

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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How to cite: Warner, S.T. 'Spain's Living Daughters'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2022(1), pp. 31–36 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.22.1.09>.

Published: 7 July 2023

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*(1893–1978)

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Sylvia Townsend Warner

Abstract

Warner's article describes in detail the harsh economic conditions and powerful social restrictions in women's lives in rural Spain. She notes that the marriage rites of the Spanish Church describe women as the property of their husbands. The article ends with a tribute to Spanish women fighting in the Civil War for Republicanism and against the tyranny of fascism.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Spanish Civil War; *The Fight*; women's history.

Editor's note. Warner wrote three pieces for The Fight. These were 'I Saw Spain' (February 1937, pp. 5–6) and 'The Drought Breaks', (May 1937, pp. 16–17), both reprinted in With the Hunted (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012, pp. 132–5, 153–7); and the article below, 'Spain's Living Daughters' (March 1938, pp. 8–9, 26), which has not till now been reprinted. The October 1937 issue has an article by Valentine Ackland titled 'Invitation to Madrid' (pp. 21, 25–6), her account of the Second Writers' Congress. Ackland's article and 'Spain's Living Daughters' were both illustrated by Henry J. Glintenkamp (1887–1946).

The *Fight* magazine was published from 1933 by the American League Against War and Fascism (the organisation changed its name in 1937 to the American League for Peace and Democracy). It was published monthly from November 1933 to July 1939, edited by Joseph Pass; its full title was *The Fight for Freedom and Democracy*. For further details and online contents, see <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/fight/>.

Spain's Living Daughters

Once backward and illiterate, the women of Spain are responding eagerly to their emancipation by the Republic. They claim liberty not only for themselves but for all humanity.

In 1931 Marcelino Domingo¹ founded the *Misiones Pedagógicas*, an educational mission exploring the country districts of Spain. In the journal of this society for March 1933 there is an account of a visit to a village with the name – grim enough – of La Mujer Muerta: The Dead Woman.

La Puebla de la Mujer Muerta is a small village in the province of Madrid. It is surrounded by mountains, and during a long period of the winter no sun light reaches the valley. All the women dress in black. Girl children look like miniature women with their trailing black skirts. Their hair is drawn tightly back into a knot, their faces are thin and pale, their eyes haggard. Even the smallest girls wear these long skirts. They ran away from us, holding up their trailing petticoats. When they saw us, the women of the village ran to and fro with nervous laughter and cries of fear; one of them, to whom we spoke, made desperate efforts to answer us. She looked at us uneasily, laughed, and hid her face in her hands like a child.

Scarcely one of these women, it was found, had ever been out of the village. Of its 340 inhabitants, only ten knew how to read and write.

In this village no one had seen a wagon, let alone an automobile. No one had heard of electric light or the phonograph. They live by what harvest they can scratch out of the soil, eating potatoes, beans, and sometimes, but only in a good season, bacon. Many of them believe in sorcerers, all of them are afraid of evil spirits.

The *Misiones* report what seemed to them especially noteworthy: the percentage of illiterates, the isolation, the survival of a cumbersome costume. There were other things which they would take for granted but which seem striking to us. Not one of these women of The Dead Woman, it may be assumed, had a pair of shoes. Not one of them had ever had a bad tooth treated. Not one of them had ever had a bar of soap. All of them worked in the fields, behind the stilts of the wooden plough or between the shafts. They dug, reaped (with a sickle, perhaps the most exhausting

of all field labor), carried enormous loads on their backs, living illustrations of that passage in a Spanish treatise which condemns the use of women as beasts of burden on the grounds that 'even the strongest woman can barely carry one-fourth as much as a donkey.'

Birth-rate and death-rate

The birth-rate of this village would seem to us oddly at variance with its population of 340. Ten, 12, 18 children born to a woman, of whom three or five might live to grow up. The Spanish infant-mortality rate was recently over 50 per cent of births. Among the poor it was even higher. In families of over ten children the mortality rate sometimes reaches 75 per cent. 'If Spanish women had twice as few children the population of the country would be doubled in a hundred years,' writes G. Marañón.

Backward women are not peculiar to the village of *Mujer Muerta*. Such conditions would meet the workers of the *Misiones Pedagógicas* wherever they went in agricultural Spain; and two-thirds of Spain is agricultural.

In the industrial regions higher wages, less illiteracy, smaller families lighten the lot of the working-class woman. But there is little chance of her going into industry herself. The Seville tobacco workers are a show, but they are not typical. The main employment for the Spanish wage-earning woman is domestic service. Women servants are cheap in Spain. In the cities, wages may be 25 to 40 pesetas (\$5 to \$8) a month. In the provinces they may be 50 per cent less. Length of service does little to augment the wage. Women may work a lifetime for the same employer and still get the wage they got at the beginning, with an occasional *propina*,² or an old dress. Supply exceeds demand, there is little inducement to look for a better situation. Moreover, a woman who can neither read nor write, whose knowledge of the world consists of the village where she was born and the way to church and market in the town where she is employed, is not in a good position to better herself.

For the dowried, the religious life offers considerable advantages. At the best, it was until recently the only opportunity for a woman with ambitions to have something like a profession. A Spanish Montessori, a Spanish Florence Nightingale, had to enter a convent on order to fulfil herself. Teresa d'Avila, that eminent woman of action, is characteristic of this aspect of conventual life.

At the worst, religious life offers considerable worldly advantages: a secure maintenance, a share in great corporate power, a gratifying social position. The fault most commonly urged against the Spanish nuns is not that of avarice, nor of idleness, though these accusations are made. Arrogance is the quality most bitterly resented. 'The Mothers—' I heard a Catalan working-class woman say – 'the Mothers! They are as proud as the Fathers.' She could think of no higher degree of comparison.

Property in women

The Spanish Church in its marriage rite still preserves an acknowledgment that the wife is the property of the husband. Before the blessing of the Church, the husband hands the priest 13 pieces of money, gold for the well-to-do, silver in the case of the poor. The 13 pieces of silver enslave the working-class bride to a life of obedient labor. The gold pieces enslave the more prosperous bride to a life of obedient idleness. Bitter as is the lot of the working-class woman in Spain, her very ability to carry almost a quarter of a donkey's load gives her a value and a voice in the family unit. Her life is bitterly hard, but it is real. In the upper classes, to the tyranny of husband is added the weight of social opinion; and social opinion prescribes that a woman who is not obliged to work must stay home and do nothing. Of that traditional Nordic quadrilateral *Kinder, Kirche, Kleider, Küche*,³ the last is lopped away. With such plenty of cheap servants, to cook would be unladylike. Since higher education was opened to women, girls of the middle class who would otherwise have been driven to the convent for a career have trained as teachers. But where ambition has been lacking, or where social snobbery or social position have the say, the tradition of gentry idleness holds fast, and the girl who does not marry must qualify through a life of triviality and tedium for the post of companion, aunt, duenna.

The snobbishness of the high bourgeoisie in Spain rises to great heights, displays itself in fantastic pinnacles. At Barcelona there was an extremely grand convent, which specialised in educating the daughters of the aristocracy. Its standard of the inward and outward blazon was imposing. No young lady could be admitted who did not bring with her an outfit of a dozen dozen of each article of clothing. (Compare the high-class Prussian brag of the quarterly or half-yearly washing-day.) Officially, a dozen quarterings were equally *de rigueur*. But yielding to the demands of the unquartered – but very wealthy – industrial grandes who wished

their daughters to enter society with the *cachet* of an education in this aviary of the high-born, the convent opened its gates to gold without blazoning. It opened its gates; but opened no further. Inside those gates the daughters of the industrial grandees were carefully segregated from the daughters of the high-born. They sat in different classrooms, walked along different passageways. And this was common knowledge. But still the industrialist fathers provided the dozen dozens, and pleaded and strove in order that their daughters might finally be let in for a snubbing.

How heavily the shadow of the Dead Woman hung over the living women of Spain is shown by the fact that the early movements for the emancipation of women came from men. The Church, giving a modicum of education to the women within the religious life, has always opposed any liberation of those outside it. It was after the expulsion of the Jesuits that Carlos III founded the first girls' school (1783).⁴ During the Nineteenth Century, so remarkable for the number of women in good or middle-class society who were powers either in the realm of good taste or of good works, no such women emerged in Spain. If such women there were, they were in convents. Harnessed either to the production or the regimentation of Christians, the daughters of the Dead Woman lived in the icy shadow of a church which had much use, but no regard, for them. The peasant woman dreaded the sorcerers and the evil spirits; the woman of the upper classes dreaded the bogey of social opinion; but both alike feared Holy Church.

The liberal movement in Spain has always included measures for the emancipation of women. How heavy, how difficult the task, could always be seen. But not till the outbreak of the Civil War can it have been realised, even by those working for the emancipation of women, how deeply those women themselves had imbibed the strange, the heretical idea of liberty. It is not only to the figures of such women as Margarita Nelken, Maria Teresa Leon, Pasionaria,⁵ that we should turn for proof of this. We do not understand these great heroines if we allow them to dwarf the importance of the ordinary women of Spain who have in such numbers, and with such passion, brought their powers to the aid of a government pledged to their social liberation. In many cases these powers were unsuspected even by the women.

In Catalonia the departure of the religious orders left unstaffed many hospitals, orphanages, institutions for the aged or the infirm. (Not all people in religion have left Republican territory. Under the Madrid Women's Anti-Fascist Committee is a group of nuns who, in a workshop of their own, are making clothing and hospital supplies.) Work in such

places involves much that is arduous and even repugnant, but volunteers flocked to meet the need, and women of all classes work side by side, bringing their various talents of training or simple compassion. In the first days women joined the fighting forces – and there is no need to expatiate on the heroism of the *milicianas*;⁶ but there was an equal heroism, when women were disbanded from the army, in going on to the less brilliant battlefield of work in the rearguard, and this heroism too has been sustained.

War, it has been said, weighs most heavily upon those who do not fight. This is certainly the belief of the Fascist command in Spain, with its policy of terrorism, its air attacks on markets and schools and the working-class quarters, its use of starvation as a means of conquest. If the women of Spain had yielded, the war in Spain would have already been lost. But from the Dead Woman have come living daughters. Long-hoarded, long-repressed, the feeling for liberty has expressed itself in action, and shows itself at its purest. The Spanish woman today claims liberty, not for herself in a man-made world, but for mankind against the tyranny of Fascism. Such phrases as ‘a man-made world’ would fall on uncomprehending ears if spoken to her. She sees only a world ill made, and worse menaced, and the need to rescue and remake it.

The Fight, March 1938, pp. 8–9, 26

Notes

- 1 Marcelino Domingo (1884–1939), Minister for Education in the Second Spanish Republic; teacher and journalist before becoming a politician.
- 2 *Propina*: a tip.
- 3 *Kinder, Kirche, Kleider, Küche*: children, church, clothes, kitchen.
- 4 King Carlos III expelled the Jesuits from Spain in 1767.
- 5 Margarita Nelken (1896–1968), Spanish art critic, feminist and politician during the Second Republic; Maria Teresa León (1903–1988), Spanish novelist, essayist and secretary of the Alliance of Antifascist Writers; Isidora Dolores Ibárruri Gómez (1895–1989), known as ‘la Pasionaria’, Spanish communist leader known for her impassioned oratory.
- 6 *Milicianas*: women who fought during the Spanish Civil War.