Comisión por el Derecho al Aborto de Madrid, and the Asociación de Clínicas Acreditadas para la Interrupción del Embarazo lobbied the Ministry of Equality to

[7] The word "escrache" comes from the popular slang of Buenos Aires, and refers to a kind of public protest that shows a person up for who they really are. Although similar forms of protest have occurred in other places, the first "escraches" recognized as such date from the 1990s, a period when impunity reigned regarding crimes that had been carried out during the 1976–1983 dictatorship in Argentina. Families of the "desaparecidos" would demonstrate outside the homes or the workplaces of some of those responsible for crimes during the dictatorship, so that their neighbors and workmates would come to know who they really were and what they had done. Later the range of objectives for this kind of protest broadened to include those responsible for the crisis which swept the country after the "corralito" (the economic measures to stop a bank run which implicated a limit of cash withdrawals) of 2001, and in a process of transnational diffusion, being used during the cycle of anti-austerity mobilization in Spain to blame those responsible for the economic crisis.

sanction the harassment practiced in front of these clinics; this type of harassment was finally introduced into the Penal Code in April 2022. However, according to the testimony of an activist from Feminismos Tetuán, the prospect of that reform being implemented provoked the creation of what Hazte Oír called a Pro-Life Shelter right in front of one of these clinics, where "they convince you to get into a mobile ambulance, have an ultrasound and give you a coffee so that, if that day you have an abortion planned, you can no longer do it because you are not fasting" (I2, autonomous feminist).

This and other anti-abortion infrastructures have become the target of FEMEN protests (Albarrán Méndez, 2023) and other more prompt confrontational actions, such as graffiting (Ruiz, 2024).

More recently, the anti-gender reaction against the right to gender self-determination, recognized by the Trans law, which has included impacting political decisions by conservative regional governments to cut LGBT+ rights, has also motivated immediate and less structured confrontational reactions. For example, in November 2023, FEMEN protested against the Madrid government's decision to change its regional Trans law by boycotting a PP public event in Madrid, in which Alberto Núñez Feijoo (its national leader) and Isabel Díaz Ayuso (president of the Community of Madrid) participated.

Non-Confrontational Tactics

While confrontation and public protest were the main strategies adopted by the feminist movement during PP's rule in government from 2011 to 2018, activists also resorted to promoting media and cultural campaigns aimed at disseminating information, preserving the collective memory of the movement, and countering anti-gender narratives. As one activist from the Comisión 8M Madrid explained:

> I think we see our work more as building mass, rather than pointing fingers [...] When I start writing manifestos, what I try to do is to visualize what we want [...] and the strength we have, and who we are with [...] Not to take for granted the shit we have, but what can be. That germ of the world that is constructed within an assembly and within a collective or within safe spaces and so on, is an idea of the world and then (what we have to do is) to open it up. (I4, autonomous feminist)

From Raising Voices…

Feminists have raised their voices not only to protest against the anti-gender agenda but also to explain the "germ of the world" the movement intends to carry out, to use the activist's expression from the quote above. The explanation of the movement's goals is also an exercise in memory, in which different moments in time are bridged to show how current struggles connect with others in the past, building a collective identity (Sommers, 1994). This endeavor includes the production of diverse documentaries that have commemorated past protests and demonstrations in the face of the new reactionary offensive (*Yo decido. El tren de la libertad*; *¿Qué coño está pasando?*; *No estás sola: La lucha contra La Manada*), as well as publications on the recent cycle of the feminist movement and its demands (Fórum de Política Feminista, 2017; Comisión Feminista 8M de Madrid, 2019; Suárez Suárez, 2020).

Another major strategy employed by feminist activists involves gaining access to institutional channels and monitoring and evaluating gender policies implemented by public administrations. These initiatives have succeeded in exposing (and redressing) the drain of resources by conservative governments on gender-related social policies. The *Plataforma Impacto de Género Ya* (Gender Impact Now Platform) is an umbrella organization that aims to monitor, review, and analyze annual general state budgets to make sure that they comply with the legal obligation to include a gender impact report, as well as with other political commitments. In 2018, among other things, this platform identified a breach of the State Pact Against Gender-based Violence signed by all political forces at the end of 2017:

> The State Pact against Gender-based Violence had been approved to increase by 200 million euros [...] but when the government presented the draft budget, the 200 million were not there. They were in the yellow book, which is one of the volumes, but it is not binding. We made a lot of demonstrations all over Spain, in 60 cities, [...] The fact is that we achieved it. In the end [the liberal party] Ciudadanos and even the PP rectified and the 200 million were [finally] approved. (I5, institutional feminist)

… to a Controversial Silence

However, in the most recent wave of anti-gender mobilization (since 2019), the main strategy adopted by the feminist movement against anti-gender actors in the country is probably avoidance or silence, which aims

at disempowering and delegitimizing these entities by keeping media and social attention away from them. Most of the time, this is a deliberate strategy:

> One of the things that the Platform (Gender Impact Now) does is that we present the manifesto within the deadline for the presentation of amendments by the deputies and we present it to all the parliamentary groups. [...] We do not invite Vox because they are masters at using the efforts of others to turn them against you. We have already seen them practice this on several occasions with other feminist organizations or in other institutional matters and we do not want to deal with them as far as we can, because we know that they are against it, but also that they are going to distort it, that they are going to turn one of our actions into their own news and we do not want that. (I5, institutional feminist)

The avoidance strategy seems to be the most common strategy when looking at the communicative and social media initiatives of feminist activists. Indeed, when some feminists have engaged in public debate with anti-gender opinion leaders, they have been widely criticized. This was, for example, the general reaction toward the association Mala Feminista (Bad Feminist) as a result of their organizing a debate in November 2019 between the philosopher Clara Serra, a feminist intellectual and activist, and the anti-gender influencer and YouTuber *Un tío blanco hetero* (A Straight White Guy). Despite the relative success of the debate (which got almost 500,000 views on YouTube), the very decision to debate in public with anti-gender actors generated a huge controversy within the feminist movement, on whether or not it was appropriate to grant visibility and an audience to anti-feminist discourses (Serra, 2019, 2022).

The strategy of avoidance is also used by autonomous trans-inclusive feminists against gender-critical feminists, who have grown in number and been very active in their campaign against the recognition of the right to gender self-determination by the Trans law. As one of our interviewees said to us: in the face of anti-gender feminists' provocations or of the media trying to delve into divisions within the movement, "our strategy is rather not to answer, not to go in there" (I4, autonomous feminist).

However, the avoidance strategy seems to be seen as increasingly problematic, fundamentally among feminist activists who have held institutional positions:

> What we have to do is to clearly address how to combat anti-feminism […] but now it is up to us not to make it easy for them. This means thinking concretely about how we combat the anti-feminist discourse in the most intelligent and effective way possible. [At some point] we did not want to debate with anti-feminism and neo-machism, […], but I am a high school teacher and I notice that at this point it is necessary to articulate a discourse and concrete debates to respond to the questions that anti-feminism and neo-machism are raising. (I9, political representative)

Conclusions

Since the turn of the millennium, feminist and anti-gender movements have played a fundamental role in the Spanish political process, especially in relation to gender policies such as LGBT+ rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. Within this framework, both movements have developed, over the years, a dynamic of action and reaction that has influenced their strategies and tactics, the making of frames, and the success or failure of each of their goals. While the study of the anti-gender movement has become a growing field of research in Spain in the last decade, attention has focused on the political, economic, and cultural causes for its development (Alonso & Paleo, 2017; Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2017, 2018; Alabao, 2021; Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez, 2021; Cabezas Fernández, 2022a, 2022b) and on the new arenas in which anti-genderism is displayed (Núñez Puente et al., 2021; Villar-Aguilés & Pecourt, 2021; Bernárdez-Rodal et al., 2022). Nevertheless, research on movement/counter-movement dynamics between feminist and anti-gender movements has been limited. This chapter serves as an attempt to fill this gap by exploring the different waves of feminist and anti-gender mobilization in Spain, the evolution of the patterns of interaction between the two movements, and the role of political institutions in mediating, facilitating, or accelerating this interaction.

Two recent waves of anti-gender mobilization can be distinguished in Spain. The first wave arose in 2004, led by the Catholic Church and allied organizations against the gender-related laws (essentially, same-sex marriage and abortion) passed by the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. It was only when this wave of the anti-gender movement became partially institutionalized with the arrival of PP in government and its plan to roll back key gender rights that feminist movements adopted stronger, more organized, and more extensive (in terms of both

time and space) confrontational tactics. The feminist response to anti-gender politics was so massive that it even impacted feminist activists, who from then on felt empowered to organize more ambitious mobilizations. Thus, feminism boomed in Spain from 2012–2013 to 2020 and, for a few years, it seemed to have built up hegemony, winning the cultural battle and taking the streets. With strong support in public opinion as expressed in various polls (see the introduction to this chapter), the feminist movements managed to get all political parties represented in the Congress of Deputies to sign a State Pact on Gender-based Violence in 2017, as well as prompting all political parties, except for Vox, to declare themselves to be feminist in the months leading up to the 8M feminist strike in 2018. Indeed, feminism is considered one of the key factors of the success of the pact between center-left and left-wing parties ahead of the 2019 general elections. However, feminist outcry and the partial institutionalization of the movement through a Ministry of Equality led by UP leaders and former feminist activists is also at the root of the strong anti-gender backlash Spain has experienced in the last four years. As we have seen, this second wave of anti-gender unrest has been fundamentally led by Vox and has developed in opposition to the legal advances in gender policies (especially, sexual and reproductive rights, gender self-determination, and gender-based violences) introduced by the national government of Pedro Sánchez between 2019 and 2023. The main feminist strategy employed with regard to this latest cycle of the anti-gender mobilization has been avoidance or silence. This strategy is clearly a response to what seems the main strategy of the anti-gender forces: victimization and the desire for media attention.

In this sense, we have observed how the nature and characteristics of the feminist responses to the anti-gender mobilization have adapted over time, depending, to a large extent, on the role of state institutions. When the national government adopts an anti-gender agenda, feminist movements coordinate and organize stronger forms of confrontational tactics, seeking support in regional or local governments. Conversely, when the national government implements an accelerated feminist agenda, anti-gender forces respond by shifting the sites of contention to the judiciary and conservative regional governments. This, in turn, motivates limited and less organized responses from feminist activists. In this respect, the

diversity of feminist responses and the adaptability of the movement cannot be understood without seeing them in continuity with the actions of their opponents. The Spanish case provides an example of how closely coupled these two movements are, in the sense that "one movement's agenda, tactics and the venues in which it operates (is) determined by its opposition" (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1647).

At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that Spanish feminist movements are diverse and that different types of feminist responses coexist and are combined all the time. The reason for this is that the political context is not the only factor explaining why individual feminist organizations and groups opt for more or less confrontational tactics. Feminist groups have different attitudes toward who is/are the main target(s) of their actions and, therefore, they have different approaches toward their interaction with political institutions. In this sense, we have seen that groups such as FEMEN focus on direct action and tend to use unconventional, immediate tactics in the face of anti-gender forces, while other organizations, such as the *Plataforma de Impacto de Género Ya* (Impact Gender Now Platform), are by nature much more interested in monitoring institutional measures and engaging in political advocacy. In any case, as some activists pointed out in our interviews, feminist movements are doing what they can to counter anti-gender movements, but

> We cannot ignore the fact that on the other side there is a lot of organisation, a lot of interests and a lot of money. And so, of course, if the feminist movement had the structures and funding that the anti-rights movement has, we would make revolution in 24 hours [laughs]. But we are in a very asymmetrical situation. (I11, autonomous feminist)

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Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response

Productive Resistance

Edited by
Rok Smrdelj · Roman Kuhar

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Rok Smrdelj • Roman Kuhar
Editors

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"This book brings a new innovative and democratically important twist to the discussions about anti-gender mobilization. The contributions do not only state the consequences of this culture war that are damaging to democracy, but also show how feminist and LGBT movements actively mobilize against it and thus make an important contribution to saving democracy, indeed to democratizing liberal democracies."

—Professor Dr. Birgit Sauer, *Institute of Political Science, University of Vienna, Universitätsring, Austria*

"This is an important and timely book analyzing the cultural and political battle fields across Europe and the EU premised on eight national case-studies. The book convincingly demonstrates that one of the crucial elements in productive feminist resistance to anti-gender mobilizations across Europe would be to engage knowledge-based activism premised on alliances between scholars and activists."

—Birte Siim, *Professor Emerita, Aalborg University, Denmark*

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