

From 2004: How Opposition to Gender and Feminism Emerged in Spain

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From Catholic fundamentalism to the far right, a diverse and loosely connected network of anti-gender movements is growing in the country and creating new challenges.

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In 2004, Spain witnessed some of the earliest mass demonstrations in Europe against the same-sex marriage law, which passed soon after. The Catholic Church was actively involved in the organisation of marches and made headlines when some of its high-ranking members appeared behind banners demanding that marriage be reserved exclusively for heterosexual couples. In so doing, the Church demonstrated both its enormous power to mobilise conservative sectors of society and its significant position as a key political actor in the country. That said, according to Cornejo and Pichardo Galán, for most Spaniards Catholicism is 'a matter of little concern in daily life, values or politics ... with believers privileging the rights of their non-heterosexual friends or relatives over the mandates of the Catholic hierarchy' (1).

Since the Catholic Church's mobilisations against various progressive policies introduced by former president Zapatero in the 2000s, the institution has adopted a less prominent role in their opposition to women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Individual sections of the Church are however involved in initiatives, such as the 'unlawful and clandestine' conversion therapies to 'cure' homosexuality, organised by the bishopric of Alcalá (2).

Other actors with Catholic roots have made known their opposition to feminism and gender, including the *Foro español de la familia* (Spanish Family Forum), *Abogados Cristianos* (Christian Solicitors), several anti-abortion groups and *HazteOir* (Make Yourself Heard). The latter is an organisation which became widely known through its 2017 campaign, which placed large ads on the side of a bus to deny the existence of trans people, using the message 'Boys have a penis. Girls have a vulva. Don't let them fool you. If you are born a man, you are a man. If you are a woman, you will continue to be so.' (3) Some of the founders of HazteOir met and received funding from an international summer school at the neoconservative US thinktank the Phoenix Institute (4), which portrays itself as 'dedicated to fostering a deeper understanding of the Western tradition.' In 2013, HazteOir launched the online platform *CitizenGo* - with its headquarters in Madrid. This has been translated into over ten languages and is recognised as an essential tool in the running of anti-gender campaigns in various European countries, such as Hungary, Italy and Poland.

The Emergence of Vox

The far-right party Vox splintered from the dominant right-wing party PP in 2013 and became successful in regional and national elections after 2018. Beyond its main political strategy against regional separatism, it has also mobilised against so-called 'gender ideology'. Some of Vox's main discursive arguments are depicted in a book by their regional member of parliament Alicia Rubio, whose title translates as: 'When they forbade you to be women... and chastised you for being men. Understanding how gender ideology affects us'. During the first lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Vox has had an active role in the attempt to [associate the spread of the virus with feminism](#).

Links between the party and other national and international neoconservative agendas become apparent in specific campaigns, such as the 'parental pin' promoted by Vox, which has also been at the top of HazteOir's agenda. It aims to allow parents to block the teaching of progressive sexual education by introducing the obligation for schools to ask for explicit parental permission before organising classes on these issues.

Today, Vox is established as the third political force in parliament and a key ally for many autonomous regions governed by the Spanish Right. The party has been successful in shifting the Overton Window of which policies are acceptable to discuss and it has had some impact on legislation. In its opposition to the current gender-based violence law, it has been successful in replacing it with a so-called 'intra-family' violence law in the southern region of Andalucía. Vox politicians argue that this is a means to protect men from fake reports of domestic violence and end the alleged privileging of women in the law.

Vox has repeatedly participated in the spreading of fake news and insisted, for example, that a variety of progressive school programs on sexuality are teaching children how to masturbate. The judge and Andalusian regional member of parliament Francisco Serrano has even spoken about 'homosexual indoctrination' occurring in classrooms (5). At the beginning of the year, Twitter suspended Vox's official account for 'hate speech' after Vox accused the PSOE – the main party in the coalition government – of promoting sexual child abuse through a regional school program on gender equality (6).

The Spanish 'Manosphere'

Arguably, a Spanish 'manosphere' movement – uniting men in opposition to feminism – is emerging and we can expect it to become more visible in the coming years. Vox's vanguard style and discursive distancing from religion has already helped them to attract large numbers of people, with young men being particularly seduced by its framing of 'men's rights.' In an attempt to apply the victim-perpetrator reversal for which the new right is internationally well-known, Vox sidelines women's and LGBTQ+ experiences to speak about (mostly cis and heterosexual) men as the ultimate underdogs.

A handful of influencers are leading the way in arguing that feminism is a so-called supremacist ideology. Their impact can be measured in large numbers of followers. *Un Tío Blanco Hetero* (translating as 'A Straight White Guy') is one of the most prominent YouTubers using the social network to criticise feminism. Having spent some time in Canada, he may have been inspired by the prominent psychologist Jordan Peterson, who theorises about a supposed 'backlash against masculinity' (7). On his channel, *Un Tío Blanco Hetero* appears wearing a white Lycra mask, gloves and sunglasses in order to represent that ordinary straight white guy who he claims feminism

blames disproportionately. His videos criticise and ridicule known feminist figures (mostly women), policies and projects in the name of free speech, whilst opposing so-called political correctness.

Rising Transphobia

Transphobic views are a substantial part of the far-right anti-gender imaginary, not only in Spain but also at a global level. Trans people are regarded as a symbol of a society in decay, which is in the process of losing its 'natural' cisgendered binary, blurring the boundaries between women and men. For those who take the most catastrophist view, this is considered to eventually lead to the destruction of humankind as we know it.

Worryingly, transphobic views have also acquired a particular prominence within some sectors of the feminist movement in Spain and beyond, which see in trans people an erasure of the category 'woman' as a political subject. Last year, a conference in the northern city of Gijón brought together a number of key Spanish feminists who made joking transphobic comments that were mostly directed at trans women. In June of this year, Lidia Falcón, a longstanding activist who is known for her commitment to women's rights and who was subjected to torture by the Franco regime, published a piece in the online journal of the far-right organisation HazteOir. In her article, Falcón asked: 'Is it foolish that women be women and men be men? Not even in Wonderland could I have imagined such a discussion taking place'(8). Vox was quick in praising Falcón, with their member of parliament Iván Espinosa de los Monteros defending its 'pure logic' regarding matters of gender (9).

We should not assume that links between trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) and the far-right are common, but Falcón's example demonstrates how transphobia transcends right-wing spheres to represent a broader intensification of hate against trans people across the political spectrum. As the leading trans studies researchers Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent argue: '[w]e have not sought out the TERF wars; rather, the TERF wars have found us' (10).

The Time to Come

There is hope in that a large part of Spanish society is committed to progressive values and has no interest in these forms of conservative backlash. At the same time, inclusive forms of transfeminism are making their way into activist circles and academia. There is also hope in how younger generations are growing up with increasing awareness of feminist and LGBTQ+ issues and with a more open and fluid attitude to sexuality, as claimed by Mireia Montaña, media researcher at the Open University of Catalonia (11).

However, anti-gender mobilisations in Spain have not only diversified over the last years but have also grown in strength by moving into institutions, mainly through the election of Vox to the national parliament and various regional governments. Following international trends, the Spanish (far-)Right has been successful in putting sexual, reproductive, women's and LGBTQ+ rights back on the table to be questioned and contested. Although for the time being this trend is only marginally successful at policy level, it could have more detrimental effects on Spanish society in the long run.

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