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Catholic Housewives in Transition: The Centres for the Promotion of Women between the Franco Dictatorship and Democracy in Spain (1960–1980)

This article aims to study the history of the Centres for the Promotion of Women in relation to the changing religious and gender identities of Spanish women. The first centre was founded by the lay organisation Catholic Action Women in 1959 and similar centres quickly spread across the country, giving access to basic education to many women from a working-class background. By analysing oral interviews with students and sociocultural organisers, this article will demonstrate how the Centres for the Promotion of Women contributed to the transition from the self-sacrificing housewife model of the first decades of Franco dictatorship to the more dynamic model of the working woman of the 1960s and 1970s.


The talks were about education, because none of the women had a basic level of education. And well, I met incredible women who started to read the newspaper and their husbands didn't let them buy newspapers. I met women who finished secondary school and went on to get a university degree. For some of them it led to separation because their husbands didn't go along with it. They were usually women who married young. There were some interesting developments, but also some painful ones.

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This testimony is from Ana T. J.,¹ a woman born a few days before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. From a young age Ana expressed, through her Christian faith, a clear desire to change some of the injustices of the society into which she had been born. This led her, in the mid-1960s, to manage one of the new Centres for Family and Social Development — subsequently called Centres for Popular Culture and the Promotion of Women, abbreviated as Centres for the Promotion of Women (hereafter CPWs). In her experience as an instructor and sociocultural organiser (*animadora sociocultural* in Spanish), Ana refers to the processes of personal and collective change, which could be exciting but also painful, among the women who attended the centres.

The objective of this article is to study the history of the CPWs in relation to the changing identities of Spanish women. While the CPWs still exist today in much of the country (though in much smaller numbers and with less influence), our focus is on the period from 1960 to 1980. It was during these years that there was a clear shift from the model of the domestic woman to the model of the working woman; that is, these decades saw the move from women's invisible work to the hyper-visualisation of women's roles as mothers, wives and well-trained and exemplary workers.² Our aim is to investigate the transformation in the identities of women (students and organisers) who participated in the Centres. Our hypothesis is that, while the aim of the CPWs at the time they emerged was to form conscious Catholic women and independent housewives, this independence increased in importance to the point of propelling women to pursue a fuller education, leading in turn to their reincorporation into the labour market and their commitment to improving society.

Alongside the analysis of press and documentary evidence that mainly comes from the National Delegation of the CPWs (currently located in the Spanish Catholic Action Archive in Salamanca), the research for this article also involved the study of oral sources. Within the epistemology of oral history, we have chosen the life-story method, which allows researchers to access the choices people make in relation to crucial issues in their lives. Life histories provide an exceptional perspective from which to observe how a subject felt and negotiated their experiences within the social and discursive limits of a particular historical moment. Oral history therefore constitutes an effective tool with which to define the boundaries between what happens and what is possible.³

In order to access the experiences of women who attended the Centres, we draw on the lives of six Basque women (two natives and four immigrants

1. Ana T. J. (b. Ataun, 9 July 1936) was born in a rural area of the Basque Country. During her youth she found a way out of her hometown through religious associationism. In the mid 1960s she worked as a sociocultural organiser in a Centre for the Promotion of Women located in a working-class neighbourhood of Vitoria. Years later, this experience proved invaluable when she tried to organise something similar during her time as a missionary in Angola. When she returned to the Basque Country she worked as a schoolteacher until her retirement. For several decades she has been a member of a Christian base community settled in Bilbao. Interviewed by Raúl Mínguez in Vitoria, 12 April 2016.

2. E. de Dios, *Sirvienta, empleada, trabajadora de hogar. Género, clase e identidad en el franquismo y la transición a través del servicio doméstico (1939–1995)* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 2018), 196–223.

3. See L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

from other parts of Spain) born between 1933 and 1951. Despite the particularities of the Basque Country at this time (especially marked by the rise of violent nationalism by the separatist organisation ETA, who were opposed to the repressive regime led by General Franco), we consider that the lived experiences and stories of these women can be representative for the whole of Spain for two reasons: because the Basque Country was involved in the wider process of consolidation and crisis of the dictatorship as it happened in other parts of Spain, and because the CPWs were extensively located across the country. It is true that, for reasons outlined below, Vizcaya was one of the provinces with a larger number of CPWs and where they were more successful, but only nine of the fifty provinces and two autonomous cities in Spain did not have any CPWs during the period studied in this article.⁴

All the interviewees were educated during the first stage of the Franco regime. As we will see, three of these women were organisers and the other three were students, but all of them came from a lower-middle- or working-class background. Four are married and two claim their single status as a space of female autonomy. Three of them left the labour market when they got married (though two later returned), while the rest experienced few interruptions in their paid work. None of them have been actively involved in politics but they have generally sympathised with leftist ideas and, in some cases, with a moderate Basque nationalism. The sample shows interesting differences among the six women but, above all, the six interviewees share in common the fact that their participation in the CPWs had an important impact on their life choices and on the construction of their religious and gender identities.⁵

Hunger for God?

From the first months of the Civil War the majority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy supported the military coup of General Francisco Franco, giving the church a privileged position within the new regime after the Francoist victory in April 1939. Taking advantage of its dense network of female congregations and a discourse which, since the nineteenth century, had linked women and religion in an almost natural way,⁶ the church took responsibility for girls' secondary education as well as a large part of their primary education. Furthermore, the church could count on the far-from-insignificant influence of the pulpits, the catechesis, mass religious rituals, its own media, and lay Catholic women's organisations such as Catholic Action Women. The

4. These provinces were Orense, Asturias, Huelva, Almería, Tarragona, Girona, Las Palmas, and the two autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla. *Memorias e informes (1967–1990)*, de los Centros Católicos de Cultura Popular y Desarrollo de Adultos (CCCPDA), Archivo Histórico de la Acción Católica Española (AHACE), Archivo de la Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca (AUPSA), Salamanca.

5. In correspondence with others of our articles, we refer to the interviewees with their first name followed by the initials of their two surnames. They have been changed when the interviewee requested anonymity.

6. R. Mínguez, *Evas, Marías y Magdalenas. Género y modernidad católica en la España liberal (1833–1874)* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2016).

Spanish wing of this transnational organisation was founded in 1919 and, until the military uprising of 1936, had sympathised with some feminist positions.⁷ After the Francoist victory, however, it became one of the principal pillars of support for the regime along with the *Sección Femenina* (the Women's Section of the regime's sole political party). Both of these organisations transmitted an authoritarian model of women and the family. It is worth mentioning, however, that their elite female members enjoyed more freedom and did not follow in their personal lives the morals that they conveyed to Spanish women in their discourses.⁸

However, during the 1950s various factors came together to transform Catholic Action Women profoundly.⁹ On a transnational level, we must consider the liberalising influence of associations such as the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO)¹⁰ and the changing perception of women on the part of the pontificate. While the latter was more perceptible in the early 1960s, with the encyclicals of John XXIII and the documents of Vatican II, its origins can be located in the final years of the pontificate of Pius XII. He was the one who started regularly to use the concept of "promoting women." In a speech at the fourteenth international WUCWO conference, Pius XII encouraged the association to "take upon yourselves the programme of the promotion of women, without restriction. May it awaken a vast hope among the countless mass of your sisters who are still submitted to degrading customs, victims of misery, of the ignorance of their surroundings, of a total lack of means for culture and education."¹¹ Mary Salas, at the time one of the main leaders of Catholic Action Women, recalled years later that those words of Pius XII had been an incitement to action: "Many of us felt that the Pope was encouraging us to move ahead with the difficult issues we faced in Spain, which at the time was not a very favourable environment for women's social action."¹²

At the end of the 1950s the concept of the promotion of women meant providing women with greater cultural training with the aim of inspiring

7. I. Blasco, *Paradojas de la ortodoxia. Política de masas y militancia católica femenina en España (1919–1939)* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2003).

8. C. Gómez, "Entre la flecha y el altar: el adoctrinamiento femenino del franquismo. Valladolid como modelo, 1939–1959," *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 31 (2009): 297–17; B. Barrera, "La Sección Femenina en perspectiva. Historias y otros relatos sobre las mujeres de Falange," *Historia Contemporánea* 62 (2020): 265–95; and A. Pérez del Puerto, *Católicas de posguerra en acción. El discurso de género de Acción Católica en España y en Estados Unidos* (Granada: Comares, 2021). This last author, however, emphasises the differences between the femininity model of Catholic Action Women and the one of the *Sección Femenina* during the 1940s.

9. M. Moreno, "De la caridad al compromiso: las mujeres de Acción Católica (1958–1968)," *Historia Contemporánea* 26 (2003): 239–65.

10. In the mid twentieth century, this organisation claimed to bring together 36 million Catholic women throughout the world. See I. Blasco and M. Moreno, "Españolas en el catolicismo internacional: la UMOFC, de la 'personalidad de la mujer' a la demanda de 'derechos inalienables'," in *Más allá de los nacionalcatolicismos. Redes transnacionales de los católicos hispánicos*, ed. J.R. Rodríguez and N. Núñez (Madrid: Sílex, 2021): 391–20.

11. Pío XII, *Sentido cristiano de la llamada "promoción de la mujer" en la vida moderna*. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de las Mujeres de Acción Católica de España, 1957).

12. M. Salas, *De la promoción de la mujer a la teología feminista. Cuarenta años de historia* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1993), 27.

them to participate more in public life. But the concept was limited because it did not question the theory of the complementarity of the sexes, which assigned different roles to women and men according to supposed differences in their natures.¹³ In any case, the WUCWO picked up the baton. They conducted a survey of its organisations in 1956, the results of which indicated that these organisations provided their members with a solid education in religious and family issues, but very little from a cultural, social or civic perspective. Faced with this situation, Spanish Catholic Action Women, led at that time by Pilar Bellosillo and Mary Salas, put a series of initiatives into place with the aim of improving the situation. Among these was the 1960 Campaign Against Hunger, which grew out of the organisation *Manos Unidas* in response to the WUCWO's denunciation of the fact that there existed in the world not only "hunger for bread" but also "hunger for culture and for God."¹⁴ It was in this wider context that the Centres for Family and Social Development, later called Centres for Popular Culture and the Promotion of Women, were founded in 1959.

Initially the Centres were financed by the Campaign against Hunger, but when this subsidy started to wane individual dioceses had to seek additional resources to finance their respective Centres. Those that found such funding were not only able to increase the number of active Centres but also to guarantee their survival. Such was the case of the Diocese of Bilbao which, in 1970, secured support from the Savings Bank of Vizcaya to finance the majority of the Centres; these subsequently became the Centres for the Promotion of Women of Vizcaya. Thanks to this external support the number of Centres in this diocese did not fall below nineteen during the 1970s and rose above forty in the second half of the 1980s.¹⁵

Thus, although in their original form the CPWs had something of a religious character due to having been established through the initiative of Catholic Action Women, almost from the start it was decided that they would not be evangelising spaces. Furthermore, the recourse to external funds from public institutions and savings banks made the Catholic character of the Centres dissipate even more in the context of a general and accelerated process of secularisation. Nonetheless, Catholic Action Women continued to train the sociocultural organisers and were able to maintain their ownership of most of the Centres across Spain. For this reason, some of the material taught at the Centres was inspired by a spirit of Christianity, connected to the religiosity of Vatican II, albeit in a vague way. Similarly, there were students and instructors with little or no interest in religious issues, while others found in the Centres a platform that allowed them to experience a spirituality

13. M. Moreno, "Ideal femenino y protagonismo de las mujeres en las culturas políticas católicas del franquismo," *Arenal* 15, no. 2 (2008): 274–75.

14. Mujeres de Acción Católica General, 1973, 4926/008-00, Archivo Histórico Eclesiástico de Bizkaia (AHEB), Derio.

15. F. Molina and M. Oleaga, *Fundación Centro de Promoción de la Mujer de Vizcaya. 1970–1995. 25 años de historia*, 1995, 65–66. Throughout Spain, the number of Centres continued to increase during the 1960s and 1970s until they reached a maximum of 220 active centres in 1984. Memorias e informes (1967–1990), de los CCCPDA, AHACE-AUPSA, Salamanca.

different to the one they had been socialised into as girls. This process of identity (de)construction will be the focus of the rest of this section.

Following the rebel victory at the end of the Civil War, the Catholic Church became one of the main legitimising agents of the dictatorship. What is more, it actively helped Franco's government to impose a strict state of control, exercised through fear, over Spanish society. Francoism therefore aimed to maintain the social order with the objective of preventing the "imbalances" which the regime believed had been responsible for the Spanish Second Republic (1931–1936). Fear was imposed on the population through direct forms of repression but also through religious discourse. This discourse, while directed at society as a whole, was particularly aimed at women, who were considered the agents of the re-Christianisation of the family and society.¹⁶ For this reason, it is not surprising that the women interviewed for this article, who were raised in such an atmosphere, recall it as stifling and restrictive. Miren G. S., who was educated at a convent school, speaks of "a constricting faith based on fear, death and sin,"¹⁷ while Juani M. B. describes the idea of divinity that she was taught in her childhood as "a righteous God, a God that held you to account, found fault with you, even made you afraid."¹⁸

Fear was felt most profoundly in the area of sexuality.¹⁹ Motherhood was the only desirable route for sexual relations, to such an extent that those women who fell outside the norm were denigrated by the old Judeo-Christian stereotype of the seductive and dangerous Eve.²⁰ Thus religious discourse not only recurred to fear but also to spreading ignorance among young girls.²¹ It is precisely this sense of fear of the unknown that Elisa R. M.

16. M. Moreno, "Creencias religiosas y política en la dictadura franquista," *Pasado y Memoria* 1 (2002): 245–53 and A. Morcillo, "El género en lo imaginario. El 'ideal católico femenino' y estereotipos sexuales bajo el franquismo," in M. Nash, *Represión, resistencias, memoria. Las mujeres bajo la dictadura franquista* (Granada: Comares, 2013), 71–80.

17. Miren G. S. (b. Bilbao, 26 February 1933) had a childhood complicated by suffering from a number of serious illnesses. This difficult experience led to an awareness of the need to help the poorest and most needy. From the start of the 1960s until the 1990s she participated actively in the CPWs, working in different municipalities in Vizcaya as a sociocultural organiser. Since her retirement, she has continued to have an active social life and belongs to a Christian base community settled in Bilbao. Interviewed by Raúl Mínguez in Amorebieta (Vizcaya), 7 June 2016.

18. Juani M. B. (b. Guitiriz, 3 April 1947) was born in a rural area of the Spanish region of Galicia but immigrated at age nine with her family to Bilbao. She started working at a young age because she did not have the economic means to continue her studies. She was very active in her local neighbourhood association in demanding improvements and services. Building on this civic commitment she founded a CPW in her neighbourhood and directed it for some years as a sociocultural organiser. She has also been active for many years in a Christian base community settled in Bilbao. Interviewed by Raúl Mínguez in Bilbao, 17 February 2016.

19. C. Martín Gaité, *Usos amorosos de la posguerra española* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1987), 13–14.

20. J. Roca, "Esposa y madre a la vez. Construcción y negociación del modelo ideal de mujer bajo el (primer) franquismo," in *Mujeres y Hombres en la España Franquista. Sociedad, economía, política y cultura*, ed. G. Nielfa (Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2003), 45–66; and D. Juliano, "Tiempo de cuaresma. Modelos de sexualidad femenina bajo el franquismo," in *Mujeres bajo sospecha. Memoria y sexualidad, 1930–1980*, ed. R. Osborne (Madrid: Fundamentos, 2015), 35–47.

21. E. de Dios, "Domesticidad y familia: ambigüedad y contradicción en los modelos de feminidad del franquismo," *Feminismo/s* 23 (2014): 30–34.

recalls in her first relationships: “The thing is, sex was a taboo topic back then . . . A boy got close to you and you put your hand out like that [keeping him away], a brake. We were traumatised by sex in those days.”²²

As is well known, Vatican II shook the foundations upon which theology, ecclesiology and the church’s relationship with the world had rested for centuries. It marked a true turning point for Catholicism on a global scale. Concepts such as “People of God” or “signs of the time,” which were so common in the conciliar texts and encyclicals of Pope John XXIII, underscored the sincere will of an important part of the church to open itself to lay believers and commit itself to addressing the ills of the world.²³ In Spain, the existence of a dictatorship that did not recognise the separation of church and state meant that the reception of the new winds blowing from the Council was delayed among the episcopate. But this was not the case among the faithful at the base level, who, in the mid-1950s, had already begun to “unglue” themselves from the dictatorship.²⁴

The CPWs were founded and created at this juncture, and therefore their Catholicism adhered closely to the principles of Vatican II. Their main objective was to get women out of the home and open them to new life prospects through training and culture. But the Centres did not hesitate to do this with a Christian inspiration that they considered necessary in an increasingly secular society. Thus, there were regular requests in the newsletter *Women and Culture* for the organisers not to forget that the Centres had been founded by Catholic Action Women and that “they would betray their mission if they did not offer the women who attended them a Christian vision of man and the world.”²⁵ However, they also added that “it is not a question of imposing. It is a question of opening horizons, prudently but sincerely, without hiding away.”²⁶ Although the curriculum changed over time, there were always some religious courses, such as Human and Religious Values or Education in Faith. Furthermore, from 1972 onwards the sociocultural organisers were asked to have a basic knowledge of the principal texts of Vatican II.²⁷ In any case, *Women and Culture* made it clear that faith should not be transmitted in isolation but in a transversal way as part of a series of topics, so

22. Elisa R. M. (b. Condado de Treviño, 3 November 1944) was born into a family of day labourers in a Castilian village. After spending some years of her youth as a novice in a convent she decided to migrate to Bilbao, where she started as a live-in domestic worker. Later on, a religious association encouraged her to rent a flat with other female domestic workers and to work as a hourly paid domestic worker. She continued this work after she was married and until her retirement. She was trained at a CPW in her neighbourhood and was very involved in her parish and local neighbourhood association. Interviewed by Eider de Dios in Bilbao, 27 April 2010.

23. G. R. Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5–59.

24. F. Montero, *La Iglesia: de la colaboración a la disidencia (1956–1975)* (Madrid: Encuentro, 2009), 35–219.

25. This was a monthly publication put out by the National Delegation of the CPWs to support the organisers in their work. *La Mujer y la Cultura* 119 (1982): 1.

26. *La Mujer y la Cultura* 86 (1979): 1.

27. Convocatoria de cursos para animadoras culturales, 07.09.1972, Memorias e informes (1967–1990) de los CCCPDA, AHACE-AUPSA, Salamanca.

that women were offered “a culture that has as its backdrop a supernatural sense of human existence.”²⁸

Both Juani M. B. and Miren G. S. confirmed this open approach to faith on the part of the Centres. In their respective interviews the two women assured us that the students were advised in advance when there would be discussion of a religious issue so that they could decide whether to attend or not. In any case, all three sociocultural organisers interviewed here got involved in the Centres because of pre-existing religious concerns. Ana T. J. had left her hometown when she was young to live in a community with other women who wanted to practise their spirituality with greater freedom and autonomy. From there, in the mid-1960s, she took part in a CPW in a working-class neighbourhood in Vitoria. For her part, Miren G. S. became interested in the Centres through her social commitment to poor women as a lay missionary.²⁹ She assures us that in those days “that was all there was if I wanted to do work in relation to women, because I felt very called to work with women.” Finally, Juani M. B. became interested in the Centres through her work as a catechist in her local parish and her involvement in a Catholic base community in Bilbao. She started teaching courses on faith in some of the Centres, and, having had such a positive experience there, decided to try to establish a Centre in her own neighbourhood.

It is clear from this that not only through the Centres but also through other spaces, such as base communities and neighbourhood parishes, many women were able to release themselves from the religious bonds they had inherited in childhood thanks to the discovery of a new spirituality. Both Juani and Elisa stress the encouraging role played by their neighbourhood priests at a time — the 1960s — when progressive clerics, particularly in the Basque Country, were profoundly concerned with working-class and nationalist claims.³⁰ As in the rest of Spain, many local priests also made a decisive contribution to imparting the new principles initiated by Vatican II among a faithful community who had been socialised in a religion of fear and external ritual.³¹ Thus Juani was surprised when the parish priest himself encouraged her to break away from her old spirituality: “I remember I was making a confession to a particular priest and he said to me, ‘Forget all that!’ I mean, it was freedom in the sense of a different way of understanding God and Christ.” She later tried to transmit this new form of understanding religion to the children through the catechism:

28. *La Mujer y la Cultura* 141 (1984): 1 and *La Mujer y la Cultura* 148 (1984): 1.

29. The Institute of Lay Missionaries (IMS), founded in Vitoria in 1939, became, especially after Vatican II, a community of lay celibate women with the option of a life dedicated principally to the poor.

30. A. Barroso, *Sacerdotes bajo la atenta mirada del régimen franquista. Los conflictos sociopolíticos de la Iglesia en el País Vasco desde 1960 a 1975* (Bilbao: Desclee de Brouwer, 1995).

31. A. Cazorla, “Did You Hear the Sermon? Progressive Priests, Conservative Catholics, and the Return of Political and Cultural Diversity in Late Francoist Spain,” *Journal of Modern History* 85, no. 3 (2013): 528–57.

My own experience as a mother also really helped me in the reflection of the catechism. I said, "I don't tell my children things in order to batter them. So, if I don't do that, how would God do it? . . . Somehow, I'm helping these children to have a different understanding of Christ than we had because that was a different time and there hadn't been this progress." So that was nice.

Here Juani links a gender identity very connected to motherhood with a religious identity that was undergoing transformation, and which would later lead her, when she was a regular member of the Catholic base community Faith and Justice, to refer to God as "Mother God." For her part, Miren G. S., who suffered a real crisis in her faith after she felt abandoned by the institutional church, also discovered in this Catholic base community a way of recuperating meaning for her work with people in need, in, among other places, the CPW:

I had an experience there that I stopped going to church. Now I belong to a community, Faith and Justice, that saved me, showed me the way. Because I started to question lots of things. When I went to study Social Work I also met agnostic friends and really lovely colleagues. And I said, "What is faith for me?" And I turned that over in my head. . . . And there [in Faith and Justice] I started to experience faith a bit, I discovered something important: you can't be a Christian if you don't fight for justice, and I couldn't be a Christian if I wasn't on the side of the marginalised, the poor, those who aren't valued.

This step, which some of our interviewees called "from a God of fear to a God of love," also manifested itself in that aspect where perhaps pre-Vatican II theology had put the heaviest burden on women: sexuality. Of course, the pressure of this limited conception of sexuality is still felt in the generation of women who lived a good part of their lives under Francoism. This is evident in the difficulty our interviewees had in allowing this topic to emerge during the interviews. However, Miren herself refers to it when recalling the first time she heard a priest who did not link sexuality to sin: "When John XIII died I was in [the Basque town of] Markina. . . . A priest came to give lessons to the young people in town and I went. Those were the first lessons I did where sexuality wasn't mentioned. We talked about the love of God. Thank goodness. Because the whole thing about sexuality was so exhausting!"

The Centres did important work during the late Franco years and the transition to democracy after 1975 in trying to put an end to some of the prejudices linked to sexuality. In the lessons around marriage taught at the CPW in the province of Vizcaya in the early 1970s a certain openness can be observed in relation to the monolithic vision of sexuality within marriage that had been offered by the church and the Franco regime before Vatican II.³² Of course, neither the indissoluble nature of matrimony nor the conception

32. Lecciones impartidas en torno al matrimonio, c. 1970, 4439/000–00, AHEB, Derio. On the vision of sexuality in marriage under the Franco regime, see M. García, "Sexualidad y armonía conyugal en la España franquista. Representaciones de género en manuales sexuales y conyugales publicados entre 1946 y 1968," *Ayer* 105 (2017): 215–38.

of men and women as naturally different beings were questioned in these classes. However, following the principles of Vatican II,³³ the lesson stated that “the carnal union is not only a procreative act for the transmission of life, but also an expression of the service to love.”³⁴ It was considered very positive for both members of the couple to achieve orgasm and men who did not adapt to the “needs” of their wives were labelled “selfish.” In addition, at a time when the ecclesiastical hierarchy had tried to close the debate on contraception with the *Humane Vitae* of 1968,³⁵ this course offered a relatively flexible interpretation of this encyclical from Paul VI. Although the course reminded women that this text condemned all forms of contraception other than periodic abstinence, it added that “if a Catholic . . . decides with conscience that the general prohibition promulgated by the Pope is not applicable in their particular case and decides to recur to some form of contraception, they should not fear that they have committed a subjective offense, nor be afraid of feeling guilty before God.”³⁶

Therefore, while the religious character of the CPWs decreased during the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that, alongside local parishes and Catholic base communities, they played a notable role in the process of identity transformation for many Catholic women who had been socialised in a religion of fear during the early Franco period.

Hunger for Culture

If some students and future organisers came to the Centres through an impulse to discover a different God from the one they had had access to in their childhood, for others it was a hunger for culture, that is, a desire to gain a greater level of education. In fact, that was the main objective of the Centres from 1959, when the first course for instructors, later called sociocultural organisers, was held. The task of these instructors was to attract to the Centres married women with limited resources and little or no education, a group that had been neglected by the Francoist education system.

During the 1940s and 1950s the educational opportunities for women were very limited. Coeducation, which had been established by the Second Republic, was totally forbidden by the dictatorship. This favoured the consolidation of an education differentiated by sex, with specific courses for women (those related to care). School was compulsory for boys and girls up to age twelve,

33. *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), 50.

34. Lección 7ª: Armonía sexual y conyugal, c. 1970, 4439/000-00, AHEB, Derio.

35. A. Harris, ed., *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe (1945–1975)* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). On its reception in Spain, see M. García, “Sexualidad y religión en el tardofranquismo. La recepción de la Humanae Vitae en España y la crisis de autoridad de la Iglesia,” *Hispania Nova* 19 (2021): 255–90.

36. Lección 9ª: Procreación racional, c. 1970, 4439/000-00, AHEB, Derio. The following doctoral thesis gathers testimonies from students and organisers in the Spanish region of Navarra who indicate that it was possible to speak openly about sexuality in the CPWs: P. Amigot, “Relaciones de poder, espacio subjetivo y prácticas de libertad: análisis genealógico de un proceso de transformación de género,” PhD thesis (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2005), 329–32.

but in higher grades the presence of women decreased because of the lack of incentives for them to continue studying.³⁷ The Franco state did not compensate these structural deficiencies in female education with a strong educational offering for adult women.³⁸

This is the context for the testimonies of our interviewees, who express a degree of bitterness at not having been able to continue their studies when they were young. Nonetheless, it was an awareness of their limited training that led them to want to study when they were adults. Just as happened with other working-class women of their generation, this aspiration to continue their education corresponded with the desire to be “something more,” in particular, something more than the model of domestic woman promoted during the first period of Francoism.³⁹ This wish translated into an impulse to move to the city, as in the case of the sisters Luisa⁴⁰ and Vicenta R. S.,⁴¹ Juani M. B., and Elisa R. M., and into the need shared by all our interviewees to learn and expand the expectations of their youth. That is how Elisa R. M. explains the decision she took along with a friend to leave her situation as a live-in domestic worker:

I started going to a centre, where there were classes, people were learning to sew, things like that, to promote yourself a bit. And we asked them to let us go out one afternoon to a class, another afternoon to another, and the lady said we weren't allowed to go out anymore. The other girl and I had a contract and we said, “Well, if you won't let us go out, we'll leave.” And we left.

Although in this case Elisa is not talking about a CPW but about a centre that was specifically for domestic workers, this excerpt gives us an idea of how important this training was for her, even though it was in activities, such as sewing, considered exclusive to women. After leaving a job that had a contract (which was rare in domestic work in the early 1960s) and the housing that

37. C. Agulló, “‘Azul y rosa’: franquismo y educación femenina,” in *Estudios sobre la política educativa durante el franquismo*, ed. A. Mayordomo (Valencia: Universitat de València, 1999), 243–303.

38. E. García, “La educación de adultos en España durante el periodo azul. Del triunfo militar a la Ley General de Educación (LGE) de 1970,” *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 5 (2017): 441–67.

39. M. C. Muñoz, “Mujer mítica, mujeres reales: las revistas femeninas en España 1955–1970,” PhD thesis (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2002), 468–69, 560, 622, 630 and E. de Dios, “Trabajadoras, ¿católicas?, ¿feministas? Las mujeres de la JOC en el tardofranquismo y la transición,” in *Mujeres, hombres y catolicismo en la España contemporánea. Nuevas visiones desde la Historia*, ed. I. Blasco (Valencia: Tirant Lo Blanch, 2018), 238–42.

40. Luisa R. S. (b. village in León, 9 March 1948). Luisa studied until the age of fourteen, at which time she started to work as a live-in domestic worker, first in a house nearby, then in the city of León and from the age of sixteen in Bilbao until she was married. Together with her husband she set up a butcher's shop; when the shop started to have economic difficulties, she went back to domestic work. Her three sisters also did domestic work, but she was the one who did it for the longest. Interviewed by Eider de Dios in Bilbao, 29 April 2010.

41. Vicenta R. S. (b. village in León, 30 March 1951). Like her sister, Vicenta studied and helped her family in their hometown until the age of fourteen, when she migrated, first to León and later to Bilbao to work as a live-in domestic worker. At the age of twenty she married a man who was also from León and worked for some years as an hourly paid domestic worker but stopped the work because of her husband's objections. She was a student in a CPW and participated in various activities and associations for improvement of her neighbourhood. Interviewed by Eider de Dios in Bilbao, 29 April 2010.

came with being a live-in worker, Elisa went to live in a flat shared with other young women who were domestic workers. That allowed her to leave the live-in situations and start to work by the hour. In that way she gained a bit of time in the afternoons to train and be active in Christian base groups.

The CPWs therefore played an important role by opening a door for adult women to expand the knowledge that had received in their childhood and that many had tried to continue in their youth. However, the importance of this training went beyond the acquisition of greater knowledge. In a conference she gave in 1967, Mary Salas, who was at that time the person responsible for the Centres at the national level, declared that the Centres should, first and foremost, educate responsible citizens.⁴² In her view, it was necessary to shake off women's "drowsiness" and "awaken them to political responsibilities, make them discover their duties in the community." The aim was not just to instruct women but to give them the necessary foundation so that they could adopt an active and critical role in the good running of society. The basic course taught in the vast majority of Centres was called the Comprehensive Promotion Course and lasted between one and three years depending on the location and timetable.⁴³ The classes took place twice a week in the afternoons, which was considered the time of day when married women had most time. Furthermore, the Centres normally had a childcare service during class hours. The methodology aimed to be as dynamic as possible, with the intention of encouraging the active participation of women who were not used to speaking in public. Thus, there was an attempt to have a limited number of women in each classroom, group work techniques were developed and alternative activities, such as cinema groups or cultural visits, were encouraged.

Although the curriculum for the Comprehensive Promotion Course changed according to the specific circumstances of each place and time, there was an important emphasis on courses related to those areas in which women educated during the Franco regime had been most socialised: the family and the home. Thus, over the years we find courses such as Marital Relations, Children's Education, Food, Cooking, Design, and Manual Work. As some of interviewees indicated, these types of skills and knowledge acted as a "hook" to attract to the CPWs housewives with very little formal education (Fig. 1).

Nevertheless, the Centres' determination to train women to be as independent as possible, including in the home, is evident in the curriculum through basic notions such as domestic painting, electricity and plumbing — tasks traditionally assigned to men.⁴⁴ In this regard it should be stressed that it was not a question of "substituting" husbands in the few tasks they had done

42. Quoted in Salas, *De la promoción de la mujer a la teología feminista*, 69–72.

43. In the case of the Centres in Vizcaya, these were consolidated as two-year courses during the 1960s and during the 1992–93 course year, they went up to three years in some Centres. Memoria curso 1992–1993, Diócesis de Bilbao, CCCPDA, AHACE-AUPSA, Salamanca.

44. Memorias e informes (1967–1990) de los CCCPDA, AHACE-AUPSA, Salamanca. However, we should not think of this training as something specific to the Centres. From 1967 the *Sección Femenina* offered similar courses in home improvement in their Home Schools for Domestic Workers. Cursos de formación y promoción social para empleadas de hogar, 1969 y 1979, 5310, Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares.



Figure 1 Cooking class in a Centre for the Promotion of Women in Vizcaya (c. 1965). Source: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer de Vizcaya, Fondo: M^a Ángeles Larrea Sagarminaga, AHEB-BEHA.

around the house up until that point, but rather of encouraging the model of a woman who was more autonomous in relation to her husband. Ultimately, as we shall soon see, this autonomy meant economic independence. In fact, the aspiration to be more efficient housewives, as Mary Salas herself signalled in her speech in 1967, did not so much imply being better home managers as dedicating less time to things and more time to people, beginning with themselves (Fig. 2).

More than Housewives

Young women who wanted to be “something more” ended up becoming something more than mothers and housewives. In fact, this had been their main objective when looking for education and ongoing training. In her PhD thesis, cited above, Muñoz Ruiz argues that women’s magazines from the 1960s attempted to channel the discontent experienced by many women in their sole role as housewives by offering a more positive image of extra-domestic work and emphasising the need to take an interest in public affairs. Even the *Sección Femenina*, which in previous decades had predominantly promoted a domestic model of femininity, was increasingly open to the idea of extra-domestic work for women.⁴⁵ It could be argued that this change was

45. E. de Dios, “La señora azul y las mujeres trabajadoras: La Sección Femenina en los años sesenta,” *Historia del Presente* 32 (2018): 57–72.



Figure 2 Opening speech in the Centre for the Promotion of Women in Barakaldo (Vizcaya, 1962). In the picture placed on the right of the crucifix, it can be read “More time for people and less for things.” Source: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer de Vizcaya, Fondo: M^a Ángeles Larrea Sagarmínaga, AHEB-BEHA.

a nuanced one in that the traditional model of womanhood was not challenged (and, indeed, was still strongly defended in some quarters). Despite this, these modifications were still significant because they laid the foundations for later development.

In any event, it was not just a case of “being something more” but also of being “a bit better.” Another of the objectives of the CPWs, as Mary Salas indicated in her 1967 speech, was to get women to be “better wives and mothers.”⁴⁶ Whereas there had been an attempt to inculcate women educated in the early part of the Franco regime with a maternal identity above all else, the Centres’ promoters aimed first and foremost for their students to have a more equal relationship with their husbands. The idea was for them to “work on the marriage,” in other words, not to think of the couple relationship as ending at marriage, something that Catholic organisations such as Young Catholic Workers had insisted on for some time.⁴⁷ Women who had been active in these groups, such as Elisa R. M, had a clear view on this point. Although the burden of housework and childcare fell unevenly on her, her

46. Salas, *De la promoción de la mujer a la teología feminista*, 69–71.

47. E. de Dios and R. Mínguez, “Del obrerismo naif al Cristo revolucionario. Género y clase en el discurso de la JOC (1955–1975),” *Historia, Trabajo y Sociedad* 11 (2020): 121–40.

relationship with her husband was much more egalitarian than those of her contemporaries. The testimony of Juani M. B. reflects something similar:

He depended a lot on me to set the pace and together we complemented one another. I think I was really important for him because I was at home with the children. And my work allowed me to balance, because it was two and a half hours, at first two days a week and later four days a week. So I had lots of time to look after the children and he could carry on working and be involved in his trade union activities, social activities and so on . . . We didn't have any help, we helped one another. My children contributed, my husband contributed, he started contributing from early on.

In this passage, we can see that the narrator considered herself the main agent in the home while her husband and children are given the role of contributors. Like many other women of her generation, Juani decided to leave paid work when she married and had children; but this did not mean that she dedicated herself exclusively to housework or renounced working outside the home for good. The CPWs encouraged women who had left the labour market to get back into it. One of the jobs that offered itself to many women was that of sociocultural organiser, which is precisely the work to which Juani M. B. refers. Becoming an organiser had various advantages: it allowed many of these women to quench their thirst for knowledge, it had an element of leadership in the role of managing the running of the CPWs, and it allowed women to balance their work with their duties at home and care for the family. This was also a work opportunity for Ana T. J. and Miren G. S, although their cases were different because they were single and had worked as informal social workers.⁴⁸

From 1974 onwards, the training period for the organisers had three phases: the first was distance learning, during which the trainees received topics to study by correspondence; a second involved in-person training in Madrid over the summer; and the third was practical and took place in a Centre in the woman's province during the year.⁴⁹ The organisers' previous training was usually limited. During the 1970–71 course year, almost 64 percent of the organisers from around the country had only studied at primary school. This figure did not decrease much over the years: in 1987 the number of organisers who had only a primary-level education stood at 53 percent.⁵⁰ As opposed to the *Sección Femenina* or Catholic Action Women, whose leaders came from an educated middle- or upper-middle-class background, this aspect of education experience proved to be positive when it came to encouraging a largely egalitarian relationship between organisers and students within the CPWs, since they belonged to a similar social class with

48. By this term we mean that this is not a case of workers with university degrees such as those today, but the work that was done by such women who were connected above all to the church or to the *Sección Femenina*. Within the church there were initiatives linked to charity, both traditional and others much more progressive, linked to the empowerment of sectors of society at risk of exclusion, such as those in which Miren G. S. as well as Ana T. J. participated.

49. *La Mujer y la Cultura*, 32–33 (1974): 2–3.

50. Moreno, "Ideal femenino y protagonismo," 74–75.

few opportunities in education. However, it was also a source of constant concern for the National Delegation of the Centres. For this reason, from 1974 onwards a new section appeared in *Women and Culture*, titled “Permanent Training and Cultural Organisers,” in which various topics considered essential for the making of a good organiser were developed.⁵¹

Another important problem was that many of the organisers received very low or no pay for their work. The National Delegation of the CPWs argued on various occasions that the organisers carried out essential evangelical work and extolled their capacity for sacrifice and abnegation; but they were also aware that one of the reasons it was difficult to attract new organisers was the lack of a salary.⁵² This was not the case in the CPWs in Vizcaya, which enjoyed stable financing from a savings bank from 1970 onwards. In this sense, organisers such as Juani M. B. who were paid expressed satisfaction at being able to contribute to Social Security and receive a pension when they retired. As she put it: “I got it by the skin of my teeth, but it has helped me.”

Elisa R. M. and Luisa R. S., both students in a CPW who had not left the labour market even when they married, stressed the importance of the Centres in getting housewives into the workforce. As we can see in the following excerpt, Luisa R. S. went a bit further, criticising full-time housewives who had not taken part in the Centres:

Many of them did nothing at all. They didn't go out, not even to socialise with other women, or to the promotion of women which was in fact to get you out of the house and teach you to walk in the world without being scared, being stuck and home, with the children . . . There was this conflict, this squabble. But if I analyse it coldly, for me (work) was much better psychologically than economically. Much better.

For women like Elisa or Luisa, real women not only had to be hard working but also had to work outside the home, because that made them psychologically stronger and, in short, gave them more autonomy. There is also a reference to the conflict, the “squabble,” between those who worked outside the home and those who did not. In a context in which married women's paid work was still not fully recognised, those who did not work outside the home often insulted those who did. That is why Maria Luisa demonstrates a certain aversion towards those who “did nothing”: this is her revenge as a working woman. Luisa also indicates that even economically “comfort has its cost,” in other words, family women had to work in order to be financially solvent. This vision clearly contrasts with that of her sister, Vicenta R. S., who was also a student at a Centre. Vicenta argued that not working outside the home gave her “peace” because she did not argue with her husband, who did not want her to be temporary worker and “clean for others.”

51. *La Mujer y la Cultura*, 35 (1974).

52. *La Mujer y la Cultura*, 122 and 123 (1982): 1.

However, the fact that there were women who decided not to enter the labour market did not mean that, in the context of the transition in female gender models during the 1960s and 1970s, these women dedicated themselves exclusively to domestic duties. This was the case with Vicenta herself: her involvement in a CPW allowed her to expand her character and open herself up to the outside world. In fact, she participated in the neighbourhood association and school in her local area, in catechesis at the parish and, years later, in *Gesto por la Paz* (the popular organisation that opposed the violence of ETA), as well as volunteering with older people and in the association of blood donors. In this way, Vicenta, like other women, was able to give expression to civic commitments which she had perhaps felt before but which she was able to bring out through the Centres. This form of participating in the public sphere connected with the renewed gender discourse in the late Franco era and the transition to democracy which promoted women who were much more dynamic and interested in the extra-domestic affairs that affected their lives. This is what Vicenta says about this:

The CPW . . . the truth is I've grown through everything, but that was . . . ! For the women here it was very, very good, and I'm happy I went there, because today we have an association that grew out of that. The Centre was closed, they were closed in a lot of places, so we went ahead and set up a women's association. Now it's men and women. I started it, I was the Vice President. And we still do lots of activities, relaxation, dances, groups for married couples . . . We still have talks once a month about current events, AIDS . . . And then we have a cinema group and lots of other activities.

This civic commitment to creating, as Mary Salas put it, “responsible citizens,” was one of the main aims and achievements of the CPWs. This is confirmed in an explanatory text in 1978 about what the Centres were and were not: “The Centres are concerned about wives and mothers who do not read the newspaper, who do not understand what they see on television, who do not appreciate what they see in the cinema, who are not concerned about the country's political progress, who do not tremble in the face of society's problems.”⁵³ As we see in the case of Vicenta and the rest of the interviewees, the CPWs functioned as amplifiers of women's social action. Under the broad title Social Training, a series of materials were gathered together in the Centres' curricula with the aim of interesting the students in social and political issues close to their lives so that they could get involved in them. These topics were covered through talks, cinema groups or comments on the daily press, and were adopted to the spatial and temporal reality of each Centre. In the pages of *Women and Culture* topics related to current events were developed so they could be imparted by the organisers themselves. In some cases, these involved controversial issues of the day. Thus, during the late Franco years topics such as abortion, women in social and civic life or the disjuncture between religious and civil marriage were brought up.⁵⁴ By the

53. Informe curso 1977–1978, Memorias e informes (1967–1990) de los CCCPDA, AHACE-AUPSA, Salamanca.

54. *La Mujer y la Cultura*, 14–15 (1973); 16 (1973), and 20 (1973).

time of the transition to democracy there were open discussions about political parties, trades unions, strikes, elections, and democracy (Fig. 3).⁵⁵

It is significant that the majority of the CPWs were located in working-class and/or newly constructed neighbourhoods on the outskirts of large cities such as Bilbao, and that these areas faced serious problems because of the lack of basic services and infrastructure.⁵⁶ One of the main aims of the neighbourhood movement that was organised in municipalities throughout Spain starting in the late Franco period was the improvement and refurbishment of local areas: paving of roads, creation of green spaces, extension of public transport, construction of schools, and so on. A number of our interviewees, organisers as well as students, got actively involved in the neighbourhood movement, sometimes using the Centres as platforms for consciousness raising and mobilisation. Juani M. B. explains how she experienced this struggle in her neighbourhood of Zurbaranbarri:



Figure 3 Students and their children in a Centre for the Promotion of Women in Vizcaya (c. 1970). Source: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer de Vizcaya, Fondo: M^a Ángeles Larrea Sagarmínaga, AHEB-BEHA.

55. Memoria-informe curso 1976–1977, 4926/008-00, AHEB-Derio.

56. In the case of Bilbao there were centres that functioned extensively in these types of neighbourhood, such as Otxarkoaga, Rekaldeberri, Zurbaranbarri, San Ignazio, and Santutxu, or Zorroza. They also existed in working-class municipalities in the greater Bilbao area, such as Barakaldo, Sestao, or Santurce.

The neighbourhood association and also the parish, but especially the association, called for a primary school from the beginning, and a secondary school. People wanted a secondary school, but, at the same time, there was an attempt to get rid of the primary school. There was a tremendous movement, we stopped the streets, we made a huge fuss . . . I'd say that of the neighbourhoods on the outskirts, ours was one of the most militant. And after Franco died it was easier because there was a bit more participation. You could use other channels, but even then we had to use pressure in a lot of cases.

We need to understand Juani's testimony in the context of a dictatorship under which there was no right to gather in public, no right to hold demonstrations or protests or strikes. As such we can appreciate how risky it was to campaign, for example, for the construction of a secondary school. Neighbourhood associations, originally promoted by the dictatorship itself as a way of domesticating citizen discontent, turned against the regime and, while considered the least aggressive element of the struggle against Francoism, could sometimes provide a platform for radicalisation.⁵⁷ In fact, Miren G. S. recognised that she used her position as an organiser in a CPW to encourage women to demand improvements to their neighbourhoods and towns, leading her to participate in "rackets" and even to get a 50,000 peseta fine in the early 1970s, which was no small sum in those days.

Nevertheless, this radicalisation could also lead to forms of struggle other than those directed against the Franco regime. In Luisa's case it meant, in the 1980s, recognising herself as a feminist, which led her to ask her husband to do more domestic chores and to spend more time with the children. In fact, Luisa explained in her interview that she recommended to her own daughters that they, "not be their husbands' maids or mothers, but their partners." For Luisa, the Centre had not been a route to get out of the house, because she was already a proud working woman, but an incentive to defend, as she put it, "my rights as a woman." In other instances, the struggle to obtain more rights perturbed the women's husbands, leading some women to file for divorce. This was not a painless process, as Ana T. J. recounted at the beginning of this article, since these were the first cases since the legalisation of divorce in 1981.

For Elisa R. M., participation in her neighbourhood CPW led to a total dedication to a new model of womanhood in the 1960s and 1970s, what de Dios has called the "instant-soup housewife,"⁵⁸ a woman who not only worked outside the home but also educated herself, could participate actively in society, and took care of her household in more efficiently than full-time housewives:

57. P. B. Radcliff, *Making Democratic Citizens in Spain: Civil Society and the Popular Origins of the Transition, 1960–78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and T. Groves, N. Townson, I. Ofer and A. Herrera, *Social Movements and the Spanish Transition: Building Citizenship in Parishes, Neighbourhoods, Schools and the Countryside* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2017). Regarding Bilbao, see I. Ahedo, "Acción colectiva vecinal en el tardofranquismo: el caso de Rekalde," *Historia y Política* 23 (2010): 275–96.

58. De Dios, *Sirvienta, empleada, trabajadora de hogar*, 227–43.

I was energetic. I often say, “Look at all the demonstrations I went to with my children when they were young!” I managed, I wasn’t overwhelmed. No way! I had time to have a good time. Those people who say, “Ah! I have to make lunch” in the 12 o’clock meeting . . . You make it beforehand and leave it out. You get to everything. I’m convinced that the people who do the least are the ones who never have time. I don’t know if it’s a gift or if it’s cultural or what, but knowing how to manage your finances, your house, your time . . . I’ve gone to lots of talks, lots of courses and things, and I haven’t neglected my house. My husband has never come home and the meal wasn’t ready. You do it at night, you do it during the day, just like you go to work for a few hours to earn some money

This testimony captures the new model of the working woman that the Centres sought to promote. Elisa presents herself as a well-rounded woman who can do anything; the key lies in total organisation. She is also proud to have served as an example to the housewives in her neighbourhood so that they would work outside the home. Her testimony demonstrates what we can call “accumulative paradigm,”⁵⁹ a concept that reflects the reality of these women more effectively than the idea of second shift due to the former includes not only family life and work but also, civic activism, education, and a focus on keeping fit and healthy. But Elisa views the rest of the facets from the perspective of her commitment to domesticity. She finds in this domestic femininity arguments for working and fighting for the good of her family. This discourse does not propose, therefore, abandoning the home but rather the need to complement it with education and professionalisation. Women should be professionals at home and also at work, continually improving themselves by taking courses and attending talks.

A good indication of the change in the model of hegemonic femininity is the fact that in the 1977–78 course year the CPWs in Vizcaya made a notable reduction in the number of hours dedicated to Sewing, Decoration and Crafts. This reduction was justified by requests made, through the Pedagogical Committee, by the students, who wanted greater weight given to other topics, such as Languages and Math.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in 1980 the Centres in Vizcaya received official recognition as a Private Education Centre for Adult Education,⁶¹ which in practical terms meant that the Centres could teach and examine students towards gaining the Schooling Certificate and the Certificate of Basic Education, two basic titles for accessing the labour market. In fact, Elisa R. M. herself obtained the Certificate of Basic Education at age forty in her neighbourhood Centre. From the 1992–93 course year, the Centres in Vizcaya offered courses in occupational training, directly destined for certain professions, such as Health Auxiliary or Home Nurse. Elisa recognised that she “stayed put” with her certificate, but that other course

59. Our expression based on a reading of M. C. Muñoz, “Modelos femeninos en la prensa para mujeres,” in *Historia de las mujeres en España y América Latina*, vol. IV, ed. I. Morant (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006), 288, 294.

60. Memoria-informe curso 1977–1978, 5158/001-00, AHEB, Derio.

61. Memoria-informe curso 1980–1981, 5158/001-00, AHEB, Derio.

mates obtained the Professional Training titles and some even went on to university, as Ana T. J. related at the beginning of this article.

From this we can conclude that the CPWs functioned as a platform for the integration of housewives into social life, a platform for learning, integral training, equality, and even radicalisation. In so doing, they departed from the traditional knowledge and values through which Spanish women had been socialised during the first decades of the dictatorship. The CPWs convinced many women from a popular background to be something more than housewives by encouraging a model of active womanhood that involved more equal gender relations and the creation of a space of autonomy through education and work. The flip side of this model of a hyper-dynamic woman was that she was not only supposed to do everything but she would do so without experiencing exhaustion, no matter how many tasks she had, something that links closely to the recent model of the Superwoman.

Conclusion

Throughout these pages we have demonstrated the contribution of the CPWs in the consolidation of a new model of femininity during late Francoism and the transition to democracy that was more dynamic than the model of domesticity under early Francoism. From their founding, the CPWs aimed to attract young wives and mothers of humble circumstances and little education in order to open up opportunities for these women through a participatory and integrated education. Through these efforts they encouraged a fundamental identity transformation among the students and the organisers, which we have seen here from the perspective of religion and also of gender. On one hand, the CPWs, together with some parishes and Catholic base communities, performed an important role in the transmission of a new, post-Vatican II religiosity that was much more open and tolerant than that promoted by the Catholic Church itself during the early years of the Franco regime. A God of love replaced the old God of fear, including in the area of sexuality. On the other hand, the CPWs promoted the transition from the domestic woman to what we have called “the instant-soup housewife,” a feminine archetype that brought together the efficient and autonomous housewife, spouse and mother, the educated worker and active citizen. This was an empowering as well as exhausting model of womanhood, given the accumulation of duties, demonstrating that the consolidation of democracy in Spain did not bring with it full equality between men and women.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.