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Women's Houses in the Basque Country:

Political, Cultural and Bodily Laboratories of Feminism

Mari-Luz Esteban

AFIT-Feminist Anthropology Research Group

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

ml.esteban@ehu.eus

Abstract

This article analyzes the key characteristics of the Women's Houses in the Basque Country and how they are run. These municipal centers are promoted by the feminist movement in close collaboration with local institutions and are part of the long international feminist tradition of creating spaces specifically for women. The Houses run a diverse range of programs and offer legal, employment and sexual health counseling services and other targeted support for precarious groups. The central point of this article is that these spaces are laboratories in which activity related to politics, training and support services influences the recomposition of the political subjectivities of the people who participate in them. Another key and distinctive aspect is the particular interrelationships found in the Houses between the institutionalist rationale coming out of the politics of equality and the rupturist rationale of movements like the feminist movement. Furthermore, different groups of feminist women (members of associations or institutions, professionals and researchers) co-exist in the Houses, which contributes to the horizontality of the relationships. Nevertheless, these aspects are not free of tensions, a point that will also be analyzed here.

Keywords. Women's Houses, Basque Country, space, feminism, institutionalization

Introduction

In January 2018, we formed a research team at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) and began a study that aimed to analyze the new forms of solidarity and alliances that have emerged in recent decades among different social movements and social actors in the Basque Country (located at the western end of the Pyrenees and straddling France and Spain). This article focuses on one of the projects we analyzed as part of our research, namely the *Emakumeen etxeak/Casas de las Mujeres*—or Women's Houses, as we will refer to them as in this article—which are spaces within municipalities that are pioneered by the Basque feminist movement in close collaboration with local institutions. These spaces bring together women's associations, city councils and equality advisory boards or departments. Women's Houses also run a range of programs, offer legal, employment and sexual health counseling services and provide targeted support for precarious groups.

The Women's Houses are a response to a long-standing demand by the feminist movement: women need to be able to rely on having a space of their own to gather, think, debate, create and enjoy themselves and to take collective action on social inequalities. In 1929, Virginia Woolf published her much celebrated essay, *A Room of One's Own*, advocating for women's need to enjoy financial independence and a room of their own in which to write. Writing, then, becomes a metaphor for any activity that women undertake for their own sake, for which certain premises are essential.

At the time of writing, there are fifteen Women's Houses in the Basque Country: eight in the province of Gipuzkoa (Arrasate, Azpeitia, Donostia-San Sebastián, Eibar, Errenteria,

Urola Garaia, Zarautz and Zumaia); five in Bizkaia (Balmaseda, Basauri, Durango, Ermua and Ondarroa); one in Araba/Álava (Vitoria-Gasteiz); and one in Navarra (Iruña-Pamplona). In addition, Women's Houses are in the process of being created in several other cities.

The network of Women's Houses coordinate in an informal manner, although each has its own origin, context and path to development. Houses are given different names as a function of the municipality they are located in, and they are run under a variety of models. And in addition to their activist, administrative and counseling and aid activities, the Houses offer training; each one sets a list of programs for the year, offering a wide variety of programs that take on the basic format of what are referred to in Basque as *Emakumeen Ahalduntzerako Eskolak/Escuelas para el empoderamiento de las mujeres*, or Schools for Women's Empowerment (which I will address in more detail below) and attract each year hundreds of women, along with a few men. Through these programs, the Houses create support, solidarity and personal and group empowerment networks, encouraging reflection and the active participation of women in public policy, and they serve as a platform for making visible feminism and its influence. And although the processes are not the same at all sites, the model has enjoyed a great deal of success and social influence even beyond city limits, and it is expected that still more Houses will be created in the coming years.

In this article I am going to describe the main features of how these Women's Houses emerged and grew, as well as the dynamics of how they are operated. I will argue that these spaces are feminist laboratories where the combination of political, training and counseling activities influence the participants' recomposition of their political subjectivities. Yet this recomposition, this "becoming feminist", is not simply learning about or becoming aware of social and gender inequality; rather, it involves "bodily labor" (simultaneously physical, cognitive and emotional) in the sense of Loïc Wacquant (1995), an individual and collective change in how we feel, show ourselves, project ourselves and relate to the world.

Another key distinguishing feature that I will consider is the particular interrelation that the Women's Houses foster between the institutionalist mindset, which is associated with policies on equality (equal opportunities), and the rupturist mindset of a feminist movement like the Basque movement, which is autonomous, self-organized and markedly anti-system. In this setting, an uneasy balance has been struck between calls for legal reform and actions that seek profound political and economic change. Moreover, within the Houses, women from groups that practice feminism in one way or another (through associations, institutions, professions or research) co-exist and interact, something that is particularly positive in the current feminist panorama, which tends to compartmentalize. All of this contributes to greater horizontality in relationships than is seen in other feminist projects, such as, for example, university programs (Esteban 2019). Nevertheless, these dynamics are not free of tensions, and I will analyze these tensions using the theoretical proposals of Teresa del Valle (2005) and Ana Fernández et al. (2008).

Before delving into the results of my analysis, in the next sections I will first describe the methodology used in our research and then I will contextualize the emergence of the Women's Houses at the international level, the national level, and at the level of the Basque feminist movement. This will allow me to properly frame the results of our research into a phenomenon that not only contributes significantly to the sustainability and influence of feminism in Basque society but also speaks to questions and debates that are central to the current feminist movement and reach beyond the Basque Country.

Methodology

The research presented here is part of two joint research projects. The first, which is currently ongoing, is called "New solidarities, reciprocities and alliances: the emergence of

collaborative spaces for political participation and the redefinition of citizenship" and is financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO-I+D+i, CSO2017-82903-R, 2018-2021); the second project, "Weaving communities from citizen initiatives (2018)", was carried out in 2018 and financed by the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa's *Etorkizuna eraikiz* program in agreement with the Vice-Rector's Office at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). The researchers who undertook the analysis of the Women's Houses belong to AFIT, the Research Group in Feminist Anthropology, which is a university-wide research group within the Basque university system. Although the study includes all the Women's Houses in the Basque Country, which share many parallels despite their differences, we have analyzed the processes in greater depth for the Houses in five cities (Arrasate, Donostia-San Sebastián, Iruña-Pamplona, Errenteria and Hernani).

Our methodology is qualitative and ethnographic. The primary techniques used were: (1) 39 in-depth interviews with people involved in the Houses in various ways; (2) about 150 hours of participant observation at different events, including internal meetings, public events, and conferences; and (3) the study of documentary sources: local studies and publications, internal documents, reports and brochures. Additionally, the researchers' own experience and close connections to the locations, themes and domains addressed—either because they live in those cities and/or participate in the associations or activities that take place in them or because they are or have been involved in some of the initiatives analyzed—has been crucial for the analysis. In my case, I participated in the process of creating the Marienea Women's House in Basauri (Bizkaia) as a member of that town's Women's Group, and since its inauguration in 2012, I have been involved in its day-to-day business. I have taken part in many of the events organized by the Houses in the Basque Country both as a speaker/instructor (for courses and workshops on a variety of topics) and as a member of the audience. All of this has allowed me to sustain an active and ongoing ethnographic process, which includes cycling through my own

experience as an activist, a researcher and a teacher/speaker. This triple position has provided me with a wealth of information while also allowing me to maintain the distance required to carry out my analysis.

Feminism and spaces of its own

Interest in physical space has been a constant in the history of feminism, at the level of theory as well as action. One specific aspect of this interest is how the configuration and division of space promotes and sustains gender inequalities, and another is everything related to the reclaiming and occupying of space in order to seek refuge, resocialize, interact or undertake collective action. Some of the loci of action or analysis are: the public/private-domestic division (Rosaldo, 1980; Pateman, 1983; Murillo, 2006), the relationships between geography, space and gender (Sabaté, Rodríguez & Díaz, 1995; McDowell, 1999), urban planning and design (Hayden, 1981; del Valle, 1997; Ciocoletto & Valdivia, 2019), policies around housing and accommodation (Austerberry & Watson, 1981; Jarvis, 2015; Mogollón & Fernández, 2016), "scary" spaces (Walkowitz, 1995; del Valle, 1997; Barjola, 2018), and the recovery of "women's footprints" within cities (Fernández, 2015). To this we must add the tremendous work done regarding refuges and shelter homes for women in situations of extreme vulnerability, such as victims of intimate partner violence (for this particular case, see Krenkel & Moré, 2017).

On an international level, there are numerous examples of feminist places and spaces, including meeting places, health centers, publishers, libraries and cafés. Among the more significant spaces that have been established through the decades we find: The Women's Building (San Francisco, USA, 1979); Casa Internazionnale delle Donne (Rome, 1983) and Casa di Ramia/Centro Interculturale delle Donne (Verona, 2004), in Italy; the Women's House

in Tindouf (2014) in Western Sahara; and La Gozadera (2015) in Mexico City. In Spain, some of the pioneering Houses are: Centro de Cultura de Mujeres Francesca Bonnemaison (Barcelona, 1941), la Casa de la Mujer (Zaragoza, 1990), la Casa de Encuentro de las Mujeres (Gijón, 1991) and la Eskalera Karakola (Madrid, 1996).

Yet women's commitment to availing themselves of spaces either reserved for them exclusively or in which they are the protagonists takes very different forms, both in terms of hard infrastructure—namely, the material qualities and characteristics of the building—and soft infrastructure—social systems, meanings, practices and relationships. This terminology comes from Helen Jarvis' study on co-housing (2005), which is cited by Irati Mogollón & Ana Fernández (2016, p. 25). Moreover, some of the spaces mentioned above take a fairly general approach in terms of their aims, activities and the people and groups that they direct their efforts toward, as is the case of the Women's Houses in the Basque Country. Others are more focused on specific issues or groups, such as support for women who are victims of domestic violence or meeting places for lesbians. In some cases, the Houses are managed directly by feminist groups, as is the case for Ca la Dona (Barcelona) and la Eskalera Karakola (Madrid), and in others they are administered by a mixed management scheme, as is the case with many of the Houses analyzed in this article.

The idea of establishing Women's Houses, then, is not exclusive to the Basque Country; indeed, they belong to a long feminist tradition at the national and international level, in which women (re)appropriate and (re)compose public spaces and make them suitable for social and political action. In the context studied, the establishment of such Houses in the Basque Country rests on two pillars. On the one hand, many of the Houses are the product of lengthy processes and long-standing demands, in which feminist collectives take part and where, regardless of whether they have their own space or one provided by the municipality, they view having a space available to them, a place in which they can centralize all or most of the town's or city's

feminist praxis, as essential. On the other hand, they constitute an initiative that tells us something about cultural, symbolic and identity configurations and about ways of taking on politics in the Basque context, which we will see in the next section.

Basque society and the challenges of feminism

The Basque Country is a fairly small territory with a population of approximately 3,000,000 people. It is culturally diverse and plurilingual (primarily Basque, Spanish, French, among others). The economy, especially in the southern region, is based on industry and the service sector. It is also a place that has experienced emigration and immigration during moments of great socio-economic change (e.g. industrialization, urbanization) and social and political conflict (such as the end of the Franco dictatorship, the transition to democracy, the nationalist conflict and independence movements, political violence, the rise of social movements).

Basque feminism burst on the scene at the end of the 1970s when women's collectives affiliated with various left-wing parties and independent women's groups banded together to make demands in areas such as employment, abortion and sexual and reproductive rights, and gender violence. After a slight decline at the end of the 20th century, Basque feminism currently enjoys significant social influence and has become a cross-cutting issue, feeding into and serving as a catalyst for many other social collectives and actors (Esteban et al. 2020). With the turn of the century, the process that we could call the diversification of feminism intensified, which has meant that, in addition to the traditional organization of collectives and associations, feminism has been professionalizing and consolidating its presence in institutions and at universities (all Basque universities offer postgraduate degree programs in Feminist or Gender studies). Moreover, the passing of the movement from generation to generation seems assured,

and the massive turnout by young women, some of whom are university students, has also been one of the most striking facts about the March 8 demonstrations in Spain generally, and the 5th edition of Euskal Herria Feminist Conference, held in Durango (Bizkaia) in November of 2019. Feminism has grown into the largest social movement in the Basque Country and it also serves as a transversal axis and a significant impetus for many other initiatives and movements due to its concrete demands as well as to its critical take on methods of organizing and activism. By the same token, Basque feminism has known how to keep itself unified in terms of the essentials, and it is demonstrating a great capacity to reinvent its influence on society and on women through its innovative initiatives, such as the Women's Houses that we are analyzing here.

Results and discussion

Architecture, diversity, training and assistance

Returning to the analysis proper, recall that many of the Women's Houses are the result of long-standing local feminist policies, which have developed alongside each other and strengthened each other and are promoted in large measure by the local feminist groups, who have been able to take advantage of the cracks in the system as well as their alliances with equality specialists and a number of political representatives. Obtaining space is not always easy (and depends fundamentally on which political party or even which individuals make up a municipality's government) and in some cases the creation of a House involves years of battle and perseverance for women's collectives: where previously feminist activities had been distributed throughout the municipality, the House makes it possible to bring together all that heritage, thereby amplifying the social influence of the movement.

One feminist summarized the success of the Women's House in Donostia-San Sebastián (Gipuzkoa) in this way:

> 'The House has become a reference point for all the women in the city, whether it's about equality or violence against women… I think they've done what the feminist movement in Donostia wanted (…) From a small project that risked becoming elitist, it's grown into an ambitious project that's known across sectors, by all political groups and all the women in Donostia'.

With regard to the buildings that accommodate the Houses, they are either municipally-owned premises that are usually recovered, rehabilitated or, in some cases, illegally occupied, places like old schools, pavilions or donated premises, or they are new builds on public land. The buildings often look quite distinctive architecturally and aesthetically, and tensions sometimes arise, more or less explicitly, between aspects that can come into conflict: on the one hand there is the pleasure of enjoying a new, beautiful, spacious and functional site, and on the other there is the use it will be put to and the assessment of both its location and the message to be projected. Taking everything together, we could say that the Houses tend to weave together very different dimensions—location, use, functionality, aesthetics, ecology, accessibility, history/memory, presence, and so on—which are difficult to balance.

Once a House is up and running, it is staffed by a variety of women and feminists who work together and are in contact with equality specialists and other professional women (instructors, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, educators, social workers, and so on). As I noted above, today these are the only spaces in which women that support feminism in different ways (through associations or institutions; as professionals or researchers) collaborate, which is of great value in itself. Similarly, women in different socio-economic situations and from geographical-cultural origins are found in the Houses, although, exceptions aside, there tends to be an asymmetry in that the women who avail themselves of the services offered are largely

of middle to low socio-economic status and/or born outside the Basque Country, while those who participate in the cultural and political activities are primarily women born in the Basque Country and are economically secure. This means that the dimensions of diversity and interculturality are not always well integrated, and divisions that highlight different types of otherness relative to various factors of inequality (racialization, disability, employment insecurity, and so on) emerge. Such diversity is not free of conflict.

The vast majority of the women who use the Houses are over the age of 40, though there is a certain imbalance among them in terms of age. At some sites, the young women who were initially wary of the institutional nature of the Houses have gradually come around, though they often continue to meet at their own premises or *gaztetxes*. Yet the young women's fears are not unfounded, given that, as we will see below, one of the risks of institutional feminist policies is the tendency to supervise activism, where the professionals guide the women's initiatives, limiting their creativity and their ability to push back against the institutions. This is a risk the professionals are aware of, however, much like this worker at the Women's House in Arrasate (Gipuzkoa):

> '… and at the same time, we have great respect for the feminist movement, in order to not encroach on its leadership… because some very adverse consequences sometimes result from official feminist policies'.

Of the various activities organized by the Houses (conferences, courses, expositions, seminars, workshops), the programs based on the Schools of Empowerment—from which, in some cases, the very House itself was conceived—stand out. As their name reflects, the Schools' philosophy is inspired by the concept of empowerment, which was borrowed from Latin American feminism. The concept purports to enrich and supersede earlier definitions of awareness-raising and socio-political participation because, in addition to addressing political

and cultural rights and contexts, the aim is to integrate the psychological, political, cognitive and economical processes that impede change (see De León, 1999).

The first Schools of Empowerment in the Basque Country were run in Bizkaia in 2003. These schools, which also form a network, are sections within the Houses that are wholly focused on offering various training, educational, reflection and meeting activities, with a very high number of participants every year. The schools' objective is to foment women's participation in society so they are able influence public policy. The programs are many and varied, ranging from those that explicitly deliver feminist content (training in theory, readings, debates) to workshops on general or specific issues that are relevant to different groups of women (social skills, computer skills, ailments or diseases) and to cultural activities (literature, art, theater, film).

Their history is still relatively short and they have not been evaluated in any depth (for this last point, see Fernández Boga, 2012; Picaza, 2017), so we do not know what real impact these schools have had on the lives of their "students" or on women more generally; however they are a qualitative leap forward in terms of informal feminist training and they are important projects within feminist pedagogy. A woman from Hernani (Gipuzkoa) who regularly participates in these activities defined her city's School of Empowerment as a space that is 'very loving, very pleasant, very creative, with lots of discussion and also lots of growth'.

I will close this section by describing the assistance offered by the Houses, which usually takes the form of providing information, counseling, legal aid and psychological services for needs relating to aggression, abuse, separation and divorce, civil partnerships, labor rights and employment discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual rights, and domestic violence, which is one of the main types of assistance given. Providing aid and support is also part of a long tradition in feminism, and in the Basque Country as well, as highlighted by the emergence of the so-called family planning centers in the 1980s, most of which were

established and run by feminist associations. Feminism has been very critical of the services that official bodies usually provide to vulnerable segments of society, where the prevailing approach tends to be patronizing and victimizing, given the asymmetry of the provider-user relationship and the tendency to downplay the users' capabilities. Beatriu Masià (2003), representing Tamaia, a leading women's association against domestic violence based in Catalunya, highlights certain aspects of the services they provide in this area that could be extended to any other area of action. Masià stresses that their work is not undertaken in a solitary or unidirectional manner; rather, it is done "in companionship" with many other people, including members of the association. Furthermore, they are very clear about the need to break the duality of "us/them" and, above all, the distrust of an "us"

> 'that encompasses certain women who share characteristics and mutually acknowledge each other, at least a priori, while believing there is a "them" that falls outside the scope of this acknowledgment, to the extent that the violence experienced by others is because they are "them", that the "us" would not be exposed to such violence, or at least not to the same extent' (2003, p. 186).

Activism, institutionalization and professionalization: tensions and dangers

The professionalization and institutionalization of feminism has shaped what is usually termed state feminism, institutional feminism or femocracy, which leads, on occasion, to a degree of disassociation from other feminist groups. In the Basque Country, over time the number of positions within administrations related to gender equality has grown considerably at all levels (autonomous community, regional, municipal), although these have not always been highly valued or stable jobs. A good number of these professional feminists work in the Houses, and their value is undeniable—not only do they bring in excellent theoretical training (postgraduate study in gender and feminism) and a broad range of practical experience, many

also continue to be members of independent feminist organizations. As noted above, Basque feminism is attempting to reconcile reform and rupture, a tension that has characterized feminism from the beginning. At the end of the 20th century feminists started demanding specific reforms to law, employment, education and health (for example, the 1981 Divorce Act, the 1985 and 2010 Abortion Acts, and the emergence of family planning centers), using social pressure as their main tool with the objective of forcing politician to make changes, but without always being involved in the specific drafting of the policies. This allowed the feminists to guarantee their independence in drawing their own readings and drafting their own proposals. And when they put concrete initiatives into action (such as the feminist health centers), they tried to maintain their autonomy above all else. This shift, combined with the significant number of feminist women working as equality specialists or holding political positions, is directly related to the fact that Basque society is clearly committed to equality between women and men, which can be seen, for example, in the Gender Equality Index[1], which gave the Basque Autonomous Community (Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa) a score of 71.1 out of 100[2] in 2020, and a score of 69.2 to Navarra in 2019[3]; these scores position Basque society above the mean score for the European Union. This commitment to gender equality in Basque society is rooted in several factors also present in the rest of the Spanish state, such as the rapid increase in membership in feminist organizations and certain legal reforms following the end of Francoism, but others are unique to the Basque Country, particularly the strength of the labor and the nationalist-independence movements, which, in conjunction with more current struggles, such

[1] According to EUSTAT, the Basque Statistics Institute, this index 'is a synthetic indicator that summarizes the inequalities that still exist between men and women in a series of dimensions related to well being and personal development. It follows the method used by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), and includes information provided by that body on the 28 countries that currently make up the European Union'. See: https://www.eustat.eus/elementos/El_Indice_de_igualdad_de_genero_de_la_CA_de_Euskadi_mejora_un_ano_mas_hasta_situarse_en_los_711_puntos_sobre_100/not0017325_c.html

[2] See: https://www.eustat.eus/estadisticas/tema_515/opt_0/ti_Indice_de_igualdad_de_genero/temas.html

[3] See: https://www.navarra.es/NR/rdonlyres/50E08D3A-C2AE-48B7-973B-ECC8291787BC/442003/2019PGN_Ejecutivo1.pdf

as anti-racism, have been good breeding grounds for the spread of feminist demands (Barcena, 2020).

Assessments with regard to institutional feminism and equality policies vary, depending on the author, because there are certain signs that set off alarms, such as the fact that the use of the word 'feminism' is somewhat taboo in many plans and projects (Lombardo, Meier & Verloo, 2009; Fernández de Labastida, 2018), where that term is virtually systematically replaced by the term 'gender equality'. This often leads to actions and demands becoming watered down to mere equality of opportunity, without considering the social and economic roots of gender inequality and exploring their intersectionalities in any real depth. This approach can also result in the glossing over of the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of the feminist movement (Méndez, 2007). Of course, that also depends on the administrative level involved, who is in the government and who is involved in the drafting of those plans. Nor should the capacity of institutions to coopt and neutralize be underestimated, even when progressive people on staff. At the same time, it would be useful to analyze in depth the impact that institutionalization, professionalization and the specialization of knowledge has on the feminist movement as a whole. One of the overall consequences of a hegemonic culture (also affects feminism) that places considerable import on the "system of experts" is that, almost without anyone realizing it, the divide between 'those who know' (professionals with university degrees) and 'those who don't know' (activists who sometimes become mere "followers" of the professionals' initiatives) has grown. All this, plus the differing paces of professionals and activists, may be weakening feminism's power to be a tool for change (Esteban 2019).

All the above mentioned tradeoffs and dangers come into play in the Women's Houses, making them both an opportunity and a challenge for feminism. In that regard, some of their characteristics can also help neutralize the effect of the hierarchization between professionals and activists. One is the clearly feminist identity of the equality specialists and of the

professionals that work in the Houses, many of whom are active participants in Basque feminism. Another advantageous characteristic is precisely the mixture of initiatives, groups and issues that exist on the same plane. A final positive characteristic is the extensive experience that the feminist associations that sustain the Houses have in many cities. The majority of these associations have a long political track record, and the projects they have undertaken and their decades' worth of experience in dealing with their local administration in order to obtain resources and services for women have garnered recognition and legitimacy from the local citizens. A feminist from Donostia-San Sebastián (Gipuzkoa) noted:

> 'We also suggested that (…) the Department of Equality be located in the House, as we thought that this would, well, create synergies, you know, between the movement and the equality specialists, right?, that it would give greater impetus to the House and the policies of equality'.

However, maintaining the difficult balance between the clearly rupturist positions and the ongoing search for reform is not without risk, the main one being the supervision of the activists' work, since it is the specialists and professionals that set the feminist praxis (Esteban et al. 2020). This mentoring can have positive connotations, but there are negative consequences as well, the most important ones being the surveillance and the continuous institutional pressure that keeps them within certain boundaries. Similarly, the continued dependence on the professionals and the rigidity of the protocols and deadlines can impoverish the feminists' autonomy when it comes to conceiving and implementing new alternatives, especially those that go against more official policies.

I now return to the dimension of horizontality in the Women's Houses. For this point, the concept 'horizontal architecture', proposed by Jone M. Hernández (2012), is relevant. She establishes a connection between the Houses I describe here and the public washing places, or lavoirs, where women used to gather and talk about their problems. The urban architecture that

Hernández speaks of is scaled to people, which enhances the quotidian and fosters networks and relationships among people. For the case at hand, the ability to repeatedly inhabit the House, even occasionally or irregularly, allows the women to examine their lives individually and collectively, to re-order them and project them into the future. In doing so, they engage in a communal reinterpretation of reality, generating 'common aspects from shared experiences of exclusion and discrimination, regardless of the diversity of the environments in which they occur' (Montero, 2006, p. 177).

This horizontality does not mean that there are no power structures or power relations, even if they are invisible. In fact, the Houses usually have various structures that function simultaneously and in an interrelated manner, creating intertwined dynamics. Moreover, in many cases, there is usually a dominant association that supports the House beyond the professional sphere, creating a weak parallel structure. This structure is also influenced by groups and friend networks, which strengthens the ability to gather, but it also brings its own risks, as noted by Jo Freeman (1970) in her widely read essay 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness'.

On the above note, there is an element of ongoing (formal and informal) dialog between the professionals and activists and the city managers that is of interest. This dialog, which also has its tensions, not only helps the Women's Houses achieve their proposed objectives, but it also helps strengthen the 'we' and make evident the presence of implicit leaderships and power relations within the House. Thus, the processes of dialoging and negotiating with the institution help the group self-evaluate its overall functioning.

As the last two sections demonstrate, the Houses are places where different orientations and approaches meet and confront each other at many different levels, and not always harmoniously. In order to characterize these various dynamics, we can apply the proposal put

forth by Teresa del Valle (2005) regarding the tensions that are inherent to social change, whereby she distinguishes between negative, critical and creative tension:

> '*Negative tension* is that which stays at the boundary of the problem and views it as an intractable conflict with no way out. *Critical tension* facilitates the issuance of assessments and judgments for problems and areas of action. Creative tension is that which, by analyzing opposing forces, promotes solutions that take into account the social forces generated by diverse groups' (in Maquieira 2011, p. 24).

I agree with Virginia Maquieira's assertion that what characterizes feminism is the 'blurred boundary between critical tension and creative tension' (ibid), and this idea is especially valid for the Houses that I am analyzing.

The conclusions drawn by Ana Fernández et al. (2008) in their analysis of certain factories and businesses in Argentina that were recovered by the workers are useful in closing this section, since their arguments apply perfectly to our case study. In addressing the issue of leadership and self-management, these authors note that:

> 'A collective process is not more self-managed because it lacks *leaders*, it is instead when its key members refrain from appropriating the power of the collective, when they do not accumulate for themselves the power-potential that belongs to everyone' (Fernández et al., pp. 197-198).

The Women's Houses not only make it possible for women to examine social issues and reinterpret their lives, they also go beyond the typical political organization.

Women's Houses as laboratories for political subjectivization and bodily and affective praxis

Everything that has been said up to this point would not be fully understandable without looking at the subjective, bodily and emotional dimension of the feminist perspective in general and that of the Houses in particular.

Carlos Diz (2019) defines political subjectivities as:

> 'A patchwork of experiential regions that expand and retract endlessly; fragile, mestizo and dynamic regions, open and never fully delineated, in which a whole range of experiences, desires, relationships, agencies and emotions are blended (…) Thus the "we" or the "activist" we is no longer given—unique, coherent, static—but rather something that is always to be invented' (2019, p. 94).

If we understand popular movements as political, communal and emotional spaces (Azpiazu, 2020), in any movement, including in the Houses, there would be a continuous creation and circulation of practices, affects and discourses that, in defining and transforming subjectivities, change the space itself and the relationships forged in them, an effect that transcends the walls of the building. That is, despite the physical infrastructure that gives the appearance of permanence, despite its more or less stable sections, structures and actions, we would have to view the Houses as being in constant movement. This dynamism is related to the processes of constructing and reconstructing political, individual and collective strategies, which originate in the interior but are also projected to the exterior, to various environs (the street, the town/city, the city hall and administrative buildings, into the very homes).

Inspired by Franco Berardi's[4] idea that a collective uprising is, above all, a physical, affective, erotic phenomenon, I have claimed that feminism or indeed any social movement can be similarly understood as a physical, affective, erotic phenomenon. Moreover, this perspective also leads us to think about political praxis in an alternative way and opens up fertile ground

[4] See http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/bifo-sublevacion-afectos_6_319578060.html

for activism: politics, activism as a desire for 'being and doing things together' (Gil, 2011; Kypriotaki, 2012; Esteban 2019). But, what would it mean to say that the politics, the activism and the dynamics of the Houses are affective phenomena? Using the approach taken by Sarah Ahmed (2004), I understand affect or emotion as being constituted in the 'between-bodies' contact, in interactions; that is, they are performative, they generate effects and shape objects and relationships. Sarah Ahmed (2010) has written that inheriting feminism is to inherit sorrowfulness, to be aware of the limits that are imposed and to be aware that those limits are not necessary. But feminists are feel joy and pleasure in the many activities they undertake, although this fact has sometimes remained in the background, as several authors have pointed out recently (Olivella & Porroche, 2012; Cornwall, Hawkins & Jolly, 2013; Muelas, 2018). The Houses are spaces that give rise to connections, to the intertwining of the many different emotions that contribute to the creation of a specific atmosphere. The Houses are, furthermore, spaces imbued with eroticism. Authors such as Audre Lorde (1984[1978]) and Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (1975) help us redefine the concept of the erotic as power, as a creative and driving force (Esteban 2020). Eroticism is the desire to go toward another and disrupt the discontinuity of beings (Bataille, 1986). As one feminist explained:

> 'When I look back and think about all these years together, I remember the many projects we worked on, I remember the discussions and the disagreements, but most of all I remember the celebrations, the songs, the dances, the laughter, the moments where we really had fun, all that combined energy is still inside me…' (Basauri, Bizkaia).

In order to dive deeper into these ideas, a social theory of the body is useful, since it allows us to claim that all social and political change implies physical and corporal transformations, changes in the way we sense and behave. Thus, if I highlight the fact that feminism has undergone major changes in the last decade and if we say that a house is a space

in constant movement, it would be logical to think that, whether they are aware of it or not, the inhabitants will necessarily have experienced modifications in their bodies and emotions, to how they relate to others, how they perceive and express subordination and agency, how they make concrete their claims/demands and how they shape and implement their actions; in short, how they live as feminists. Investigating these 'bodily reforms' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992) can provide insights into understanding the present better and guiding the future. Thus, we can refer to the space that is created within the Houses as a body 'factory', where bodies interact with each other and transform, thereby creating the social realm. Many of the Houses' members are well aware of their own transformation:

> 'I've changed a lot over the years, a lot, the House has changed me, the courses I've taken, everything I've learned, all the debates… but also there's the contact with the other women, most of all, I'd say, the contact with them… It's not just what I wear of how I present myself, it's everything: it's how I connect, how I'm able to express and defend my opinion, how I can laugh at myself… And I carry this with me outside (the House) too. My friends have noticed, my family has noticed …' (Donostia, Gipuzkoa).

Following Loïc Wacquant (1995), we could say they are transformations that affect different levels (subjective, affective, cognitive, etc.), brought about by work, by fully corporal, physical learning in which new perceptions, capacities and awareness are tested—a 'feminist becoming' that only consists of

> 'shaping and reshaping, consciously or unconsciously, our corporeality, our subjectivity and intersubjectivity, our "being in the world", our individual and collective action… (…) But in a way that is always critical of cultural mandates' (Esteban 2011, pp. 51-52).

Georges Didi-Huberman, in his proposal for analyzing images and what he calls 'events of the sensible' (images, appearances, apparitions, gestures, looks), calls for a 'rendering sensible':

> 'To render accessible to the senses, even to render accessible what our senses, like our intelligences, do not always know how to perceive as "making sense": something that appears only as a flaw in the meaning, sign or symptom (…) … "to render sensible" also means that we ourselves, before these flaws or symptoms, suddenly become "sensible" to something of the life of the peoples—to something of the history—that escaped us until then but that "regards" us directly (…) … moved in the double sense of putting into emotion and putting into movement of thought' (Didi-Huberman 2016, p. 85-86).

By way of conclusion

The Women's Houses in the Basque Country—embedded in a feminist and cultural tradition that is both local and international, characterized by their multiplicity, heterogeneity and complexity as bodies that are affected by others while also being agents and by all their tensions and contradictions—are spaces for training, for political activity and counseling services; spaces that are experiments in a way of doing that renders sensible social and gender injustices and inequalities; and a fundamental starting point for making such things disappear. All of this emerges from a continual flow of ideas, discourses, practices and emotions that intertwine and convert individual and collective subjectivities into dissidents and give rise to a desire for change within their inhabitants. This is what makes them privileged laboratories of feminism and for 21st century feminism.

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