

Gender and agency in the political learning of contentious activism. Reviewing activist models of young people in the new political cycle in the Basque Country

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Abstract

The reproduction of gender order in young people's learning of counter-hegemonic contentious activism may seem a contradiction in a political field seeking to transform the social order and help empower its activists. A qualitative study carried out on young activists in the sphere of leftist Basque nationalism in the aftermath of ETA's armed activity revealed that the repertoires and forms of action of contentious politics foment activist ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity and mean that the women participating tend to occupy a subordinate position. In the tension between the political forces keen on change and those favouring continuance, we studied the factors which could help women activists build dissident collective agencies, particularly, feminist agencies.

Key words: political learning, youth, gender, agency, contentious activism, the Basque Country

Introduction

Contentious politics is a specific field (Bourdieu 1990), a relatively autonomous social space for action, with rules of operation and internally structured in terms of power relations, in which the occupants or would-be occupants take part and compete for the resources considered of worth within it. The contentious field, in its classical sense, encompasses collective political struggles which include social movements, but also other forms of contention, such as riots and strike waves, and other more extensive ones, like civil wars, revolutions and episodes of democratisation. These activities often intersect with routine political processes (Tarrow 2013). Included in diverse contentious politics are those based on an ethnic or national conflict (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1996), and are referred to in this article, resulting from a study carried out in the Basque Country.

In the Basque Country, a European region straddling the border between France and Spain, sub-state nationalism has generated conflict in both states and in Basque society itself since the beginning of modernity. Over the course of 60 years, Basque territory in Spain was the scene of armed action by ETA [*Basque Country and Freedom*], which erupted in the period of Franco's dictatorship in Spain, a time of severe repressive policies on the part of the state. This situation gave rise to a high level of politicisation of Basque society and a more frequent use of models of

contentious politics in civil society when compared with other European democracies. However, the end of ETA's activity in 2011 and its self-dissolution in 2018 marked the beginning of a new political cycle that has developed in the last ten years.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, numerous popular sectorial demands have converged around the political core issue of nation building. As occurred with other new nationalist movements, Basque nationalism has reframed and updated its discourses, adding values and alternative practices, among them, feminism, environmentalism, anti-militarism and resistance to state violence. In point of fact, one of the specific features of the cycle of Basque mobilisation and national vindication in the last forty years lies in articulating the classical values of the left and the demands of new social movements (Zubiaga 2012).

In a context of political conflict and a mobilised society, many youth organisations and movements have, in the past, been characterised by their involvement in the *kale borroka* [street fighting]. Though considerably more tempered, young people close to the Nationalist Left continue to develop other forms of low intensity contentious politics in the face of state repression but have likewise incorporated demands for the authorities of the Autonomous Community and their neoliberal socio-economic policies relating to education, culture and order: civil disobedience, passive resistance, occupation of public space and self-managed space, concentrations and demonstrations. The majority initiated their political learning during adolescence within a constellation of organisations and movements, in which they were socialised in the activist tradition of self-organisation, counter-hegemonic activism and the logic of political confrontation. The formal socialisation spheres were, in the main, the youth organisations, *Jarrai*, *Haika*, *Segi* (each outlawed in turn) and, subsequently, *Ernai*. The informal spheres in which nationalist youth agency played out, such as *gaztetxes* [self-managed youth spaces] and other squats, were also the setting for political learning.

Just like the political parties and trade unions of the Nationalist Left, in the last decade, youth organisations and movements have incorporated feminist principles into their strategy. An example of this is the youth organisation *Ernai* which, following a long process of self-reflection and training, has included feminism, along with independence and socialism, in its strategic lines (Galardi 2017). Moreover, Basque left-wing nationalism has always maintained links with social movements, with which it has frequently formed counter-hegemonic alliances. In turn, feminism acts as an innovating force, rebuilding community networks, together with other popular movements (Esteban 2020). Today, a large conglomerate of feminist groups, many of them made up of young women, is one of the most influential movements in the Basque Country, due to its ability to act and its considerable output of theory (Odriozola, Iraola and Zabalo 2020). The influence of feminist groups has become evident in the last decade in a process of severe criticism of the prevailing models of contentious politics inherited from former times, characterised by male-dominant patterns, and prevalent in the formal spheres of political organisations as well as in informal spaces (Alvarez Molés 2012; Etxebarrieta and Rodríguez 2016; Martínez-Palacios 2018). The history of Basque armed conflict from the nineteen fifties to the present day is being reinterpreted from a feminist perspective (Atutxa et al. 2021).

In this context of change, from the gender perspective, the political socialisation of youth in contentious spheres is still a relatively unexplored field of study. In the Basque political field, the start of a new political cycle, and the consequent weakening of the contentious activism in which many young people had been socialised, the increase in the numbers of young women in youth participatory spaces and the growing influence of the feminist movement lead us to pose questions on the role that the gender category currently plays in contentious youth activism.

Are the gender system and its forms of domination an explanatory category of the socialising dynamics developed by the contentious youth field in socio-political scenarios acutely aware of inequality? Under which conditions can critical youth agency, and more specifically, a dissident feminist agency, transformative of gender norms, be activated in said field?

The analysis presented below has two objectives. In the first place, to ascertain if nationalist contentious politics guided by counter-hegemonic and emancipatory values –independence, socialism, ecologism, feminism, a cultural and linguistic struggle– reproduces forms of gender dominance, and if such is the case, the mechanisms it uses to do so. Secondly, to determine if the particular contexts of a cycle of change, like the one currently being played out in the Basque Country, can influence political learning among youth by creating opportunities for activating feminist agencies that question the naturalised gender order in the political field and develop transformation strategies.

Political socialisation, gender and contentious youth activism

The binary opposition of power/resistance frequently used in contentious rhetoric conceal multiple lines of dominance present in resistance and social transformation practices developed by movements in the contentious politics field. Among these interwoven forms of oppression are those deriving from the gender system. According to Ridgeway and Correll (2004), gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference. Like other multilevel systems of difference and inequality such as those based on race or class, gender involves cultural beliefs and distributions of resources at the macro level, patterns of behaviour and organizational practices at the interactional level, and selves and identities at the individual level.

Gender power relations are part of the “deep structure” of social movements and determine the strategies and cultures of the activist field (Bhattacharjya et al. 2013). In contentious politics, the structure of choice among available tactics and repertoires is key to understanding the gendered roles of the individuals and the organisations within a movement (Ennis 1987). In turn, gender ideology acts as one of the determinants of the strategies and repertoires of activist action (Asal et al. 2013). Transnational analyses show that, though men and women develop similar levels of implication in protest activities, women are more likely than men to participate in activities without confrontation. On the other hand, it is more frequent for males to get involved in repertoires of radical action (Dodson 2015). Even while “participating in the same game”, women and men play differentiated roles (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010), and the non-conventional forms of political action, such as civil disobedience, direct action or political violence become spaces of activity and political learning dominated by men (Kuhn 2010).

Favouring certain conventionally masculine dimensions of physical strength, combativeness and boldness, contentious practices often reinforce the order they claim to subvert (Montesinos-Coleman and Bassi 2011). In this sense, representations of contentious activism give structure to the models of political engagement and generate the exclusion and subordination of voices and bodies that fail to conform to them. The identity of the “ideal activist” tends to establish and set the type of activism considered legitimate (Bobel 2007), preferably oriented to direct action in contentious politics. This identity, defined in accordance with the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and characterised by certain habitus and skills –as well as by the associated rewards– is more feasible for boys than for girls.

The acquisition and interiorisation of these gendered patterns often occurs as a continuation and reinforcement of the preceding primary socialisation (Kuhn 2010; Hooghe and Stolle 2004), so that a “daily sexism” impregnates young people’s common conscience (Calder-Dawe and Gavey 2016). Interiorised cognitive structures in the form of habitus (Bourdieu 1990; 2002) help classify certain social characteristics and practices such as feminine and masculine categories, and enables their naturalised reproduction on multiple levels, in relation to structure, interaction and subjectivities (Neetu et al. 2017).

Research on gendered political learning has underlined in particular the dimension of the reproduction of political socialisation. It has been confirmed over and over again and in different contexts that the traditional gendered division of activist work in accordance with the principles of separation, hierarchy and the visibility of the activist tasks is reproduced. Research has likewise revealed the girls’ lack of symbolic power and their subordinate situation in the field, and demonstrated the links existing between the social construction of hegemonic masculinity and the definition of the qualities recognised as necessary for exercising activism; among the latter being a good command of language, the use of reason (as opposed to emotion), and certain physical resources which, together, make up the standard activist habitus (Bargel 2005; Larrinaga and Amurrio 2017; Martínez-Palacios 2018).

Thus, in terms of reproductive socialisation, research on youth participation and contentious politics coincides in pointing out that the participation of young women is weak, and they need to make a greater effort than males in order to legitimise their activist identity (Gordon 2008; 2009; Taft 2010; 2014). Women are more likely to come up against not only barriers in order to exercise contentious activism, but also negative emotional impact on their political learning, as they fail to fulfil the criteria laid down (Craddock 2019), and due to the obligation to make a permanent effort in order to conform to the same.

However, political socialisation results not only from heritage passed on and the continued reproduction of interiorised patterns. Young people act as an agency in their learning (Amnå et al. 2009). Thus, the contexts of political learning are laboratories where young people, as an agency, experiment and put into practice attitudes and behaviours which in turn shape, remodel and transform the culture of the activist field. This second perspective of political socialisation has led to reflection on the transformative and resocialising role of feminist leadership, of critical reflexivity processes and the consequent programmes of change set in motion in movements and activist contexts (Batliwala, 2010; Wakefield, 2015). Along these lines, the point of view we put forward is that the opportunity structures for changing the gender system in the activist field must be understood at the endogenous level of the movement as well as at the external level (or context) of the political field itself.

Experts on protest politics and social movements coined the concept of political opportunity structure to designate such contextual elements as condition development and change in movements, their being understood as external resources. From the feminist point of view, Taylor (1999) suggested tackling variations in the political and cultural opportunity structures for the mobilisation and protest of women through the conceptual framework of “gender regime”, which refers to a particular state of play of gender relations in a given situation. Taylor argues that this framework highlights the fact that structural manifestations of gender stratification, together with their ideological justification, vary from one social context to another. Recently, from a Bourdieusian perspective, Ancelovici (2021) considered that the “field opportunity structure” of contentious politics should not be understood as an element exogenous to mobilisation, but it is rather the result of relations and interactions within the field

itself. In this way, the activists participating in the movements help build, and give shape to, the structure of opportunities in their relation with the context, both being mutually established. This conceptual proposal allows us to investigate the role of feminist movements and feminist agencies that act not only from the outside but also from within the movements themselves, in which dissidents may be created with an aim to open up windows of opportunity for change in gender relations.

Thus, the activist field can be understood as a sphere in which different multilevel forces interact in conflict, giving rise to struggles and transactions between autonomy and constrictions, between the construction of new meanings and dominant cultural contexts. Currently, on the one hand, there are transformative currents like feminism which, in addition to offering a framework of theory and alternative knowledge, acts as a political agent. On the other hand are the dominant cultural currents which act as forces restraining this change: the convergence of the processes of individualisation, capitalist machinery and neo-liberal rhetoric which challenge new generations with discourses on individualized feminine agency help reintegrate the discourses of agency and resistance and disguise the persistence of models of hegemonic masculinity (Gonick et al. 2009; Scharff 2016).

In these circumstances of symbolic struggles for the new interpretation of gender in activist reality and of attempts at opening up opportunities for change, in recent years, feminist research has begun to look at specific contentious contexts, such as nationalist struggles, in which armed groups have acted within a broader constellation of movements which, in turn, have used “low intensity” violent forms of contention (Balcells, Daniels and Escribà-Folch 2016). Feminist studies have analysed the patriarchal dynamics of such movements. Similarly, they have helped us appreciate the construction of feminist agencies within them and identify the interlocking systems of oppression –relating to nationality, class, culture and gender–, giving a voice to the women involved in them, and studying the effects that the incorporation of young women in the contentious action have had as an element that disrupts the traditional gender system (Moser and Clark 2001; Hamilton 2007; Alison 2009; O’Keefe 2013).

To be precise, our study on political learning among youth focuses on one of these “improbable spaces” for feminist development (O’Keefe 2013: ix), which are traditionally characterised by being patriarchal spaces, ones that reproduce gender relations at women’s expense. In a historical moment in which heritage and political change converge, with a transition towards less contentious practices, we shall examine the possibilities of feminist struggle and the conditions for the creation of feminist agencies in the Basque Left-wing youth movement in the last decade.

Methodology

The analysis presented below is based on qualitative empirical research carried out on the political participation of youth in Basque territory in Spain during 2018 and 2019 (Larrinaga et al. 2020). The qualitative methodology allowed us to reconstruct different narratives on young political careers and identify the sense given by the young people to their experience in political activist learning in a context characterised by uncertainty in their lives, the conflict, political confrontation and repression. It also helped us appreciate the agency capacity of young women and men in the participatory processes in which they are involved, within the framework of the possibility granted to each of them by social structures, power distribution and social position.

The qualitative methodology was developed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting, on average, two hours.

The people interviewed during the course of our research are characterised by their multi-activism. They are well educated and have considerable political capital thanks to their initiation in politics at an early age and their experience in different participatory spaces. They are currently still involved in a broad range of political organisations and movements, though not necessarily in those in which they were initiated. For the purposes of this article, the focus of analysis is on the processes which shaped their political learning in adolescence and early youth, and on the way in which gender normativity affected said learning. These initiatory processes of political socialisation took place in spheres of contentious politics, both as regards formal spaces –youth and student organisations– and informal ones –*gaztetxes*, squats and self-managed spaces and popular movements–, all of them of a mixed nature, within Basque left-wing nationalism. The current activist frameworks of the people interviewed were not studied.

The sample selected for this article is made up of 22 young adults between the ages of 18 and 35, with 10 socialising as women, –five of whom self-identifying as feminists–, and 12 socialising as men. Although the age spectrum established in the sample is not usual in studies on young people, this broad conception of youth has been used in other research (Uba and Bosi 2022). We made this selection in order to be able to include narratives on the political socialisation of adolescents and youth covering several generations in the period immediately prior to and after the ending of ETA's armed activity, and the consequent change in the political cycle.

Analysis

Dominant activist representations and gender exclusions in contentious politics

An analysis of the interviews reveals that the masculine order has prevailed with respect to youth activism of the Basque nationalist left in the political learning processes of several generations. The accounts of their experience given the young people when recalling their activist trajectories refer to a political socialisation of an androcentric nature. The symbolic mechanisms that ratify masculine domination are evident at a variety of levels. In the first place, in the sexual division of political work, which acts as a naturalised prolongation in the political field of productive work in the case of the boys and domestic work in relation to the girls. Secondly, in the symbolic structure of the spaces occupied by boys and girls. The latter's work is often invisible, and they place themselves, and are placed by the boys, on the fringes of the field of contentious activism, –“In the background”, “behind the scenes”, etc.–, once again reproducing the public-private relationship. Last of all, in the temporary structure of activism, with a model of strong commitment and deregulated hours, a factor that favours boys' implication.

The contentious nature of political practice, which is reflected in the prevailing political repertoires aimed at confrontation –and its consequent repressive response–, has been a determining factor in the prevalence of this model. According to Bourdieu, this type of political practice implies a special *habitus*, a system of lasting resources associated with the social position, which organise and structure people's practices and representations (Bourdieu 1977; 1990) in the field of counter-hegemonic contentious politics. Moreover, the resources would appear to be physically incorporated into specific body models –physical resources, body postures, gestures, clothing, etc.–, which represent the stereotyped values of dominant

masculinity; bravery, defiance of danger, aggressiveness and demonstrating physical strength. The political learning of many boys was initiated with the internalisation and reinforcement of this ideal model of activist. The girls, particularly in the initial stages, tried to copy the dominant model, and some, in their early teens, were attracted by its epic. One must remember that these young people were politically initiated at a very early age, one that is decisive for developing identity and subjectiveness, and in which the desire for acceptance and integration in the group, as well ideological and emotional identification, hindered the development of a critical and dissident capacity.

In sixth class at primary school, I remember that there were two choices open to me: to be a *borroka* [fighter] or rapper. And I wanted to be a *borroka* (...) I experienced my first street fights when I was 13 (...) the action and adrenaline were great (...) When they illegalised *Segi* we held a large concentration in the school yard, with smoke canisters, etc. We were about 15 years old (Man, 26, a community of self-managed squats).

Every Thursday, there were concentrations for Basque prisoners and the police would come by, just opposite the school. As we were still children, we would watch everything from behind the railings (...) We could watch the conflict live (...) We saw the *gudaris* [soldiers], who we liked because they were great (...) [At the age of 14] I joined everything I could. On the one hand, I could see the brutality of the conflict, and that appealed to me. I was attracted by activism too (...), it appealed to me, because it was the boys we loved (Woman, 27, feminist group).

The accounts of the young people interviewed likewise reveal the effects of the gradual incorporation in youth movements and organisations of an increasingly larger number of feminist girls who demand equality in activism. As a result, the forms of domination in the activist space have become more subtle over time and the discourses have been reframed, particularly in the case of the boys. At first, the discourse of some of the boys interpreted the quantitative increase in women as a sign of equality. Under the veneer of political correctness, the tutelary and patronising view of integration in activism of “empowered” and “combative” girls, strongly defended by some young people, conceals an inversion of subordination which implies no questioning of the fundamentals of patriarchal domination: male-oriented organisational culture, the distribution of power and hierarchical positions among activists, the differential capacity of political agency to condition agendas and forms of action, the expulsion of certain bodies from the activist field, and other mechanisms for exercising symbolic violence. Feminist principles were formally integrated into masculine discourses, but this integration often failed to actually question the privilege itself.

We’re all equal here (...) Girls are not denied anything, and nothing is said to them. I’d go so far as to say that the girls are the ones who do most within the group. They are more combative, the ones who participate the most (Man, 32, organisation for participatory festivities).

In reality, these recognisable forms of “friendly fire” within youth movements are accompanied, in the narratives analysed, by the allocation of very specific activist roles to girls, which reinforces their subordinate position in the field. Paradoxically, the roles conferred by those with the capacity to appoint and establish (Bourdieu 1990) require the complicity of the girls in order to be able to reproduce patriarchal domination. This complicity is sometimes unconscious and, at times, conscious but inevitable, due to the prior socialisation, the young age, the cultural resources or the emotional identification and ideological affinity. The first of these roles,

strenuously enacted by the young women, particularly in the initial period of their political socialisation, is one which seeks to imitate masculine activist ideals, with an aim to tailoring their resources as much as possible to the standards laid down: ways of speaking and presenting oneself in public, “empowered” physical presence and assertiveness. A second feminine role is the consequence of the gradual integration of feminist principles in the movements. In this case, the assignment leads to the “institutionalised role of feminist” conferred on certain girls, like a specialist women’s space for activism, though restricted in its functions and limited in its responsibilities. Last of all, a third role is the one conferred on certain girls as a form of vicarious authority. It is an unusual role for girls who get differentiated recognition from the male leaders, who, exceptionally, allow them to be at their level.

At that time, I was considered a crazy feminist, who people took little notice of. Only when we had to prove that, apart from nationalists, we were also feminists, would they call me to attend meetings, etc. (Woman, 32, trade unionist).

Inevitably, the disparity of the discourses between boys and girls observed following an analysis of the interviews refers us over and over again to the different positions of the activists involved in the field. Thus, the discourses of some boys refer to a vague social representation of the activist girls as empowered and fighters. The degree to which masculinised activist culture has been naturalised helped cover up the unequal distribution of the symbolic goods that are of worth in the field, fostering a privilege which is willingly enjoyed by activist boys, in other words, within the “order of things”. The belief by some boys that participation alone in contentious politics grants, in a universal manner, the status of powerful activist and that it generates agency and individual empowerment is further reinforced by the fact that the idea connects with the youth subjectivities typical of late modernity and neo-liberal capitalism. Such cultural structures –ideas on choice biographies, unconditioned individual agency, and the capacity for reflexivity and self-creation– have successfully gone beyond the limits of the activist field, although to a varying degree and with variations, and can be appreciated in the perceptions shared by many young activists of themselves and of the world in which they interact. However, the allusions to empowerment and activist strength attributed by some boys to young women activists are proven false in another discourse which elaborates on the experiences recalled by some girls in their processes of political learning.

This second discourse is based on statements made by girls who analyse and assess their long political career from a feminist point of view. They were socialised within “political genealogies” (Elizalde 2018) related to gender activism and have long experience in activism in different movements and organisations. It is precisely the accumulation of symbolic capital that has afforded them the power of agency, allowing them to develop a dissident outlook and, at times, to initiate counter-power actions and feminist resistance from within the activism itself.

From their paradoxical position of subordinate élites in the axis of privilege and oppression, with their experience, they confirm their history of subordination and exclusion, based on both gender and age. The model of male corporality required for contentious political practice, and with a focus on confrontation, excluded them or relegated them to the fringes of the field, their bodies being implicitly described as weak, vulnerable and insecure. In fact, the corporality of people socialised as women could hardly reach the prevailing standard in activities involving confrontation. Thus, these girls feel that the limitations imposed on weak, vulnerable bodies in contentious activism resulted in their authority, interests and opinions being undervalued and their voices, silenced, which has resulted in the somatisation of their discomfort in various forms.

Unlike the boys' stories, the girls' recollection of activist socialisation throws up a whole series of negative emotions related to their learning experience. As long as their body is the existentialist basis of the culture, these emotions emerge as ways of somatising (Csordas 1993) the subordination whereby women's bodies, robbed of all authority, express their guilt through shame, insecurity, anxiety, nervousness, silence and the feeling of "not being up to it", unlike the "true" activists. This unease and the overwhelming self-imposed standards of excellence to which they were unable to put a name during their adolescence later became clearer, together with their causal relationship, in cases in which the maturing of activist identities developed simultaneously with the shaping of feminist identities.

At that age, you don't question it, you can't put it in words, you know you are not comfortable, but you don't know why (Woman, 25, social economy and transformative co-operative).

I recall those times as being interesting and fruitful. But I also felt ashamed at times (...) I began to develop a personality and a look... "I'm orderly, I know how to do things and I make certain forms of speech my own in order to fit in". I may have had high self-expectations. I set myself high standards in activism (...) At that time, we were working in hiding, and all of them were boys (...) older than me (Woman, 27, feminist group).

Opportunities for the changing of gendered activist models in the new political cycle

The political cycle that has got underway in the last decade in the Basque Country has afforded an opportunity to revise contentious activism, its repertoires and the reproduction of the gender system. The structure of opportunity for the change is the result of the confluence of local factors as well as general trends in forms of activism typical of late modernity. As pointed out by Letamendia (2018), since the nineteen eighties and over the course of three decades, direct confrontational actions have set the tone –barricades, clashes with the police or factory blockades–. However, in the last decade, a more symbolic and self-expressive repertoire of action is gradually taking over: mosaics and human chains, forms of resistance on the margins of classical civil disobedience, collective performances, occupation of squares and space, acts at which visual distinctive signs and colours are used... Moreover, the incidence of the struggles of the different movements has varied, and there has been a shift from a characteristically modern dispute, dominated mainly by the activity of the national liberation and workers' movements, to a more diversified dispute, including a mutation in how politics and the political subject are understood. The political subject has multiplied and is blurred, (Gil, 2011; Esteban, 2015) and not pre-constructed, making coordination between different subjects necessary.

In this context, the ending of ETA's armed activity has weakened the intensity of the policy of confrontation developed by the youth organisations of the nationalist left since the nineteen eighties. In recent years, this has allowed the movements to look inwards and reflect on their own identity and their action repertoires in this new situation. Entities have been set up around the movements and these have engaged in collective thinking on the inner workings of the popular organisations using participatory action research, analysing the incidence of power relations, the mutual care of the activists, the reversal of the gender system norms in activism, and the forms of horizontal organisation (Zumalabe Foundation 2014). Moreover, this collective thinking coincided with the coming of age, intensification and organisation of women who have been conforming within and outside –in other movements– and who work jointly with different generations and genealogies of feminists. Particularly striking is the internal work carried out

within the nationalist youth movements, with groups of feminist women exercising their capacity for collective agency and acting as “subaltern counter publics” for a very long time, leading opposing interpretations and developing their own identities and interests.

The youth movement was at a time when ...“let’s think about ourselves, let’s focus on relations (...) and get ourselves out of this “response [to repression] phase”. I don’t know, it was on a different path, ready to move into a more constructive phase. Then, although at that time we didn’t use those words, feminism was an important foundation. And not focusing so much on the outside world in order to see how to change it but rather on the internal world, to see which roles, which power relations we were reproducing among young people (...) I discovered a patriarchal structure (...), I identified the power relations, male domination, and the differential difficulties we have had as women (Woman, 27, feminist group).

Despite resistance, the pressure from feminist agencies in recent years has resulted in the formal integration of feminist principles into the strategy of youth movements (Galardi 2017) and in the institutionalisation of certain corrective mechanisms: action protocols, communication models, specialist equality areas and areas involved in feminism... Younger women activists and those whose activism started in this new scenario affirm that they reconcile their activist identities with other identities, and that they have given up the intensive activism developed by previous generations, who were obliged to constantly respond to repression. Their account of political learning is not marked by any unease, they are aware of their position, and they have more cognitive and practical tools to act as an agency than the girls in former times. In their activist environment, other models of activism, more sustainable for the lives of the activists, have begun to take shape, ones that tacitly imply an acknowledgement of the vulnerability of their bodies. This vision is now beginning to be shared by some boys with a long experience in activism.

I think that politics is more pleasant now (...) I started my militancy after ETA laid down its arms (...) I had no direct experience of clandestinity (...) Activism is not the main priority in my life (...) it’s important, but it is not crucial (Woman, 26, in charge of feminist affairs in a nationalist youth organisation).

People need to feel good from the start (...) we need to give importance to the social relations that emerge here, we need to look after these relations (Man, 26, community of self-managed squats).

The process of introspection and self-analysis of the organisational culture of the movements has enabled the acceptance of other models of masculinity and non-normative sexual identities. It has also meant that some young adults have been able to critically evaluate their own activist journey and admit to the privileged status that has allowed them to take on leadership and central roles. Nevertheless, it would appear that this process of masculine activist resocialisation requires a long time for its consolidation, and, likewise, an accumulation of lessons and cognitive capital to help the activist reorient the initial *habitus* in young adulthood.

Yes, I think that being a boy was an important factor [in my career in the movement] (...) As boys we are taught to be “more forward”, to raise our voice and behave differently. I’ve thought about this often (Man, 33, reporter and digital activist).

This process of revision is not without ambivalence and fears. On the one hand, the young feminists are aware that a redistribution of the real power within youth movements will go on

generating resistance and conflicts from here on and will call for great efforts on the part of the girls and people with non-normative gender identities, from the personal and emotional point of view. On the other hand, the increased diversification and popularisation of feminist groups integrating new generations, the emergence of currents that coincide with neo-liberal forms of understanding empowerment, individualisation and agency free of constrictions adopted by many young girls, as well as the risk of trivialisation and commercialisation of feminist values in the second wave, are interpreted by the more experienced activists as a reversal of their success.

Discussion and conclusions

In line with other studies on contentious politics (Rossdale 2019), the results of our analysis appear to confirm a tendency where the gender system is reproduced in the processes of activist socialisation and the way in which certain masculine contentious repertoires can reinforce the emancipatory values they seek to combat. Moreover, they help us identify some factors in the transformation of the gender system within activism learning which may be of interest for research on other activist spaces, especially in contexts of political violence. We would underline three factors which, in our opinion, should be taken into account in future research on the subject. The first one is the importance of the presence of activist women belonging to feminist family genealogies and with considerable cultural capital, who can exercise dissident leadership and promote feminist subjects within the movements. The second one concerns the impact of contextual political changes by attenuating the more violent repertoires, and the existence of a “gender regime” in society favourable to feminist proposals, related to the progressive development of feminist movements. Lastly is the movement’s capacity for reflexivity and the implementation of internal, institutionalised, supervisory mechanisms. These three factors show that gender equality can emerge as an aspect of peacebuilding.

First of all, our study highlights the tensions which, in varying degrees, are produced in political socialisation dynamic between agency and structure, change and reproduction. Although, in recent years, research has focused on the capacity of youth agency (Youniss et al. 2002; Amnå et al. 2009; Cuzzocrea and Collins 2015), our analysis highlights the structural nature of gender normativity, which seems ingrained in the field of youth contentious activism, and which allows it to be reproduced even in certain counter-hegemonic spheres –socialist, pro-independent, formally feminist– the aim of which is to combat it. Indeed, political learning in the field of contentious activism is part of a gendered socialisation, which has been favoured by activist models related to the hegemonic masculinity required in confrontational politics, and which has placed girls in a position of subordination or exclusion. This paradox takes us back to the debate on the difficulties of integrating the gender category in youth studies and the challenge of contemplating both agency and its structural contexts from the gender perspective (Benasso, Helve, and Merico 2018).

Secondly, the analysis suggests that the collective agency capacity of activist girls to act as agents who do not conform to gender normativity, and, above all, as feminist agents, has structural limits. Similarly, it demonstrates that these limits vary according to age, the accumulated activist capital, cultural capital and the fact of belonging to feminist genealogies. In other words, a high level of education, the number of years of experience in activism and the influence of feminist mothers or parents in early socialisation are elements that help facilitate feminist capacity to resist and resocialise in the field of youth activism. These factors afford the girls the skills and capabilities –a specific habitus– which act as symbolic capital in the field of

power. As situated agents, women can follow courses of action in a different way depending on the resources to which they have access (Belvedresi 2018). At the same time, the social context and other socio-demographic factors like class, level of education and race, can limit or facilitate agency, autonomy and the degree of empowerment (Charrad 2010; Mishra and Tripathi 2011). As pointed out by Madhok, Philips and Wilson (2013), agency is always exercised within a field of tensions, and is embedded in social relations with deep inequality and power dynamics. Privilege establishes agency. As a result, feminist agency, when it arises, could be conceptualized, according to Evans (2002), as “limited agency”, a type of social agency, influenced, though not fully determined, by context. In this respect, in the structure-agency dialectic, gender equality makes headway in a process of breaks and continuities (Esteban et al. 2017).

Lastly, the study shows the relevance of context in which endogenous factors and factors external to the movement interact. A factor that stands out among the external conditions of the “field opportunity structure” is a “gender regime” (Taylor 1999) favourable to change in the Basque Country, resulting from the development of the feminist movements that have great capacity to pressurise, as well as significant social recognition. At the same time, having an impact on this opening up of opportunity are certain global trends such as the progressive diversification and spreading of actions within the framework of contemporary youth agendas and the diversification and decentralisation of political subjects. However, feminist women also express their fear of the influence of current dominant cultural constructions on the new generations of young people –individualization, “choice biographies”, etc.-. Among the endogenous factors, we noted that the disappearance of armed violence, the weakening of repertoires of confrontation and their replacement by other types of mobilisation linked to civil disobedience and the self-expression models of mobilisation have created a framework of possibilities for change. In this respect, the generation of young women who initiated their political learning before the new political cycle reported greater resistance and obstacles in their activist itinerary than those of the following generation. Despite the aforesaid, it was likewise observed that these experiences were the tipping point for setting up feminist agencies. These agencies, in turn, were organically strengthened by the internal process of self-reflection and political training implemented within the movement’s organisations and the setting up of corrective mechanisms.

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