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## **Age and Feminist Activism: The Feminist Protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract:* This article examines the existence of a positive relationship between age and feminist activism by analyzing the empirical case of feminist protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain. Drawing on published documents and fifteen interviews, this study shows that middle-aged and elderly women have more experiences and resources to participate in feminist movements than younger women. This research also identifies the circumstances where the positive relationship between age and feminist activism is more robust. The findings of this analysis contradict assumptions of mainstream social movement scholarship and part of the scholarship in life-course studies and politics: that as individuals progress into middle- or old-age, many of them tend to become more committed to the established political and social order and thus less interested in (and less active in) social movements that pursue political and social change.

*Keywords:* social movements; age; gender; Catholic Church; Spain; Franco;

### **Introduction**

Is there any relationship between age and feminist activism? Images of feminist movements in different countries and historical periods contained in current mass media and scholarly accounts suggest that such a relationship exists. Activists are usually portrayed by mass media and academic publications as young women who participate in flamboyant street

protests. In contrast, Rupp (2001) provocatively suggests that such a relationship exists but in the opposite direction. As women grow older, they accumulate experiences of gender discrimination that lead some of them to join feminist movements. Furthermore, as women age, they acquire resources that help activism, such as economic means, time and reputation. Understanding the relationship between age and feminist activism is crucial because age likely influences key features of mobilization such as aims and tactics.

This article analyzes the feminist protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain. Based on published documents and fifteen in--depth interviews, this research corroborates Rupp's proposition. However, rather than demonstrating a crude relationship between the two variables of age and feminism, this study shows a more complex relationship between them. The activists under study gained experiences and resources at different moments in their lives and not only at middle or late age. Regardless of the life stage at which these experiences and resources entered women's lives, these shaped their activism at older ages (their motivations to participate and their ability to do so). Moreover, this research specifies the contexts in which the relationship between age and feminist activism is likely to be strongest: (i) in historical periods where activism in social movements is non--paid, and (ii) when activists are leaders of hierarchical organizations, or are the more committed activists in non--hierarchical groups.

This article is organized in four parts. In the first part, I review the theory with which to rethink age and feminist activism: scholarship on social movements and life--course studies. In the second part, I present the empirical case and specify the sources used in this research. Subsequently, this article studies the feminist protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain. In what follows, members, activists and leaders of this protest are called 'Catholic feminists' (see below for a brief discussion of this terminological decision). In the

third and fourth parts, I analyze separately two factors that change with age and lead some women to join the aforementioned protest and/or continuously participate in it: experiences and resources. This article does not describe the evolution of Catholic feminists' protest in and of itself but rather focuses only on the interaction between age and activism within this protest.

## **Theory**

In 2001, Rupp asked: 'at what stage in the life cycle are women most likely to become feminists at different times and in different places?' (Rupp, 2001, p. 164). Rupp hypothesized that feminism had historically been a demand of middle--aged and even old women. Age and feminist activism are linked by two factors: the experiences that lead some women to feminism, and the resources that make participation in feminist collective action possible. When women are no longer young, they have often suffered experiences of gender discrimination that lead them to indignation and mobilization. Personal resources, such as economic means, reputation and time facilitate participation in activism. On average, middle--aged and old women have more access to these resources than young women. The image of feminists forged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as college--aged women taking part in disruptive events in the streets is probably accurate only for some streams of the movement and in periods of mass activism and peak mobilization. But these periods are the exception rather than the rule (Rupp, 2001).

Feminist movements are composed of many diverse individuals, groups and organizations. Groups and organizations are usually headed by leaders. Most examples used by Rupp while discussing age and feminism made reference to women who occupied decision--making positions in hierarchical organizations or were the most participatory

activists (Rupp, 2001). That Rupp focuses on leaders and very active participants has to be made explicit because both of them may differ in important ways from the remaining participants in social movements. One can argue that the relationship between age and activism is indeed specially strong regarding leaders of feminist movements and/or their most committed members. Reaching decision--making positions within hierarchical organizations usually implies participating in these organizations for a long period of time. On the other hand, occupying leadership positions or being the most active members often requires a high degree of commitment and personal resources, because historically activism was a non--paid activity.

Regarding experiences of discrimination that lead some women to feminist activism, as women grow older they accumulate an increasing number of such experiences. Rupp explicitly mentions experiences that propel some women to join feminist movements. But as women age, they continue to experience gender discrimination. From Rupp's work one can infer (and make explicit) that suffering degrading treatment encourages some women not only to start feminist activism but also continue in collective action afterwards. Additionally, one could also ask whether only negative experiences facilitate feminism in middle-- and old age or whether other types of (positive) experiences function in a similar way.

Rupp (2001) tends to use the expressions 'women's movements' and 'feminist movements' as interchangeable when referring to women's organizing other than the women's movement in the United States between 1945 and the 1960s and the international women's movement between the late nineteenth century and World War II. In contrast, other scholars employ the two expressions to name different phenomena. For example, Ferree and Mueller (2004, p. 577) state that women's movements are 'all organizing of women explicitly as women to make any sort of social change.' Women's organizing as women is usually

termed ‘feminist’ when it makes ‘efforts to challenge and change gender relations that subordinate women to men.’ However, women’s mobilization as women may try to reach other goals such as peace or moral reform. Thus, feminist movements are a subset of women’s movements. These definitions imply that women’s mobilizations are to be found in left and right. These definitions do not mandate that feminist movements fight exclusively for gender equality (Ferree and Mueller, 2004, pp. 578, 599). Some scholars only resort to the word ‘feminist’ when activists under study self-identify as such (Ray and Korteweg, 1999, p. 48). As shown below, some (but not all) Spanish Catholic activists utilize the word ‘feminist’ in self-presentation. Nonetheless, I name all of them ‘feminist’ regardless of self-identification because all of them tried to challenge at least some aspects of gender inequality. In this decision, I follow the renowned study of the feminist protest within the Catholic Church and the military in the United States (Katzenstein, 1998, pp. 20–1, 86–7).

What does the literature on social movements conclude about age and activism? The impact of age on activism is not a key theme of this scholarship (Goldstone and McAdam, 2001, p. 196). Nonetheless, this literature comprises general statements about the inverse relationship between age and activism (Kuzio, 2006). In other words, by proposing that young people more likely belong to social movements (and/or are more active within movements) than people of other age groups, mainstream social movement scholarship makes the counter argument to Rupp’s thesis. As Wiltfang and McAdam affirm:

The ‘young’ are more likely than older age groups to be in school, unmarried, and generally free from obligations imposed by family and career; they simply have more time to commit to activism than persons with full-time work or family responsibilities. For these reasons, we expect younger persons to be generally more active in social movement activities than older persons (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991,

p. 996).

Other authors specify the beginning of the period in which such inverse relationship between age and activism became particularly salient: the 1960s. Tarrow refers to:

the increased amount of money, free time, and expertise available to young people in the postwar boom years [...]. Both in Europe and America, they [young people] were entering universities in much larger numbers, where they had more free time and were exposed to broader currents of ideas than young people in the past' (Tarrow, 1998, p. 131; see also McCarthy and Zald, 1987).

The literature also identifies the types of mobilizations in which young people (and/or students among young people) are particularly present, including 'the vanguard of waves of social protest' (Tarrow, 1998, pp. 144--5), or 'high--risk/cost activism' such as the Freedom Summer Project (McAdam, 1986)—if only because of young people's 'willingness to engage in vigorous and possibly dangerous movement activities' (Tarrow, 1998, p. 190). Young people are also over--represented in movements in opposition to wars (such as the Vietnam war) and/or conscription (Tarrow, 1998, p. 63), in demand of university/education reform (Tarrow, 1998), and advocating long--distance issues (Rucht, 2000, pp. 86--7, 95).

As is the case with mainstream analyses on social movements, the relationship between age and activism is not a central topic in scholarship on women's and feminist movements either. Major syntheses of these movements around the world do not investigate or even mention the issue of age (Ferree and Mueller, 2004; Ray and Korteweg, 1999). This is also the case of the authoritative study of the feminist protest within the United States Catholic Church since the 1970s (Katzenstein, 1998). This lack of attention to age by the literature on women's and feminist movements is surprising because this scholarship stresses that women form an internally heterogeneous group that differ across multiple dimensions

such as class, ethnicity, religion or nationality. Logically, one could add ‘age’ to the list of variables across which women diverge. Schneider (1988, p. 13) denounces that sociological analyses on the second wave of the United States feminist movement disproportionately focus on young women and insufficiently study middle--aged and old women--she does not herself study middle--aged and elderly feminists but critiques the lack of analysis on the subject. However, regarding this very movement, activists, observers and scholars at times argue in the same direction as Rupp, and question the assumptions made by mainstream social movement scholarship: that in people’s lives, youth is the phase of maximum rebellion against the established order, and that this rebellious phase is followed by a more conventional phase conformed by labor market participation, marriage and parenthood. This pattern probably describes the activism of many men in social movements but not numerous women in feminist movements (Schneider, 1988, pp. 5, 10, 15; Steinem, 1983, pp. 212--13). The literature on feminist movements suggests that the relationship between age and feminist activism is central to understand feminist organizing. Age probably influences the aims of the protesters. For example, it is likely that middle--aged feminist activists wanting to transform academia into a more women--friendly space are interested in tenure-- and promotion--battles while student--age activists are more concerned with other types of issues such as power differences between faculty and students (Ferree and Hess, 2000, pp. viii, 57).<sup>2</sup> Age possibly shapes strategies and tactics used by in mobilization. For instance, elderly leaders may not use tactics that require physical vigor (Rossi, 1982, p. 325).

In contrast to the scholarship on social movements and women’s (and feminist) organizing, the influence of age on people’s ideas and behavior is a principal research subject of life--course studies. The life course is usually conceptualized as ‘a sequence of stages or status--configurations and transitions in life which are culturally and institutionally framed



from birth to death' (Heinz and Krüger, 2001, p. 33). As people grow older, they not only change biologically and psychologically but also encounter social expectations about appropriate behavior at specific ages (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2004, pp. 6, 10).

Particularly relevant in most people's lives are turning points or transitions, for instance when they leave education, begin to work, marry, become parents or retire (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2004, p. 10; Heinz and Krüger, 2001, p. 31). What happens at one point in time in people's lives usually has consequences in later moments (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2004, pp. 12–13; Mayer, 2009, pp. 414, 417--18; Moen, 2001, p. 180). As people grow older, some of them accumulate disadvantages. For instance, cumulative disadvantages have been documented in individuals who make simultaneously various transitions to adult life at a relatively early age such as leaving parental home, marrying and becoming a parent (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2004, pp. 12--13; Mayer, 2009, pp. 423--4).

Men's and women's life courses are different. For example, marriage and parenthood tend to reinforce men's participation in the labor market but disrupt women's (Moen, 2001, p. 182). In Western societies before the 1960s and 1970s, men's and women's life courses differed more sharply than in current times, and both men's and women's life courses were more standardized than in current times (Heinz and Krüger, 2001, p. 29; Mayer, 2009, pp. 418--19, 421; Moen, 2001, p. 181). Cumulative disadvantages have been identified in women's life courses (in comparison with men's life courses), 'given the structural lag in gender as well as in age stratification' (Moen, 2001, p. 184). Life course research emphasizes the principle of agency, that is, that individuals' life courses are not pre--determined; people construct their biographies through their decisions and behavior with a certain margin of freedom, notwithstanding structural constraints (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2004, p. 11; Heinz and Krüger, 2001, p. 41).

Since age influences multiple dimensions of human life, the life course perspective has been applied to the study of multiple phenomena including politics. Youth is a crucial stage in the life course for the development of political attitudes and behavior. In comparison with other age groups, the young are not especially interested and active in conventional politics. Conversely, the young seem to have a propensity towards the approval of (and participation in) unconventional forms of politics such as protests. In different societies and historical periods, some young people express their criticism with the established political (and social) order and demand political change. Thus, these young people show an inclination to rebelliousness and even revolution. As individuals progress into adulthood, many of them tend to become less committed to political change and more interested in the maintenance of the status quo. However, the particularities of all these processes vary with the specific political attitude or political behavior under analysis and also across societies and historical contexts (Braungart, 1984; Watts, 1999).

Life course effects (changes in people's attitudes and behaviors due to advancing age) should not be confused with other effects identified in analyses of age differences, similarities and change in political views and behaviors: cohort and period effects. On the one hand, cohort effects happen because people born in similar dates undergo common experiences during their formative years that have enduring consequences on them throughout decades. For instance, Inglehart (1990) argues that in advanced industrial societies, cohorts who came to age during the Great Depression gave priority to physical and material security. Conversely, cohorts who grew up after World War II enjoyed higher (and unprecedented) levels of physical security and affluence, to some extent took these more secure conditions for granted and subsequently valued quality of life and self-expression. Assuming that people usually retain value hierarchy throughout adulthood, inter-generational value change

(from materialist to post--materialist priorities) occurred as younger cohorts substituted older cohorts in the adult population. On the other hand, period effects happen when specific dramatic events affect people of all ages and cohorts. For instance, the accident of Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986 likely produced an increased awareness of the dangers of nuclear energy in European populations of all age groups (although probably to a variable extent) (Giugni, 2004, p. 500). Life--course, cohort and period effects may take place simultaneously in given cases. Without denying the potential existence and importance of cohort and period effects, the pertinent literature for this study is that of life course due to the central question that drives this research: at what stage in the life--course are women more likely to become feminists in different historical and social contexts (Rupp, 2001, p. 164).

In sum, to answer the aforementioned question, the literatures reviewed here offer contradictory propositions. Mainstream social movement scholarship tends to assume that youth is the stage of maximum activism. Likewise, some analyses of life course and politics defend that the young approve and take part in unconventional political activities such as protests. On the contrary, part of the literature on women's and feminist movements leads us to think in the direction defended by Rupp: that 'feminism [is] the province of old (or middle-aged) women' (Rupp, 2001, p. 164). Similarly, applying some insights of life course and gender research to the study of feminist organizing, one could argue that some women may conceptualize social expectations for women associated with age and cumulative disadvantages for women as grave problems that can be solved through collective action. Throughout their lives, some women could amass enough resources that permit them to be activists only when they are no longer young. It is to the task of elucidating the relationship between age and feminism with the help of an empirical case study that I now turn.

## **The Empirical Case and Sources**

A study based on a single case offers empirical richness to understand complex phenomena not previously widely researched. A single case study has no statistical generalizability (the enumeration of frequencies within populations or universes). However, a single case has analytical generalizability. It involves expanding previously developed theories and/or corroborating them in new instances (Yin, 1989, pp. 21, 38). In this article, I study the case of the feminist protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain. This protest comprises individuals and social movement organizations who believed that within the Catholic Church women formed a group in a disadvantaged position, this situation was unfair, and could (and should) be changed through collective efforts.

This protest is a case in point to analyze the relationship between age and feminist activism. Many (but not all) theoretical insights reviewed in the previous section come from studies on the United States society and polity. Thus, it is fruitful to examine the impact of age on feminism in other social and political contexts because, as life course studies claim, the specifics of this impact may vary across societies and polities. Franco's Spain is such a context different from the United States. While the United States is a multi-religious society, up to the last decades of the twentieth century Spain was a nearly homogeneous Catholic country after the expulsion of Jews in 1492 and Muslims in 1609. While in the twentieth century the United States was a democracy (however imperfect it was), between the mid-1930s and 1975 Spain was governed by a right-wing non-democratic regime headed by General Francisco Franco which actively undermined women's rights and status. As the previous theory section shows, insights to study the relationship between age and feminist activism come from analyses on feminist organizing in society while this article examines feminist organizing within an institution: the Catholic Church.

Notwithstanding the particularities of the case under study here, it is comparable to numerous other empirical cases in some regards. The bulk of social movement studies analyze collective action in democratic polities. Works on social movements in non--democracies are less numerous than in democracies. But non--democratic regimes such as Franco's Spain abound outside the contemporary post--industrial world and have constituted an important proportion of regimes worldwide in most of the last two centuries. On the other hand, as in the case of the Spanish Catholic feminists analyzed now, in both democracies and non--democracies social movements develop (and increasingly do so) within organizations and institutions such as companies, churches or schools (or outside them but with the purpose of transforming them) (Katzenstein, 1998).

In this study, I analyze women from two groups among the organizations which provided activists and leaders to the feminist protest within the Spanish Catholic Church: the Seminar for the Sociological Study of Women (*Seminario de Estudios Sociológicos sobre la Mujer*, SESM) and the national leadership of Women's Catholic Action (*Mujeres de Acción Católica*). Both groups were mainly formed by upper-- and upper-- middle--class women. The SESM was created in 1960 by María Laffitte, who by marriage had become the Countess of Campo Alange. María Campo Alange (1902--86), as she was usually known, asked her friend Lili Álvarez (1905--98) to help her recruit SESM members among women who had a university degree and a career. Álvarez also belonged to the aristocracy and was the author of books on religion, sports, and women's status. She was better known for her national and international multi--sport achievements most notably reaching the Wimbledon singles finals in three consecutive years in the late 1920s. The SESM endlessly demanded women's access to education and training, women's right to participate in the labor market (with the proviso that women also take care of their family duties), women's participation in civil society,

respect for single women, and a more active role of women within the Catholic Church. A first step for the improvement of women's status would be the study of women's position in society. Thus, SESM goals were directed not only to the Catholic Church but also to society.

Women's Catholic Action was established in Spain in 1919 to spread Catholicism in a society in the process of transformation due to incipient industrialization and modernization. Although the primary activities of Women's Catholic Action were religious and charitable, during the civil war (1936--9), leaders and members of Women's Catholic Action combined strictly religious initiatives with other activities supporting Franco's side in the rearguard, such as washing and sewing soldiers' uniforms, or working as nurses in war hospitals. After the civil war, Women's Catholic Action enthusiastically embraced the battle of the rechristianization of Spanish society after a (presumed) previous de--christianization, with initiatives such as continuous religious training for their members, preaching in various locations including women's prisons, charitable work, frequent religious ceremonies including masses, the rosary and pilgrimages to sanctuaries, the incessant fight against immodesty in women's clothing, and the endless prudish battle for morality in public places such as movie theaters, dance halls, and beaches. Meanwhile, the organization expanded and consolidated.

Given the pious and politically conservative trajectory of Women's Catholic Action up to the 1950s, it was unexpected that such an organization could be the home of feminist activism. But in Spain in the 1950s, female leaders of Women's Catholic Action insisted on the need of women to receive education and training. Leaders of Women's Catholic Action continuously demanded that women (and lay people in general) play a more active, influential and autonomous role from the hierarchy within the Church, that women's participation in civil society increase and that women's status in society improve (Blasco,

1999; Moreno, 2003; Rodríguez, 1995). Thus the SESM and the leadership of Women's Catholic Action pursued similar goals, but the latter focused more on the transformation of the Catholic Church and the former on the change of society in general.

The SESM and Women's Catholic Action were in some respects very different and represent important types of women's groups that formed the home of the feminist protest within Catholic Church in Franco's Spain. The SESM was a small group of nine women while the Women's Catholic Action was a mass organization with 172,056 members in 1953 (Blasco, 1999, p. 160). Women's Catholic Action was an auxiliary organization of the Catholic Church which meant that the Catholic hierarchy approved its statutes and the nomination of its leaders and chaplain. The chaplain was always a man because only men can be Catholic priests. By contrast, the SESM was an informal group, not under the authority of the Church hierarchy, and without a chaplain. As an informal group, the SESM did not have decision-making positions, although Campo Alange (1983, p. 122) refers to herself as SESM president in her memoirs. Interviews made for this article (see below) confirm the leading role played by Campo Alange in the SESM. The SESM remained active until the death of SESM founder Campo Alange in 1986. Conversely, feminist leadership of Women's Catholic Action was active mainly until the late 1960s. SESM members named themselves 'feminist', although the word was (and still is) used in a pejorative way by most Spaniards (Álvarez, 1959, p. 13; 1964, p. 168; Campo Alange, 1983, p. 226). While some leaders of Women's Catholic Action at times used the word 'feminist' for self-presentation, others did not, and still others qualified their 'feminism' with the adjective 'Christian' and/or clarified that their feminism was contrary to 'false feminism' (Moreno, 2003, p. 249).

Publications by Catholic feminists, along with academic bibliography, are among the main sources of this article. Women's Catholic Action published a monthly periodical for its

leaders, *Bulletin for Leaders* (*Circular para Dirigentes*), and a magazine for a wider readership, *Path* (*Senda*). I have analyzed all issues of *Bulletin for Leaders* between 1955 and 1966, and *Path* between 1952 and 1966. In addition, in 2009 and 2010, I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews. More concretely, I interviewed: SESM members (Borreguero, 2009; Jiménez, 2009; Pérez--Seoane, 2009; P. Salas, 2009); the President of Women's Catholic Action between 1963 and 1968 (Victory, 2009); and national leaders of Women's Catholic Action (de Silva, 2009; Quereizaeta, 2009; C. Salas, 2009). I affirm with confidence that these eight women comprise the whole group of SESM members and leaders of Women's Catholic Action who in 2009--10 were alive, could be found by researchers after very intensive investigation, whose physical and mental health enabled them to go through an interview, and who accepted to speak to me.<sup>3</sup> I also interviewed the National Chaplain of Women's Catholic Action between 1963 and 1966 (Aradillas, 2009). In case of SESM members who were dead or were alive but could not be interviewed, I interviewed their close relatives (C. Álvarez de Miranda, 2010; P. Álvarez de Miranda, 2010; del Amor, 2010; Rodríguez--Ponga, 2010; Salamanca, 2010; Vindel, 2010). Face--to--face interviews were semi--structured and lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. Most of those interviewed (except close relatives of SESM members) were in their eighties. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is my native language. I tape--recorded and transcribed all interviews in full. Although all interviews were key sources, due to space constraints direct quotes are made in this article only from interviews with Catholic feminists.

Scholarship usually locates Spanish feminist collective efforts in the 1970s in the milieu of the clandestine opposition to the non--democratic regime, where feminists encountered mainly illegal left--wing political parties and trade unions (Threlfall, Cousins, and Valiente, 2005). Yet, due to ferocious repression, this opposition was by force a



minoritarian phenomenon. As Radcliff (2011, 376) convincingly argues, historiography has found it hard to recognize women's agency and autonomy in places other than the opposition to Francoism. Radcliff (2011) documents that in the 1960s and 1970s, women enjoyed autonomy to develop their own voices in the homemaker associations under the tutelage of the single party and (to a lesser extent) the neighborhood associations permitted by the regime. Because these associations were legal or tolerated by authorities (with very few exceptions), many more Spaniards participated in them than in underground opposition groups. The same can be argued for the groups of Catholic feminists analyzed in this article.

It should be noted that during the first decades of the Franco regime, the Church and the political regime supported each other. Catholicism was the official religion of the country and freedom of worship was abolished. Catholic marriage was mandatory, with very few exceptions. In all primary and secondary schools, the state made religious teaching and religious practices mandatory and education had to conform to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The state supported the Catholic Church financially, which was exempted from taxation. In turn, the Church backed the non--democratic regime, provided it with legitimacy, and declared the civil war a crusade of the supporters of Christianity (Franco's followers) against the unfaithful and immoral. In the last years of the Franco regime, a part (only a part) of the Church distanced itself from the regime, self--criticized the actions of the Church in the civil war, and even gave protection and support to political dissidents. Thanks to this progressive distance of a sector of the Church from the regime, when Franco died in 1975 this sector could join forces with other political and social actors in the building of a democracy (Linz, 1993).

### **The Feminist Protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain**

### *Age and Experiences*

In this section, I show that both SESM and the national leadership of Women's Catholic Action support one of Rupp's propositions about age and feminism. As women grow older, they accumulate experiences of discrimination that propel some of them to start feminist activism. Both the SESM and Women's Catholic Action also support another proposition that is implicit in Rupp's work. Once in feminist activism, women continue to experience maltreatment. The number of these experiences tended to increase with age. These experiences give some women enough incentives to continue their participation in feminist collective action. However, I go beyond Rupp's proposition by revealing that some of the experiences that foster feminist activism for middle-aged and old women are not vexatious. Positive experiences may also propel these women to feminism, such as international experiences which provided inspiration and models.

As already mentioned, the SESM was established in 1960. In that year, SESM founder Campo Alange celebrated her fifty-eight birthday. Campo Alange asked her friend Álvarez help to establish the group. In 1960 Álvarez was 55 years old. Six women were initially recruited to the SESM: Concepción Borreguero, Consuelo de la Gándara, Elena Catena, María Jiménez, María Salas and Purificación Salas. In 1960, the age of these six women ranged between 30 and 41 years. A younger member joined the SESM only later: Carmen Pérez-Seoane (Campo Alange, 1983, pp.122--4; Pérez-Seoane, 2009). SESM members were aware that women in general, and they themselves in particular, were victims of gender discrimination. In her book *Laity and its Integrity (El seglarismo y su integridad)*, Álvarez denounced that in practice Catholic moral exigencies for women were mainly the repression of sexuality in order to fulfill the sixth commandment: 'You shall not commit

adultery'. In contrast, Catholic moral exigencies for men were much broader, included all commandments, and did not emphasize the sixth commandment. This double moral and sexual standard was based on the belief that in comparison with men, women's capacity for moral development was inferior (Álvarez, 1959, pp. 168--9, 175--6). In her memoirs, Campo Alange refers to the following episode that happened in the 1920s after her first delivery and raised her feminist consciousness:

My mother--in--law told me that it was customary to present the newly born son to the Virgin. [...] Still weak and in pain, one cold November day, I went to the Church [...] together with my husband. [...] As I crossed the threshold, somebody stopped me: it was the sacristan followed by two altar boys. A little bit in a rush and in an authoritarian tone, the sacristan told me: 'You must not enter yet'. 'Why?' I asked without understanding. He answered in annoyance: 'This is a purification mass, madam, and you have not been purified yet.' [...] I remained in the portico with the baby. I thought: Why does the sacristan tell me that I must not enter the Church because I am not *purified*? Am I impure? Why impure? Am I stained in some way? I suffered a lot while delivering my baby, I am married, I am honest, *I have always been so*. Does the father not need purification? I felt confused, bothered, ill--tempered, furious and humiliated. Besides, I was cold. [...] Later on, the priest gave me a stole and told me: 'Hold the baby in your arms, get the stole and follow me!' During mass, I cried. I cried of anger, impotence and humiliation. [...] Before the altar, I promised to the Virgin that in some way, I would announce to all and sundry my discontent with discrimination against women.

From that very moment, I started to study seriously. [...] I wanted to prepare

myself to combat one day the unfair social differences existing between men and women (Campo Alange, 1983, pp. 41--2).<sup>4</sup>

In 1957, future SESM member de la Gándara became widowed from Ángel Álvarez de Miranda, Professor of History of Religions at the University of Madrid. In 1957, de la Gándara had a nine--year--old daughter and a four--year--old son. At that historical time, it was common practice that de la Gándara would have moved back to her parents' place together with her children, but she rejected that option and decided to live at her own address (and mainly on her own) (P. Álvarez de Miranda, 2010). In order to support her family, de la Gándara took several part--time jobs principally teaching languages. At that time, Spanish civil law stated that widows did not have parental authority over their children, and had to nominate a (male) tutor for them. According to de la Gándara's daughter, this legal requirement deeply annoyed de la Gándara, and propelled her to feminism (C. Álvarez de Miranda, 2010).

In comparison with young women, middle--aged and old women are more likely to have undergone the aforementioned discriminatory experiences, for instance, after delivery or widowhood. This is so because these degrading treatments often happen after transitions to adulthood, such as marriage or maternity, or other turning points in the life course such as widowhood.

By definition, Women's Catholic Action was not an organization composed by very young women. Within Catholic Action, there was a branch formed by young women. Members of this female youth branch started to belong to Women's Catholic Action when they reached the age of thirty. But Women's Catholic Action is still an interesting organization to study age and feminism, because this case reveals some mechanisms which

link age and feminist activism. An analysis of biographies of those who reached decision making--positions in Women's Catholic Action shows that these women were usually neither the newly arrived women from the youth branch (or from outside the organization) nor the youngest members. Leaders of Women's Catholic Action had often been members and/or leaders of the female youth branch (Quereizaeta, 2009). Pilar Bellosillo (1913--2003), President of Women's Catholic Action between 1952 and 1963, was a case in point. Before the civil war, she joined Catholic Action by being a volunteer teacher in a training center for working class women run by the organization. In 1940, she became President of the female youth branch. When she was 30 years old, she joined Women's Catholic Action. In 1952, she became President of the Women's Catholic Action. In that year, she became thirty--nine. She acted as President up to 1963. In that year, she turned fifty (Salas and Rodríguez, 2004, pp. 26, 37--61).

It was during Bellosillo's Presidency when Women's Catholic Action started to become a platform for Catholic feminist activism (of its leaders). Bellosillo and other leaders shifted the perspective that guided the training to leaders and members of the organization. Training programs with an active pedagogy were routinely offered to (and imposed on) cadres and the rank--and--file. In these courses, women were taught to observe reality, think critically about this reality (from a Catholic point of view) and act to improve this reality. Time and again, women were urged to be active Catholics instead of passive and submissive pious souls (Moreno, 2003; Quereizaeta, 2009).

The experience of holding decision--making positions within international Catholic organizations provided Bellosillo and other national leaders of Women's Catholic Action with inspiration for feminist demands. This type of experience was to some extent related to age because it was usual that only (or mainly) women who held leadership positions in

national Catholic organizations also reached decision--making positions at the international level. International experiences were particularly important in Franco's Spain, because state mass media censorship made very difficult for Spaniards to know exactly what happened abroad. Already in 1952, Bellosillo became a member of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) Executive committee. The WUCWO enthusiastically supported an active role of lay women in public arenas. Later, Bellosillo had an outstanding career in the highest decision--making positions of international Catholic organizations: She was WUCWO President between 1961 and 1974, and President of the International Catholic Organizations Conference between 1965 and 1971. She acted as a lay auditor in the Second Vatican Council (1962--5). With other female Catholic leaders, in international fora, she continuously demanded that women (and lay people in general) play a more influential and autonomous role from the hierarchy within the Church, and that women's status in society improve (Moreno, 2003; Quereizaeta, 2009; Salas and Rodríguez, 2004, pp. 42--4, 127).

The demands of Spanish Catholic feminists were in line with a change in Papal perspective on (some) women's issues. Already in the 1940s, Pope Pius XII declared that although historically women had served God in the confinement of their homes or cloisters, in contemporary times women should participate in spreading Catholicism beyond home and cloister. References to these and other propositions made by Pius XII were included in publications and training materials of Women's Catholic Action and interviews conducted for this article (Pius XII, 1956; C. Salas, 2009; Salas and Rodríguez, 2004, pp. 42--3; P. Salas, 2009; Senda, 1956). In his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII referred in a positive tone to women's access to public life, and women's equal duties and rights in both private and public life. The Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) rejected women's subordination. The Second Vatican Council supported an enhanced role of lay people within the Church.

However, in subsequent years, the Papacy and the hierarchy firmly and explicitly rejected the possibility of women's priesthood and women's access to decision-making positions within the Catholic Church (Moreno, 2003; Rodríguez, 1995; C. Salas, 2009).

Spanish Catholic feminists sensed the mismatch between the international and national levels, because still in the 1960s in Spain, the majority of the Church hierarchy opposed a more active role of women within the Church. During her Presidency of Women's Catholic Action (1963--8), Carmen Victory visited all Spanish bishops (called at that time 'metropolitans'). One of the mandates that she continuously heard was: 'Do not get women out of the home!' She time and again answered: 'I get women out of their homes to do good!' (Victory, 2009). María Quereizaeta, leader of Women's Catholic Action (2009) remembered in the interview: 'In general, we did not agree with what bishops published. Some bishops supported us, but these bishops were only a minority.'

Because Women's Catholic Action was an organization of lay women, some leaders suffered gender discrimination in society (and not only within the Church). In the interview, national leader Ángela R. de Silva recalled an episode that took place in the 1940s:

It happened to me that, after honeymoon, I went to the bank [...] to withdraw some cash and [the bank clerk] told me: 'I think that you are married. Without your husband's permission, you cannot [withdraw cash]'. And a woman could not travel abroad without her husband's permission. [...] [That annoyed me] an awful lot.<sup>5</sup>

Once in activism, Catholic feminists continued to suffer unequal treatment because they were women. These experiences propelled them to continue their mobilization. In Franco's Spain, the main circles of Catholic intellectuals were composed exclusively of men.

There, their members discussed issues in a more open way than that permitted by the Catholic hierarchy and political authorities of the time. Catholic feminists attempted to belong to these circles, but this objective was hard to reach. SESM member Álvarez wrote to the two organizers of the so-called ‘Maldonado conversations’ asking them to include women but she did not receive any answer.<sup>6</sup> Only later on, when the topic of discussion was the relationship between women and men, were women allowed to participate. Around twelve women finally became members of the Maldonado conversations including SESM founder Campo Alange, Álvarez, and SESM member and leader of Women’s Catholic Action María Salas. Women’s participation in this forum was supported by a few men, but women often faced polite and condescending opposition from other male members. At times, when Catholic feminists spoke, they directly received severe and discrediting remarks (Salas, 1993, pp. 80--1). These disqualifying reactions against Catholic feminists arose in circles of men who considered themselves intellectually sophisticated, liberal--minded, modern and critical.

Remembering men’s indifference and even hostility towards Catholic feminists, SESM member Borreguero affirmed in the interview: ‘We thought that men attached very little value to us. [...] men were very polite and agreeable with us [...] but [men thought that what we did] were Spanish women’s stupid things’ (Borreguero, 2009). Also in the interview, SESM member Purificación Salas mentioned the general hostility against gender equality: ‘Indisputable, it was in the air. [...] Undoubtedly, at that time a lot of people were recalcitrant’ (P. Salas, 2009).

### *Age and Resources*

As shown below, and supporting Rupp’s propositions, SESM members and leaders of Women’s Catholic Action had valuable resources for activism: economic means, reputation



and (to a certain extent) time. Leaders of Women's Catholic Action also had an additional resource: in-depth knowledge of their own organization and the Catholic hierarchy. In Franco's Spain, in comparison with young women, middle-aged and old women were more likely to have access to the aforementioned resources. Nonetheless, the case under study here shows a complex relationship between age and feminism through resources. As life course studies defend, some people accumulate resources over time. Catholic feminists acquired resources at different stages of their lives and not only at old age. For instance, some of them who were affluent had their wealth at a fairly young age if they were born into it or married into it while young women. But these economic means helped activism at later ages.

I will begin with the case of the SESM. With regard to economic means, participation in this group was non-paid. SESM members were mainly from the upper-middle- or upper-class thanks to family wealth, and/or marriage and/or a profession. Upper-middle- or upper-class status allowed SESM members to take part in non-paid activism. Some routes to affluence are linked to age because age increases the likelihood that women inherit wealth, marry and exercise a profession. Campo Alange and Álvarez were aristocrats and had enough wealth to maintain an upper-class way of living without working for wages. The remaining SESM members were professionals and thus earned salaries or income; some of them also benefitted from family wealth. Married SESM members had in principle access to at least some of their husbands' economic resources: Campo Alange, Catena, Jiménez and Pérez-Seoane.

In relation to reputation, when in 1960 Campo Alange established the SESM, both she and Álvarez were well-known authors with several published books. Generally speaking, age increases the probability that a person is a well-known author. In comparison with young women, middle-aged and old women have had more time to write and publish their works.

Some books by SESM members had been reprinted several times and main newspapers had published reviews on these books. One example serves to illustrate this point. As early as in 1948, Campo Alange published a book titled *The Secret War of the Sexes* (*La secreta guerra de los sexos*) (Campo Alange, 1948). Campo Alange argued that throughout history, men had dominated women and subsequently humankind had been deprived of the potential contributions that women could have made. She argued that the state of ignorance in which many women lived was not a direct manifestation of women's innate mental inferiority. Rather, women had not been given the opportunity to develop their own capabilities. Since early moments in history, women and men had quarreled for the possession of culture. Regarding Catholicism, she affirmed that the Church has provided women with only two models which were not very useful for the majority of female believers. These models were Eve (or the non--repentant sinner), and the Virgin Mary (or Jesus's mother). In 1950 and 1958, this book was re--printed with different forewords. Art critic, writer, essayist, journalist and philosopher Eugenio d'Ors reviewed *The Secret War of the Sexes* in the newspaper *Arriba* (d'Ors 1949). In his review, d'Ors disagreed with the main arguments of the book. Although the review was written in a condescending manner, it gave the book a lot of publicity (Campo Alange, 1983, pp. 73--4).

The reputation that is analyzed here is that of intellectuals. Talking about SESM founder Campo Alange, the youngest SESM member Pérez--Seoane (2009) commented: '[Campo Alange] was a woman with a lot of prestige. She had high intellectual and social prestige. Therefore, people liked to go to María's home. She was the friend of all intellectuals'. SESM member Purificación Salas (2009) argued in the same direction: '[M]y sister María [Salas], Álvarez and Campo Alange had a lot of prestige'.

As for time, it was a necessary resource to participate in the SESM, which was mainly

a study group. SESM members met on a weekly basis in Campo Alange's home around eight at night. The meetings finished around mid--night and included a quick dinner. These meetings at times required that SESM members had done previously reading. SESM members debated certain topics, and researched and published together. For example, in a collective publication, the SESM analyzed the education system and denounced the acute education deficit that most Spanish women of the time suffered. Moreover, the SESM lamented that the majority of Spanish women had little or no ambition (Álvarez et al., 1970). SESM's publications were key intellectual contributions on gender not only because of their high quality but also because in Franco's Spain research on gender was very scarce. Generally speaking and with exceptions, other things being equal, in Franco's Spain, women had more time for activism in the following circumstances: when they were single or widows rather than married; when they did not work for wages rather than when they did; when they were childless rather than mothers; and when they were mothers of grown--up children rather than mothers of infants, toddlers or very young children. The prospect that women are widows and/or have grown--up children augments with age. SESM members have different doses of free time. Campo Alange and Álvarez had plenty of free time because they neither worked for wages nor had small children. De la Gándara was a widow. Three SESM members worked for wages but were single: Borreguero, María Salas and Purificación Salas. Jiménez worked for wages and was married but did not have children. Catena and de la Gándara worked for wages and were mothers of young children: a daughter, and a daughter and a son respectively. But both of them hired domestic servants and were regularly helped by the grandparents of their children (C. Álvarez de Miranda, 2010; P. Álvarez de Miranda, 2010; Vindel, 2010).

As SESM members, leaders of Women's Catholic Action had resources that were

valuable for mobilization. Since a scrutiny of biographies of presidents, some vice-presidents and some members of the National Council of Women's Catholic Action shows that these leaders were affluent and had time for activism for the same reasons as SESM members, let me focus on an additional resource for feminist activism in the hands of leaders of Women's Catholic Action: knowledge of their own organization and the Catholic hierarchy. I have mentioned above that in the 1950s and 1960s, some leaders belonged to Catholic Action (including the youth branch) for a long time--span. Such an extended record of participation provided these Catholic feminists with a deep knowledge of the organization and the Catholic hierarchy. This knowledge enabled these women to know which demands could be advanced and which demands could not even been raised. For instance, leaders of Women's Catholic Action dared to challenge the traditional mandate that adult women must either marry and have children or become nuns. This mandate was predicated endlessly by the Catholic hierarchy and officials of the non--democratic political regime. As Quereizaeta (2009), leader of Women's Catholic Action summarized in the interview: 'In general, at that time women were very much conceived as mothers, married and mothers.' In Franco's Spain, women who were not married were considered failed human beings and were despised for the mere fact of being single. Many negative stereotypes against single women existed, for example, that these women had been left on the shelf (*se habían quedado para vestir santos*) or were the typical sour spinsters (*solteronas*). Usually, single women were not able to support themselves, were under family tutelage and were not sexually active. Thus, it is not surprising that many unmarried women hid their age and pretended that they were younger and subsequently still marriageable (Quereizaeta, 2009; C. Salas, 2009). As leader of Women's Catholic Action Carmen Salas (2009) explained in the interview referring to members aged thirty or over: 'They could not even think of themselves as women [...] no

longer young'. But in the early 1960s, Bellosillo defended that other options different than marriage and maternity existed for adult women (Moreno, 2003, p. 248). In her book *We, Single Women* (*Nosotras, las solteras*), leader of Women's Catholic Action and SESM member María Salas argued that women's natural destiny was maternity. However, she also stated that female adults could live a meaningful life as single and childless women. Maternal inclination could be applied not only to biological maternity, but also to a profession, activism in civil society, preaching, friendship, or family bonds different from those that unite mothers and progeny (Salas, 1959). In fact, the leadership of Women's Catholic Action was mainly formed by single women (and thus, childless).<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has corroborated Rupp's thesis about the relationship between age and feminist activism in the empirical case of the feminist protest within the Catholic Church in Franco's Spain. The analysis of SESM members and national leaders of Women's Catholic Action shows that as these women grew older, some of them accumulated experiences of gender grievances. To suffer gender discrimination and be conscious about this unequal treatment led some of these women to start feminist activism. Rupp's work implicitly suggests that experiences of gender inequality propel some women not only to begin feminist mobilization but also continue participating in feminist campaigns. This implicit proposition has been made explicit in this article and supported in the aforementioned empirical case.

In line with life--course research, this study shows that experiences of gender grievances that led Catholic feminists to join (or continue into) feminist activism often (but not always) happened after several transitions to adult life, including marriage and maternity, and at other turning points of the life course including widowhood. The mere accumulation of

discrimination experiences is probably not the only factor that explains the initiation and/or continuation of feminist mobilization. The nature of these experiences also mattered. Some of the discriminatory episodes analyzed in this study happened at one point in time but had enduring consequences in women's lives. When women lost their rights because of marriage, maternity or widowhood, they remained trapped afterwards in a situation of continuous subordination, against which some of them rebelled. This study has also documented that other types of experiences different from gender maltreatment, such as international activism, fostered feminist organizing too. These other types of experiences were positive in nature and, as the case of Women's Catholic Action demonstrates, these were more common among women who were no longer young. The analysis of SESM members and leaders of Women's Catholic Action also suggests that as these women grew older, they amassed resources which are very useful for collective action, among others, income, reputation, time and/or knowledge of the context in which collective protest takes place.

Age and feminism are linked through experiences and resources in complex ways. In the case under study here, the experiences that fostered Catholic feminism in middle-- and old age happened at various moments in women's life courses. Similarly, Catholic feminists acquired resources that facilitated activism at different points in their lives. In some cases, these experiences and resources directly resulted in feminist activism in middle or late age. For instance, some Catholic women directly established or joined feminist groups, such as the SESM, when they were no longer young. In other cases, Catholic women participated in various Catholic organizations starting when they were young (or very young) but these organizations did not pursue the erosion of gender subordination. It was only later on, when these activists were leaders of Catholic organizations and they middle--aged or old, that they converted some of these very organizations, such as the Women's Catholic Action, into

homes of feminist activism.

The convoluted relationship between age and feminism (through experiences and resources) runs against assumptions by mainstream social movement scholarship and part of the literature on life course and politics: that as individuals become middle- and old-aged, many of them tend to support the maintenance of the status quo and subsequently be less committed to social movements that aim at political and social change.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in historical and comparative perspective. This article has analyzed a mobilization by upper- and upper-middle-class women who were no longer young. These women had their window of opportunity for activism and used it in a context, that of Franco's Spain, where women needed respectability (and many resources) to contest, however minimally, the gendered status quo. In this regard, Franco's Spain is not comparable to Western democracies, where, from the 1960s and 1970s and onward, youth provided legitimacy to participate in social movements. Nevertheless, as was the case of Franco's Spain, in the last two centuries, the majority of polities were non-democratic and in most societies women were deprived of the most basic rights and liberties.

Catholic feminists in Franco's Spain attempted to transform the Catholic Church, which was and is a very hierarchical organization. To try to change such a target, activists needed a lot of experience and resources. Age tends to favor that activists had acquired such high skills. In this sense, Spanish Catholic feminists are comparable to many other feminists who, in past and present, in democratic and non-democratic countries, attempt to transform, from within or outside, organizations and institutions which tend to be hierarchical too, including companies, schools or other churches.

The relationship between age and activism is probably more robust in historical contexts similar to the conditions examined in this article: when activism is a non-paid

activity. In this type of circumstances, personal resources facilitate participation in collective action. Future studies should investigate if the relationship between age and feminism is more tenuous in other historical situations where activism is at times a paid activity, and thus some activists build professional careers through mobilization. Probably in these circumstances, personal resources such as economic means, reputation and time are not so central for collective action.

This article has empirically supported Rupp's hypothesis about age and feminism with a study of leaders of a hierarchical women's organization (Women's Catholic Action) and members of a small non--hierarchical group in which participation implied a considerable degree of commitment (the SESM). These are the types of organizations, groups and activists analyzed by Rupp and other scholars attempting to understand the relationship between age and feminist activism. Future studies should inquire whether age and feminist collective action are also connected through experiences and resources regarding the rank--and--file of hierarchical organizations and members of small non--hierarchical groups who participate with a low degree of commitment. It is likely that in both cases age and activism are connected through experiences of gender discrimination that lead some women to join feminist activism (and/or remain attached to it). It is probable that in both cases age and activism are not strongly connected through resources. Being part of the rank--and--file of a hierarchical organization or a low--committed member of a non--hierarchical group usually does not imply the investment of a lot of means such as income, reputation, time and/or knowledge.

Lastly, perhaps age is related not only to feminist activism but to other types of women's activism or, in some circumstances, even to (plain) activism. To try to convert the Catholic Church into a more women--friendly space seems a monumental task. But so is the



target pursued by many other mobilizations past and present, for instance, the fights against globalization or capitalism. In the case of these colossal battles, the relationship between age and activism may be pronounced. To prove or disprove this claim is another task for research in the years to come.

### **Appendix: Interviews with author**

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Álvarez de Miranda, Pedro. (2010). Son of Consuelo de la Gándara, Seminar for the Sociological Study of Women. Madrid, 3 February.

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de Silva, Ángela R. (2009). Women's Catholic Action. Madrid, 9 November.

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Salamanca, Soledad. (2010). Daughter of María Campo Alange, Seminar for the Sociological Study of Women. Madrid, 6 April.

Salas, Carmen. (2009). Women's Catholic Action. Madrid, 25 September.

Salas, Purificación. (2009). Seminar for the Sociological Study of Women. Madrid, 9 September.

Victory, Carmen. (2009). Women's Catholic Action. Madrid, 14 November.

Vindel, Elena. (2010). Daughter of Elena Catena, Seminar for the Sociological Study of Women. Madrid, 12 February.

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## Notes

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2. However, the link between age and aims of the mobilization is not absolute. As current culture wars in the United States illustrate, certain issues, such as reproductive rights, may propel people of all ages into mobilization, and not only, or not mainly, people of fertile age.

3. Two other leaders of Women's Catholic Action declined to be interviewed.

4. In this article, all translations from Spanish to English are by the author.

5. At that time in Spain, married women needed their husbands' permission for many actions including opening a bank account, obtaining a passport and a driving license, traveling abroad, signing a labor contract or engaging in trade.

6. The 'Maldonado conversations' were meetings regularly held in Madrid in a Jesuit center on Maldonado Street from the 1950s onwards.

7. For instance, the National Council of Women's Catholic Action established in 1952 included 21 single women, 5 married women and 3 widows (*Senda* no. 119, November 1952, page 6). The National Council of Women's Catholic Action established in 1960 was composed by 26 single women, 10 married women and 5 widows (*Circular para Dirigentes* No. 166, April 1960, page 2--provisional list of members).