

# The Effects of Traditional Spanish Culture on Women's Choices to Attend College

Tabetha Maly

Faculty Sponsor: Harry Nicklaus, Residence Life, Jason Kouba, International Education

## ABSTRACT

The conservative former dictator of Spain, Francisco Franco, who ruled from the 1930's until the 1970's, spent the majority of his political career forming a political régime that reversed the advancement of Spanish women's rights. Equality of men and women by law did not take place in Spain until after his dictatorship ended in 1978; it was during this year that statistics show that more women than men were enrolled in a public university. My research investigation explores whether Spanish women face gender-related challenges when attempting to attend a university because of the historically conservative society. As a result of the project, I found that the majority of Spanish women are well supported by their families and friends, both males and females. The statistics of university attendance since 1978 reveal that women stand firm in holding the majority numbers in the public universities in Spain. While the Spanish "machista" (male-dominated) society still exists in current literature, the setbacks caused by Franco for the rights of women in education have been modernized in terms of gender in comparison to the American collegiate experience.

## INTRODUCTION

I studied abroad for five months in Granada, Spain at the University of Granada. I attended classes at the Center of Modern Languages, but I also had the opportunity to study and experience classroom settings with Spaniards, both men and women, in the School of Sociology and Philosophy. Overall, my research was focused towards the advancement of opportunity for Spanish women to attend a university. Based on the historical facts of Franco's dictatorship, I expected to find that women still lacked the support and/or ability to be well represented in Spanish universities. The focus of my research in university classrooms was to see if women were well represented in classes and to see if daily discussions were more dominated by men or women. During my experience in Spain, I was also able to talk with Spanish women of several ages about their desires to attend a university after secondary school, about their family support structure and about their experiences in the university. The last part of my research was to study the current literature on this subject in the University Women's Institute at the University of Granada and I also briefly met with a leading researcher on the subject, Ana María Muñoz Muñoz.

## METHOD

My first interaction for my research investigation was a brief discussion with a female Spanish professor at the University of Granada, Ana María Muñoz Muñoz. She is a professor of women's studies classes, the director of the Women's Studies University Institute at the University of Granada and a published author of women's studies literature. She and I had a general discussion about the experiences of Spanish women who attend public universities and the difficulties they face. She guided me towards the current literature on this topic and introduced me to the Women's Studies University Institute Library at the University of Granada. This was an early stage of my research; when I met with Ana, I did not have specific questions. She was the introduction to all of my key connections in Granada and helped me throughout my semester with research questions. My second interaction with my research investigation was my classroom experience. Most class periods were discussion based. Each class period I tallied the number of men and women in attendance and which sex was more likely to answer a discussion question without being called upon by the professor. This was meant to demonstrate autonomy or lack of it by Spanish women. During my five months in Granada, I lived with a host mother with whom I had daily interactions and discussions. One of our topics was always the history of education for Spanish women and the dictatorship of Franco. She lived through the second half of his reign and the transition afterwards when women were granted full legal equality with men. Through these discussions, I learned about the struggles and realities of Spanish women in education. I created

an online survey with specific questions related to the desires of attending a university, the reasons for attending a university if chosen to do so and the family support received by the interviewees who decided to attend a university. The answers are both qualitative and quantitative. Some have collected numerical data, some have “yes” and “no” answers and some are open to fill in the blank. Here are the questions from the survey:

1. Are you a Spanish woman? If not, please do not continue.
2. How old are you?
3. When you attended secondary school, did you want to attend a university? If you are currently attending secondary school, do you want to go to a university?
4. Why did you want or not want to go?
5. If you have finished secondary school, have you attended a university?
6. If you didn't attend a university or never graduated, why?
7. Did your family support you with the idea of attending a university?
8. If the answer to the last question was “no” or “more or less”, what was the reason that he or she didn't support you?
9. If someone didn't support you, which member of the family was it?
10. Are you the first woman in your family to attend a university?
11. If the answer to the last question was “no,” what other women in your family have attended a university?

The last part of my research was a search for the current literature on this topic to add support to the qualitative answers that I discovered during my time in Granada, Spain. With the help of Muñoz, I learned the library system at the University of Granada, specifically, in the University Women's Studies Institute at the University of Granada. I spent several hours researching published books on the current topic and documenting the results. This type of literature was difficult to find and, almost always, female Spanish professors who are part of women's studies departments completed this type of research.

## RESULTS

Legally, Spanish women were granted full equal rights with men by the Constitution of 1978 (Domingo 140). Therefore, there are no legal barriers to higher education for women. The fields of research that Muñoz and other leading researchers of Spanish women's studies focus on are the psychological and mental barriers of females. Franco's conservative ideals have been more ingrained in the subconscious of everyday life than in the direct intentions of keeping women in the submissive private sphere. Consuelo Flecha García, author of *Balance desde una historia heredada sobre las mujeres y su educación* (Balance from an inherited history about women and education), explains that although much advancement have been made in the classroom to help women's equality, there are still subtle differences in the way that women are treated versus men. She states that the classrooms still contain differences in:

“Currículum explícito y currículum oculto-, en el reparto de espacios escolares y extraescolares, en las estructuras organizativas, en el ejercicio de funciones, en los planes de centros, en los reglamentos, en los libros y material escolar, en los mismos comportamientos infantiles y en la elección que hacen de actividades, juegos y materias optativas, en la desigual dedicación de tiempo, esfuerzo y atención por parte del profesorado, y en el inconsciente y en los mensajes introducidos en sus interacciones con el alumnado que transmiten estereotipos de género reproduciendo, con ello, las relaciones y mentalidad propias de una visión masculina del mundo” (García 224). This is to say that there are still differences in the explicit curriculum and the hidden curriculum-, in the classroom and outside of the classroom, in organized structures, in the exercise of functions, in the center's plans, in regulations, in scholarly books and materials, in the child-like behavior and the way that activities, games and optional matters are done, in the unequal dedication of time, force and attention on the part of the teaching staff, and in the unconscious and the introduced messages in the interactions with the students that transmits stereotypes and reproducing gender, with it, the relations and mentality of a masculine vision of the world.

This is the general focus of the type of research that Muñoz and I discussed during my time with her. The focus of research in Spain is similar to the research that I've studied in my education classes while attending the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. García continues to say that “dentro de la escuela [...] considera al varón como medida de todas las cosas, como objeto y sujeto de estudio (225). A translated version reads that inside of the school, the male is considered the measure of all things, as the object and subject of study and this is part of García's reasoning that women are still not treated equally in the classroom actions and activities as mentioned above.

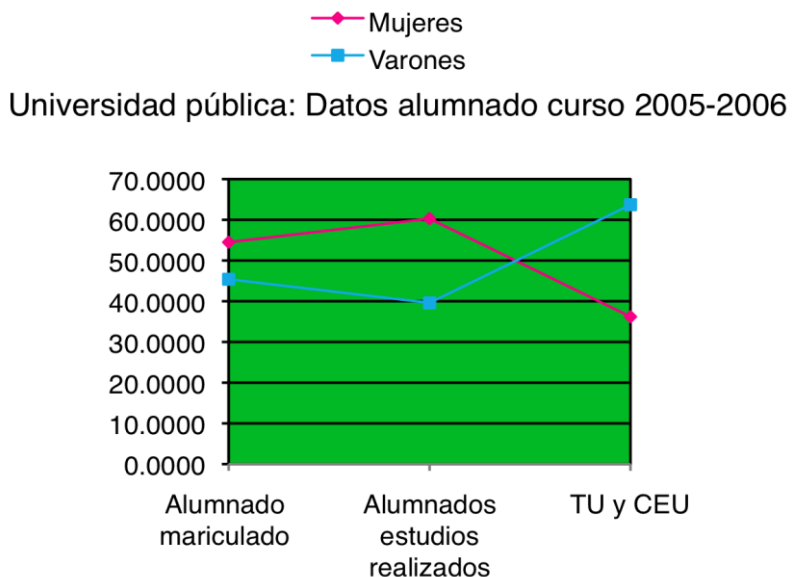
In my own class at the School of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Granada, I kept statistics on the number of females versus males in the classroom and the amount of participation that each willingly showed. During the ten-week semester, I collected data based on 20 one and a half hour class periods, all of them based on lecture and discussion. The average percentage of females in attendance for the class was 66%. Each class period the professor asked an average of eight questions. The only statistic I kept was if a student answered the question without being chosen by the professor. Of these eight questions each class period, females and males willingly answered them at about the same rate, with a final tally of women answering 48% of the time and men at 52%. With this sole statistic, the ratio can be misleading because the numbers are almost equal. Based on the amount of females in the class, which was significantly more than males, this study concludes that Spanish females are still hesitant to be the first to answer something. This study is in concordance with current educational research being completed in grade school and high school classrooms in the United States, which I had the opportunity to study in my education classes at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse also. The statistics in the U.S. also show that males are more likely to answer questions first without being asked in classrooms. García's reasons for this lack of response by women is clearly stated above as being part of the societal structure and the hidden curriculum that is mainly caused by the history of conservatism within the Spanish culture. Although, when I began this research project, part of my thesis was that the psychological and mental barriers within the field of education for females would be more evident and not as much a part of the hidden curriculum. If I had not completed this numerical study in the classroom, I would not have expected these results. My interactions with Spanish women during the five months I spent there demonstrated strength and independence in females that I wouldn't have expected and that isn't reflected in the research.

That independence for females started quickly after receiving equal rights in 1978. By 1987, less than ten years after receiving the right to independently choose to study, women were the majority population in public universities.

**Table 1. The amount of women in Spain's college preparation course (Bachiller-COU) and the university (Universidad) from 1975-1996 (Domingo 143)**

Alumnas en Bachiller-COU y Universidad (CNIE, 1988: CIDE, 1999).		
Curso	Bachiller-COU	Universidad
1975-1976	48.800%	36.700%
1979-1980	52.900%	42.200%
1983-1984	53.900%	48.000%
1987-1988	53.000%	50.500%
1993-1994		51.700%
1995-1996	53.500%	

This table shows that the number of women attending a Spanish university has been steadily increasing and women are now the numerical majority. These statistics continue to be steady today with women as the majority; the following table has statistical evidence gathered as recent as the school year of 2005-2006. "Alumnado mariculado" is enrolled students; "Alumnado estudios realizados" are students who have completed their studies. "TU y CEU" are students of private universities.



**Figure 1.** Statistics of Females (Mujeres) and Males (Varones) Attending Public University in Percentage (Gobierno de Espana, 19)

The history of right to education is still complicated in Spain, so recently and possible still being a male-dominated society. By talking with my host mother, Lina Salazar, who is 58 years old, I learned that women had the right to study in any university they wanted if approved by the most senior male member of their family. In special cases, the university school board could approve the acceptance of a female. In fact, many women were attending universities before the Constitution of 1978 granted full equality to women as shows in the chart below.

**Table 2.** Students Attending a Spanish University from 1940-1969  
"Alumnos" are male students and "Alumnas" are female students. (Domingo 131)

Alumnado en el Bachillerato en 1940-1969 (CNIE, 1988: 22)			
Años	Alumnos	Alumnas	% Alumnas
Media 1940-1945	113.633	60.926	34,9
Media 1945-1950	207.758	72.187	34,7
Media 1950-1955	252.058	91.334	36,2
Media 1955-1960	394.621	151.979	38,5
Media 1960-1965	617.662	242.959	39,2
Curso 1968-1969	1.207.006	537.011	44,5

Lina assured me that many women, including all the women in her family, attended a university. She didn't have an answer when I asked her how many finished; she dropped out of pharmacy school to get married. This response and lack thereof by my host mother was the beginning of the next step in my research: surveying Spanish females about their interests to study in the university and their familial support on the subject.

Thirteen Spanish females between the ages of 20-33 were surveyed. The mean of ages is 24.53. My survey questions were included in the last section. The results are as follows:

1. 84.6% of females polled wanted to attend a university when they were in secondary school or currently are in secondary school and want to attend a university after finishing. 15.4% polled stated that they wanted to go more or less. 0% responded that they didn't want to attend.
2. Reasons stated for wanting to attend a university include:

- a. To obtain a better culture
  - b. To prepare for the future
  - c. To learn more in the area of my future profession
  - d. To be something in life
  - e. To find what I would like to study
  - f. To continue learning
  - g. To have a good job
3. 46.2% have graduated from a university. 7.7% have attended but not graduated. 23.1% are attending now. 23.1% have not attended a university.
  4. Reasons for not attending a university or not finishing school include (only five responses):
    - a. Because I needed to work
    - b. Because I haven't found a career that I like
    - c. Because the universities are selective in their courses
  5. 100% of females polled stated that their family supported their plans to go to the university.
  6. When asked specifically if a member of the family did not support their decision to attend the university, one person answered "my father" and another answered "my mother," but the rest stated that no one disapproved of their decision.
  7. 53.8% stated that she is the first female in her family to attend a university. 46.2% stated that other female family members have attended a university including mothers, sisters and cousins.

While this was only a small percentage of the female Spanish population, it does encompass a variety of ages and backgrounds including women who did and didn't attend a university and/or graduate from a university for different reasons. The concluding results may be conflicting because when asked if they received family support, all responded "yes" but when asked if there was a member of the family that did not give support, two females responded with specific people. The reasons for attending a university given by females are similar to the reasons of female students from the United States. All were focused on bettering themselves and their lives. In fact, a recent research investigation by Julia V. Espín and Pilar Figuera at the University of Barcelona, completed in 1991, questioned the value of four things in the lives of Spanish female and male university students: The role of work, the marital role, the parental role and the pole of the home (Espín 281). They were asked to give a numerical value to the importance of this in their lives a 10 being the highest and a 1 being the lowest. The study shows that "no aparecen significativas entre los sexos pero las chicas obtienen una puntuación más baja [...] Como conclusión global podemos afirmar que los universitarios puntúan más alto que las universitarias en todas las subescalas, excepto en la escala de importancia del rol de trabajo donde puntúan más alto las chicas aunque las diferencias no sean estadísticamente significativas (Espín 281)." This is to say that the male university students involved in this study put more value on all of the roles except the role of the job, which females valued more although the difference is no statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION (AND/OR CONCLUSIONS)

While I did not have a concrete thesis when beginning this project, I was surprised at the results of the project. After reading about the Spanish culture online with no prior knowledge of the culture in order to create the research grant proposal, I was convinced that I would walk into an archaic culture where women were not respected in the field of education. While the research completed by the experts still shows an inequality in the hidden curriculum and there are still changes to be made, my experiences in Spain have taught me that women are stronger than the research shows. If I had not read any of the literature on this subject by the professional researchers, I would not have thought the classrooms held much bias or discrimination against women because it was not evident or clearly stated in the classroom. In daily life, the women are generally much more verbal, forward and demanding than the men. These characteristics are ones that are more likely to be from the dominant sex. However, after calculating the statistics for my classroom experiment, I was not surprised that males and females answered questions willingly an equal amount. But after consideration of the overwhelming majority of women in the classroom, I was able to assess that this is the same type of problem that is currently being researched in the United States on the topic of discrimination of women. The survey that I completed also was a surprise to me. I was not able to find many research subjects, but the ones that I did find answered questions so that I was able to conclude that women have more independence than I expected. All of them wanted or at least had some interest in attending college and based on the initial question about family support, all were supported by their families. I'm not sure if these would be completely accurate based on a broader number of research subjects, but I was expecting some lack of family support because of the initial research completed before actually experiencing the culture. While some parts of the culture remain archaic, the research completed combined with the experiences that I had while studying abroad in

Granada, Spain demonstrated to me that Spanish women have very similar educational opportunities that women in the United States do. They are able to legally apply to a university without a problem, are able to attend classes without direct discrimination and have the support of their family behind them. While a hidden curriculum still exists in both countries, but women have come a long way in a short time and are still fighting for equality just like Muñoz, García and many others in the Spanish universities.

## LIMITATIONS

While I spent five months in Granada, Spain, I still could not have had the experience of a Spanish woman in a university; I could only gather qualitative research for a period of five months based on what my experiences were in the classroom and which students decided to come to class. I was only able to gather a small amount of evidence based on the classrooms that I was involved with and only in one part of the entire university. Spanish universities do not keep many records of the exact numbers of enrollment and I was not able to gather statistical information of the demographics of attendance and enrollment numbers of the sexes of the University of Granada, where I completed the majority of my research. While researching this topic in the University Women's Studies Institute, I was limited on my knowledge of Spanish. While I'm considered fluent, it still is not my native language and I found myself using a dictionary several times to clarify the literature.

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