

# THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN CATALONIA OR ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF FEMINISM

THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN CATALONIA EMERGED DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, DIRECTLY INFLUENCED BY THE SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENTS OF ENGLAND, NORTH AMERICA AND FRANCE.

ISABEL SEGURA AUTHOR



**T**he Feminist Movement in Catalonia emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century, directly influenced by the suffragette movements of England, North America and France.

The first sign of the existence of the movement was the controversy that broke out over women's intellectual capacities, a controversy which appeared in print in the magazines and newspapers of the time. There were heated declarations from both sides, some, alleging scientific principles, spoke of women's intellectual

inferiority compared with men, others, alleging similar principles, argued for their equality.

Starting in the 1870's, those on the side of equality found the ideal medium by which to make their opinion known: the women's magazines that, from then until the end of the century, were to be the driving force of the incipient feminist movement.

The women on the editorial boards were the daughters of the enlightened bourgeoisie, women with an open-minded European outlook. They were in touch

with the English feminist movement and their articles provided up-to-date information on the events, congresses and other activities that the feminist movement organized in different countries. Therefore, certain sectors of the Catalan readership knew about the creation of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, knew about the motion proposed to the British parliament by the M. P. Mr Mason, in 1883, asking for the vote for women, and even came to acquire a liking for Mrs Pankhurst.





But the central issue of the women's magazines and of the Catalan feminist movement was the defence of women's educational rights. For the nineteenth century feminists, education had the power to liberate women. Women had to be educated, so as to end the submission in which they lived.

The first step in this process consisted in changing the content of education, an education which was only accessible to the "privileged few" and which consisted in nothing more than a smattering of music and painting, a bit of grammar and a lot of religion. But this education failed to develop their artistic abilities or to prepare them for a career which would allow them to survive without having to depend economically on the *paterfamilias*, whether father or husband.

These changes questioned the archetypal female that the ruling classes wanted to impose—the wife/mother whose one and only function was to reproduce the species—and provoked virulent reaction. When Dolors Aleu, to cite one example, enrolled at Barcelona University's faculty of medicine in 1875, the medical journals and certain newspapers filled their pages with personal insults aimed at her as a representative of the female sex. The reaction went beyond the strict limits of the printed word, to the extent that she had to have police protection when attending classes. In spite of these obstacles, she graduated in 1879—only seven years after Mlle. Garret did the same in Paris and fourteen years after the establishment in

London of medical training for women—and she received her doctorate in 1893.

For the feminists of the time, Dolors Aleu's admission to University was only a partial success, since it was not until 1910 that the Ministry of Public Instruction authorized women to sit for academic qualifications. From 1875 to 1910, the few women who set foot in the university were able to do so as a special favour, never as a right.

The women's press of the last century was also a mouthpiece for another demand: the right to vote.

In 1882, three magazines appeared in Barcelona: "*La Mujer*" (The Woman), "*El Album del Bello Sexo*" (The Album of the Fair Sex) and "*La Ilustración de la Mujer*" (The Enlightenment of Woman), the first two with the subtitles "Woman will defend women's rights" and "Defender of women's rights", respectively. These magazines were genuine manifestos.

These magazines, the first two directed by Thérèse Coudray and the third co-directed by Dolors Monserdà, started campaigning for equal rights for men and women and adopted the slogan "VOTES FOR WOMEN". At the same time, they were the nucleus of a women's movement that went on to organize a congress in Barcelona and another in Palma de Mallorca. However, they were short-lived, and by the end of the century, with the feminist debate being redirected by political parties, their originally radical proposals had lost their impetus.

In the twenties, there was a revival of the feminist movement, centred on the demands for women's right to vote, a right which was not conquered until 1931.

That year, the monarchist government was defeated in the municipal elections by the republican parties. After a long debate, the constituent assembly approved article 34 of the Republican Constitution which stated that "citizens of both sexes, over the age of twenty-three, will have the same electoral rights".

During the thirties, women achieved something more than the vote: the right to abort. A decree from the *Presidència de la Generalitat de Catalunya*, dated 25 December 1936, allowed artificial interruption of pregnancy in the *Generalitat's* hospitals, clinics and sanitary institutions.

General Franco's victory at the end of the Civil War led to a military dictatorship that put a complete stop to the rights conquered during the republican period, and frustrated a long process, started in the nineteenth century by a handful of daring feminists who hoped that women could be something other than "Factories for the production of human multiplication", to quote the words of Thérèse Coudray. The Franco regime once more restricted women to the space within the four walls of the home and set them a single, exclusive mission: that of being mothers.

The history of the feminist movement of the last few years—specially since 1967, international year of the woman—has been one of retrieving the thread spun by women who went before us. ■