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**Activism, Revolution and War:
Mujeres Libres Addressing the Personal and the Political**

**Militancia, Revolución y Guerra:
Militantes de Mujeres Libres enfrentando “lo personal” con “lo político”**

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ABSTRACT

Mujeres Libres, an organization of anarchist women established during the Spanish Civil War, was characterized by a dual focus on *capacitación* (empowerment) and *captación* (mobilization): (a) empowering women to enable them to recognize and act on their own potential and (b) mobilizing them into the organizations of the broader libertarian movement. An exploration of the activist biographies of two of its three founders (Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Mercedes Comaposada), as well as of two of its younger activists (Soledad Estorach and Sara Berenguer), makes clear how reflecting on personal experience within a larger political frame led to the creation of the organization and to its appeal to its base of (largely) working-class women. Although it did not frame its analysis in these terms, Mujeres Libres effectively prefigured mid-twentieth century feminist analyses of the social construction of women's subordination as well as feminism's claims about the relationship between "the personal" and "the political".

Founded officially as a federated organization in Valencia in 1937, Mujeres Libres' roots were laid in small gatherings in different parts of the country in the preceding years. In this paper, I explore those roots through attention to the personal histories of these four activists, drawing on their writings, memoirs and personal interviews. The paper argues that, although Mujeres Libres did not define itself as a "feminist" organization, many of the writings of its founders—and, in particular, their analyses of the nature and causes of women's subordination that appeared in journals both before and during the Civil War—would find echo in later 20th and 21st century feminism. Especially significant was Mujeres Libres' insistence on the relationship between anarchist analyses of relations of domination and subordination in the society at large and the specific subordination of women, both within society and in the movement, itself. While it addressed problems that women confronted *as individuals*, Mujeres Libres was not interested in *individual solutions*. Rather, its goal was to develop programs that would empower women to take their places alongside other women (and men) in workplaces and in movement activism, while, at the same time, supported by other women, to take more effective charge of their lives, their households, their sexuality, and the education of their children. In doing so, they reflected not only the overall commitment of the libertarian movement to the inseparability of war and revolution, but also their own recognition of the inseparability of personal and collective liberation, the interweaving of "the personal" and "the political."

Key words: mobilization, empowerment, feminism, "the personal and the political", social construction of women's subordination

RESUMEN

Mujeres Libres, una organización de mujeres anarquistas establecida durante la Guerra Civil Española, se caracterizó por un doble enfoque en *capacitación* y *captación* (a) la capacitación de mujeres para que puedan reconocer y actuar sus propias capacidades y

posibilidades, y (b) la captación—movilizándoles dentro de las organizaciones del movimiento libertario más amplio. Una examinación de las biografías de militancia de dos de sus tres impulsoras (Lucía Sánchez Saornil y Mercedes Comaposada), y de las de dos militantes entonces más jóvenes (Soledad Estorach and Sara Berenguer), deja claro como la reflexión sobre experiencias personales dentro de un marco político más amplio facilitó la creación de la organización y su mensaje dirigido a mujeres de la clase trabajadora. Aunque no utilizó un discurso explícitamente feminista, de hecho, Mujeres Libres anticipó los análisis del movimiento feminista de mediados del siglo XX en cuanto a la construcción social de la subordinación de las mujeres tanto como sus afirmaciones sobre la relación entre “lo personal” y “lo político”.

Fundada formalmente como federación en Valencia en 1937, Mujeres Libres tuvo raíces en grupos pequeños que surgieron en diferentes partes del país durante los años anteriores. Este artículo examina estas raíces a través de la atención a las historias personales de las cuatro militantes, basándose en sus escritos publicados, memorias, y entrevistas. Aunque Mujeres Libres nunca se definió como organización “feminista”, muchos de los escritos de las militantes—en específico, sus análisis de las bases de la subordinación femenina que aparecieron antes y durante la Guerra Civil—resonarían en los feminismos de los años posteriores. Destaca, específicamente, la insistencia de Mujeres Libres en la relación entre el análisis libertario de las relaciones de dominación y subordinación en la sociedad y la subordinación específica de las mujeres, tanto en la sociedad como en el movimiento libertario. Mientras abordó problemas que enfrentaron las mujeres *como individuos*, no propugnó *soluciones individuales*. Al contrario, quería desarrollar programas que capacitasen a las mujeres para que pudieran actuar juntas con otras mujeres (y hombres) en las fábricas y en el movimiento; mientras, apoyadas por otras mujeres, que contribuyeran a la estructuración de sus vidas, sus casas, su sexualidad, y la educación de sus niños. Así, reflejaron no solamente el compromiso del movimiento libertario en “guerra y revolución”, sino, también, su propio reconocimiento de la indivisibilidad de la liberación personal y la liberación colectiva, la conexión entre “lo personal” y “lo político”.

Palabras claves: capacitación, captación, feminismo, lo personal y lo político, construcción social de la subordinación de la mujer

Activism, Revolution and War: Mujeres Libres Addressing the Personal and the Political

Introductory comments

One of the central insights of mid-twentieth century western feminism was the notion that “the personal is political.” As Carol Hanisch stated in 1969, to claim that the personal is political is to recognize that “personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.”¹ That insight developed from the process of consciousness-raising, when small groups of women met to speak about their lives, to recognize commonalities and to analyze them in a larger context.² The term refers to the fact that, although problems may be experienced at the individual level, many have broader social and political causes; and the solutions to them, therefore, must be collective, rather than individual. Drawing on movement journals, published writings, memoirs, and personal interviews with the protagonists, this article reviews the activist biographies of four members of Mujeres Libres, an organization of anarchist women established in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. In exploring the life stories of two of its founders, Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Mercedes Comaposada, as well as of two of its younger activists, Soledad Estorach and Sara Berenguer, it examines how their personal experiences and struggles spurred them to develop a specific analysis of women’s subordination. And it makes clear how reflecting on personal experience within a larger political frame led both to the creation of the organization and to its successful appeal to its base of largely working-class women.

Although Mujeres Libres did not define itself as feminist, many of the writings of its founders that appeared in journals both before and during the Civil War effectively prefigured mid-twentieth century feminist analyses of the social construction of women’s subordination, as well as feminism’s claims about the relationship between “the personal” and “the political”. Especially significant was Mujeres Libres’ insistence on the relationship between anarchist analyses of domination and subordination more generally and the specific subordination of women. They were particularly concerned with obstacles to activism that women confronted within the anarchist movement, itself --a movement officially committed to the equality of men and women. The movement had formed the context of their activism; yet their experiences as women (both individually and collectively) led them to believe that existing movement organizations were not effectively reaching women. They insisted that a separate organization,

¹ Carol HANISCH, “The Personal Is Political,” in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, ed. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, New York: Radical Feminism, 1970, available at <http://carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

² As the document “Consciousness-Raising” declared, these were conversations “in which personal experiences, when shared, are recognized as a result not of an individual’s idiosyncratic history and behavior, but the system of sex-role stereotyping. That is, they are political, not personal, questions.” June ARNOLD, “Consciousness-Raising”, in *Women’s Liberation: Blueprint for the Future*, ed. Sookie Stambler, New York: Ace Books, 1970, p. 280

developed by and for women, would be necessary to overcome the subordination of women and to enable women to take their places alongside men within the movement and in the struggle for a better, more egalitarian, society.

While there have been a number of studies of women's organizations during the period of the Civil War, and of *Mujeres Libres*, in particular³, there has been no explicit exploration of the relationship between their personal histories, their movement activism, and the analyses they developed. Nor, with minor exceptions, has there been an effort to examine these stories collectively,⁴ nor to highlight their theoretical contributions. In comparing *Mujeres Libres'* perspectives to later twentieth-century feminist analysis, I wish to emphasize their largely-unrecognized contributions to feminist theory and the ways in which the issues they confronted of trying to negotiate their condition as women within anarcho-syndicalist organizations are still all-too-relevant to the situation of women in contemporary social movements.

* * *

Founded officially as a federated organization in Valencia in 1937, *Mujeres Libres'* roots were laid in small gatherings in different parts of the country in the preceding years. Many of those who became activists in the organization initially came to political awareness within the context of the anarcho-syndicalist movement. The major organization of the movement, the CNT, *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, was founded in 1910, but anarchism (or libertarian socialism) had been growing since it was first introduced into Spain by Giuseppe Fanelli, an emissary of Bakunin and the First International, in 1868. Spain at the time was particularly ripe for anarchist organizing: economic development was highly uneven: the economies of Andalusia and Extremadura were dominated by vast agricultural estates, owned mainly by absentee landlords and worked by landless laborers who lived in conditions of extreme poverty in large urban-like agglomerations. Mid-nineteenth century efforts at liberal reforms (including the disentailment of church estates) succeeded only in changing the identities of the absentee owners

³ Mary NASH: *Rojas: Las mujeres republicanas en la Guerra Civil*, Madrid, Taurus, 1999; "*Mujeres Libres*": *España 1936-39*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 1976 ; *Mujer y movimiento obrero en España, 1931-1939*, Barcelona, Editorial Fontamara, 1981; ACKELSBURG: *Mujeres Libres y la lucha para la emancipación de las mujeres*, Barcelona: Virus, 1999; Eulàlia VEGA: *Pioneras y revolucionarias: Mujeres libertarias durante la República, la Guerra Civil y el Franquismo*, Barcelona, Editorial Icaria, 2010.

⁴ For some exceptions, see, Yanira HERMIDA MARTÍN: *Luchaban por un mundo nuevo: Lucía Sánchez Saornil y Sara Berenguer Laosa, Militancia anarquista durante la Guerra Civil Española*, Barcelona, Descontrol Editorial, 2016; Eulàlia VEGA: "'Mujeres Libres, Una luz que se encendió': La organización libertaria en la memoria de sus militantes", pp. 101-119 en *Mujeres Libres y feminismo en tiempos de cambio*, Madrid: Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo y Fundación Andreu Nin, 2016; and VEGA: *Pioneras y revolucionarias*.

and establishing new inequalities.⁵ The utopian vision that Fanelli espoused gave voice to these laborers' yearnings for land and greater stability. Anarcho-communism took firm root in this area. The latter years of the 19th, and early years of the 20th, saw often-massive protests for better living and working conditions in these rural areas; as well as community-based protests around cost of living, in which women took active roles.⁶

Living and working conditions were only marginally better in industrialized areas. In the Catalan textile industry, for example, an 1892 report found that the average industrial worker labored for over 12 hours a day, in poorly-lit and minimally-ventilated conditions. Approximately 40-45% of the workers were men, an equal percentage were women, and the rest were children, some of who had begun working at 6 or 7 years of age. A large proportion of wages went to food, most of that to bread⁷. Cataluña was the other major area of anarchist/anarcho-syndicalist organizing. Although, as I have noted, women constituted a high percentage of industrialized workers in the Catalan area (particularly in textiles), the CNT—as was the case of many male-dominated labor union organizations in that time and even now—largely ignored them in its unionizing efforts.⁸ Nevertheless, women were quite active in community-based protests in the early years of the century, notably in the anti-war demonstrations during the Tragic Week in 1909, and in cost-of-living protests throughout the early decades of the twentieth century.⁹

⁵ Josep FONTANA: *La revolución liberal: Política y hacienda en 1833-1845*, Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Fiscales, Ministerio de Hacienda, n.d., p. 336; Antonio-Miguel BERNAL: “Persistencia de la problemática agraria andaluza durante la Segunda República,” *La propiedad de la tierra y las luchas agrarias andaluzas*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1974, p. 142. See also Julián CASANOVA and Carlos Gil ANDRÉS: *Twentieth Century Spain: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, especially chs. 1-2

⁶ See, for example, Temma KAPLAN: *Anarchists of Andalusia: 1868-1903*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977; KAPLAN: “Class Consciousness and Community in Nineteenth-Century Andalusia,” *Political Power and Social Theory*, 2 (1981), pp. 21-57, and KAPLAN: “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918,” *Signs* 7, 3 (1982), pp. 545-67

⁷ Josep FONTANA: “Nacimiento del proletariado industrial y primeras etapas del movimiento obrero,” *Cambio económico y actitudes políticas en la España del siglo XIX*, Esplugues de Llobregat, Ariel, 1973, p. 85; and Ignasi TERRADAS SABORIT: *Les colonies industrials: un estudi entorn del cas de l’Ametlla de Merola*, Barcelona: Laia, 1979

⁸ On this point, in addition to sources cited above, see also Julián CASANOVA: *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, ch. 11; NASH: *Mujer y movimiento obrero*, ch. 1-2; and NASH: *Mujer, Familia y Trabajo en España, 1875-1936*, Barcelona: Anthropos, 1983, pp. 40-60; and Eulàlia VEGA: “Mujeres y militancia en el anarquismo español (1931-1936),” *Spagna contemporánea* 40 (2011), pp. 70-77

⁹ In addition to essays by KAPLAN (see above, note 6), see also Pamela RADCLIFFE: “The Culture of Empowerment in Gijón, 1936-1937”, in *The Splintering of Spain: Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, ed. C. EALHAM and M. RICHARDS, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 133-155; and Martha ACKELSBURG and Myrna BREITBART: “Terrains of Protest: Striking City Women,” *Our Generation*, 1987

Spanish women won the right to vote in 1931, but this achievement sparked little interest among anarchists, who did not believe that voting would do anything to address the massive social and economic inequalities which plagued the country. If anything, they were concerned that women's votes—particularly in rural areas—would only add to the electoral power of the Church and right-wing parties, a fear that was partially borne out by the victory of right-wing parties in the elections of 1933 (although that victory was probably a consequence of multiples factors).¹⁰

It was in this economic, social, and political context that *Mujeres Libres* was created. When the Civil War—and its accompanying social revolution-- broke out in July of 1936, some anarchist women were already engaged in movement activism in many arenas, but that engagement was rarely recognized or attended to by men in movement organizations. *Mujeres Libres*, therefore, developed programs with a dual focus on *capacitación* and *captación*: (a) empowering women to enable them to recognize and act on their own potential and (b) mobilizing them into the organizations of the broader libertarian movement. This set of goals became even clearer and more compelling as the Civil War progressed. Its original statutes defined its aims as follows:

(a) crear una fuerza femenina consciente y responsable que actúe como vanguardia del progreso; (b) Establecer a este efecto escuelas, institutos, ciclos de conferencias, cursillos especiales, etc., tendentes a capacitar a la mujer y a emanciparla de la triple esclavitud a que ha estado y sigue estando sometida, esclavitud de ignorancia, esclavitud de mujer y esclavitud productora.¹¹

Its spokeswomen attempted to walk a thin line, rejecting both feminism (by which they meant opposition to men or the struggle to achieve equality for women within an existing system of privilege) and the relegation of women to a secondary status within the libertarian movement. As the National Committee wrote to the CNT in 1938, as part of a campaign to be recognized as an autonomous “fourth branch” of the movement¹²

¹⁰ See, e.g. CASANOVA, *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, chs. 2-4

¹¹ Por la Comisión Organizadora, MUJERES LIBRES, “Estatutos de la Federación Nacional de ‘Mujeres Libres’”, Valencia, septiembre de 1937, reproduced in *Mujeres Libres: Luchadoras Libertarias*, prólogo de Antonina Rodrigo, Madrid, Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorenzo, 1999, p. 83. See also, MUJERES LIBRES: “Estatutos de la Agrupación de Mujeres Libres”, 4pp, Alfáfar (Valencia), undated, Archivo Histórico Nacional/Sección Guerra Civil-Salamanca [AHN/SGC-S], P.S. Madrid 432, Legajo 3270; also in Federación Nacional ‘MUJERES LIBRES’, Comité Nacional: “A todos los Comités Regionales y Provinciales de la Federación Nacional Mujeres Libres,” Barcelona, 12 julio 1938, p. 1, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam [IISH], FAI: 48.c.1.a. Primary documents and interviews are included in their original language; citations from secondary sources are translated by the author.

¹² Along with CNT, FAI and FIJL

Conocíamos el precedente de las organizaciones feministas y su inmediatez con el de los partidos políticos. Recogidas estas experiencias no podíamos actuar ni como unos ni como otros. No podíamos separar el problema femenino del problema social, ni podíamos desentendernos del primero y del segundo para convertir a la mujer en un sencillo instrumento de cualquier organización, por más que ésta fuera la nuestra propia, la organización libertaria.

La intención de sus impulsoras era más amplia, mucho más amplia: servir a una doctrina, no a un partido; capacitar a la mujer para hacer de ella el individuo capaz de contribuir a la estructuración de la sociedad futura, el individuo que aprendiera a determinarse por sí mismo, no a seguir ciegamente las indicaciones de una Organización.¹³

Our understanding of how they came to these goals can be illuminated by an exploration of some of their biographies.

* * *

Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Mercedes Comaposada: Life and thought of two founders

At the time of the outbreak of the Civil War and the creation of *Mujeres Libres*, both Lucía Sánchez Saornil and Mercedes Comaposada were among those considered older, more “professional” women.¹⁴ Both had been active in the CNT in the preceding years. Lucía worked for a number of years as a journalist, in addition to holding a position at the central telephone company; and Mercedes was also a journalist, and a lawyer. Both had grown up in straightened circumstances; and they confronted significant challenges as girls and women—both within and outside the libertarian movement. A closer look at their stories can help to explain Lucía’s focus on both engaging women in the movement while improving their situation within it, as well as Mercedes’ commitment to *formación*.

Lucía was born in Madrid in December 1895 to a working-class family.¹⁵ Relatively few details are known about her life, though Antonia Fontanillas states, simply, that her youth “must have been hard.”¹⁶ Her mother died when she was young, and she took on the responsibility of

¹³ FEDERACIÓN ‘MUJERES LIBRES’, Comité Nacional, “Anexo al informe que la Federación Mujeres Libres eleva a los comités superiores del movimiento libertario y al pleno del mismo,” Barcelona, octubre 1938, p. 2, available at IISH, CNT: 40.c.4

¹⁴ On the ways Mercedes and Lucía were viewed by others, see also Eulàlia VEGA: “Mujeres Libres, Una luz que se encendió”, pp. 107ff

¹⁵ Antonia Fontanillas cites this date, basing her claim on Lucía’s national identity card, and on documentation obtained from the Compañía Telefónica de Madrid. Antonia FONTANILLAS BORRÁS and Pau MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ: *Lucía Sánchez Saornil: Poeta, periodista y fundadora de Mujeres Libres*, Madrid, La Malatesta, 2014, p. 26. Yanira Hermida says that Lucía was born in 1896, the date that appears on her death certificate: HERMIDA: op. cit., p. 57

¹⁶ FONTANILLAS BORRÁS and MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ: op. cit., p. 26.

helping her father to raise a younger sibling. In 1916, she began working for Compañía Telefónica de Madrid, enabling her to contribute to support of the family while also pursuing her own interests in poetry and art (especially painting).¹⁷ That same year (1916), she began publishing her poetry, under the masculine pseudonym, Luciano San-Saor, in the *ultraísta* poetry journal, *Los Quijotes*,¹⁸ apparently the only woman to form part of the group of poets at the core of the journal. The poems were mostly love poems, written in the voice of a male lover to his female lover—possibly simply because that was the expected mode; but possibly also (as a number of critics surmise) to hide her lesbian desire. During the years to follow, her poetry increasingly challenged conventional models of femininity—a process of critique that she would soon transfer to her prose writing.¹⁹

Most likely she was introduced to the CNT through the presence of CNT activists at the Telefónica.²⁰ In any case, she seems to have participated actively in telephone workers strikes during the late 1920's, for which she was “exiled” to Valencia in 1927 to work at the offices of the Telefónica there.²¹ Returning to Madrid in mid-1933, she joined the editorial office of *CNT* and the secretariat of the Federación Nacional de la Industria Ferroviaria. In the years to follow, she published a number of articles in movement journals—such as *Solidaridad Obrera*, *Tierra y Libertad*, *Umbral*, and *Fragua Social*-- on issues related to women. These reflected her sharp analysis of sexism, not just in the larger society, but even within the organizations of the libertarian movement.²²

¹⁷ HERMIDA: op. cit. pp. 57-68; FONTANILLAS BORRÁS and MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ: op. cit. pp. 23-30; *Lucía Sánchez Saornil: Poesía*, Introducción y edición de Rosa María MARTÍN CASAMITJANA, Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1996, and Nuria CAPDEVILA-ARGÜELLES: *Autoras inciertas: Voces olvidadas de nuestro feminismo*, Madrid: Edición horas y HORAS, 2008

¹⁸ Rosa María MARTÍN CASAMITJANA: “Lucía Sanchez Saornil. De la vanguardia al olvido”, *Duoda: Revista d’Estudis Feministes*, núm 3 (1992), pp. 46-7.

¹⁹See, for example, MARTÍN CASAMITJANA: “Lucía Sánchez Saornil,” p. 47; *Lucía Sánchez Saornil: Poesía*, pp. 9-10; CAPDEVILA-ARGÜELLES: op. cit., p. 159; HERMIDA, op. cit., p. 62; and Luz SANFELIU GIMENO: “Lucía Sánchez Saornil: Una vida y una obra alternativas a la sociedad de su tiempo”, paper prepared for I Congreso Internacional de Cultura y Género de la Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, 11-13 noviembre 2009 (www.lrmcidii.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Lucia_Sanchez_Saornil.pdf) consulted 19 June 2017. In addition, CAPDEVILA-ARGÜELLES describes a later poem (written under Lucía’s own name), as “a poetic coming out of the closet” [“una salida poética del armario”], op. cit., p. 166

²⁰ FONTANILLAS BORRÁS and MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ: op. cit., pp. 29-30.

²¹ The original article by MARTÍN CASAMITJANA (published in 1992) says that Lucía was transferred to Valencia in 1931 (p. 57), but in her 1996 book she says that that this took place in September of 1927, op. cit., p. 17

Luz Sanfeliu argues that Sánchez Saornil was the most explicitly feminist of Mujeres Libres’²² founders. See SANFELIU: “Educando y viviendo en la ‘Libertad Sexual’. *Mujeres Libres y Lucía Sánchez Saornil*” in Raquel OSBORNE, ed.: *Mujeres bajo sospecha: Memoria y sexualidad 1930-1980*, Madrid, Editorial Fundamentos, 2012, pp. 340-44

Easily the most significant of these was a series on “the woman question” published in *Solidaridad Obrera* in response to articles by Mariano R. Vázquez (Marianet), the Secretary of the CNT. Those articles have been widely reprinted, and discussed in multiple venues.²³ I will not rehearse all their arguments in detail here; but I do want to note the emphasis she placed on the experience/treatment of women *within* movement organizations, the treatment of women’s subordination as a *social* problem, and the importance she gave to changing both men’s and women’s views of women’s capacities and possibilities.

Vázquez’s initial article appeared to understand the issues women confronted in the movement.²⁴ In effect, his article affirmed that women had been active participants in historical events, but that they had too often been forgotten or ignored. In Spain of that era, he wrote, women were, effectively, the “slaves of slaves” [“esclavas de los esclavos”]. The obvious question was, why had women allowed this to happen; and he answered: because of their economic dependence on men. That dependence could be overcome through the incorporation of women into the paid labor force, and their active participation in the workers’ movement. Only by joining the struggle for a new society that would guarantee the economic independence of everyone would women free themselves from masculine tyranny. Women would need to join the anarchist movement.

Lucía responded that most male anarcho-syndicalists seemed little interested in encouraging meaningful participation by women. There were many contexts to organize them. Propaganda and conversation can take place in factories, schools, *ateneos*, and even the very homes of male anarchist activists.²⁵ That so few women *had* been recruited indicated a problem with *men* and with movement organizations, rather than with women: “Hay que decirles [a los compañeros] que antes de reformar la sociedad es preciso reformar su casa”.²⁶ Vázquez had called on women to engage in propaganda with other women; Lucía replied that the problem was with anarchist men, whose homes were “ruled by the purest feudal norms” [“las más puras normas feudales”]. Her critique was sharp, and reflected her awareness that behavior in the “private” domain of the home was inseparable from that in the “public” domain of the workplace

²³ They have been reprinted in Mary NASH: *“Mujeres Libres” España: 1936-39*, Barcelona: Tusquets, 1975; and summarized in HERMIDA: op. cit., pp. 68-76; FONTANILLAS and MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ: op. cit., pp. 32-39; CAPDEVILA-ARGÜELLES: op. cit., pp. 168-171; Mary NASH: “Dos intelectuales anarquistas frente al problema de la mujer: Federica Montseny y Lucía Sánchez Saornil”, *Convivium* 44-45 (1975), pp. 89-93; NASH: *Mujer, Familia y Trabajo en España, 1875-1936*, Barcelona: Editorial Anthropos, 1983, pp. 15-17; and ACKELSBERG, op. cit., pp. 161-165, among others.

²⁴ Mariano R. VAZQUEZ, “Mujer: Factor revolucionario,” *Solidaridad obrera*, 18 septiembre 1935.

²⁵ “Propaganda en casa! Es la más sencilla y más eficaz. En qué hogar no hay una mujer, compañera, hija, hermana?”. SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL, “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios,” *Solidaridad obrera* 26 septiembre 1935

²⁶ SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 26 septiembre 1935

or union hall: men who treat their wives with disrespect, and effectively as servants, in their homes will not treat women equally outside of the house, and cannot expect those women to come running to movement organizations. Lucía challenged the sexism and misogyny of all-too-many anarchist men, arguing that, over the course of history, men’s views of women had oscillated “de la prostituta a la madre, de lo abyecto a lo sublime sin detenerse en lo estrictamente humano: la mujer”;²⁷ that treating women in these ways left no room for actual women to see themselves, or be seen by others, as true equals.²⁸ More significantly, women’s emancipation could not be achieved simply through their incorporation into the labor force, or the labor movement. Women’s situation would need to be addressed directly, and specifically: “la problemática de la mujer proletaria requería soluciones específicas, al margen de las resoluciones del conflicto de clases”.²⁹

The series of articles she wrote addressed women’s economic subordination and the devaluation of women in society; indeed, she articulated an early version of what, today, would be described as the social construction of women’s subordination: Woman’s ‘nature’ is simply the product of “el medio ambiente en que se ha desenvuelto”.³⁰ Men then demean women because they behave “como vosotros la habéis creado!”³¹ To put it another way, women have been reduced to

...nacer, gestar, morir... el concepto de madre [está] absorbiendo el de mujer, la función, anulando al individuo. Para un anarquista, antes que el trabajador está el hombre, antes que la madre debe estar la mujer. Porque para un anarquista antes que todo y por encima de todo está el individuo....³²

Men’s treatment of women as less than fully equal, the denial to women of opportunities to develop themselves, resulted in women’s *being* much less able to realize themselves. At the same time, however, she insisted that the only solution to the so-called “sexual problem”—women’s

²⁷ SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL, “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios IV,” *Solidaridad obrera* 15 octubre 1935

²⁸ SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios III”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 9 de octubre de 1935. Many women told stories of not being taken seriously at one or another anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist gathering. See, for example, María Luisa COBOS, “A la mujer, no; a vosotros, proletarios”, *Solidaridad obrera* (8 octubre 1935); Pepita Carpena and Sara Berenguer, quoted in ACKELSBURG: *Mujeres Libres*, ch. 4. See also VEGA, op. cit. “Mujeres y militancia”; and “Mujeres Libres, Una luz que se encendió”; NASH: *Mujer y movimiento obrero*, ch. 2; and CASANOVA: *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, ch. 11.

²⁹ Lucía Sánchez Saornil, cited in Antonina RODRIGO: *Una mujer libre: Amparo Poch y Gascón, médica y anarquista*, Barcelona, Flor del Viento Ediciones, 2002, p. 88

³⁰ SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL, “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios, IV”

³¹ SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL, “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios, II,” *Solidaridad obrera* 2 octubre 1935

³² SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios, IV”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 15 octubre 1935, p. 2

subordination at home, at the workplace, and in the society at large— “es en la solución al problema económico. En la revolución. Nada más”.³³

Marianet responded to the first three articles with another of his own, in which he argued that, while it was true that many libertarian men were tyrants both at home and in movement organizations, it was the responsibility of women to claim their rights. Indeed, in the same way that the bourgeoisie would not voluntarily cede its power over workers, it was “muy humano” for men to want to hold onto their privilege. Just as anarchists had argued that “la emancipación de los trabajadores ha de ser obra de los trabajadores mismos” so, he stated, “desde hoy podemos lanzar el grito unánime: La emancipación de la mujer ha de ser obra de la mujer”.³⁴ Lucía criticized Marianet sharply for this position. If women were to take their places as equals in the movement and in the revolution, she argued, then the *capacitación* of women was an essential, and not secondary, task of the movement. Further, though “será ‘muy humano’ que el hombre desee conservar su hegemonía, pero no será anarquista!” She insisted that the analogy to bourgeoisie and proletariat was flawed: the interests of capitalists and workers are fundamentally incompatible, but those of men and women (in the movement) are not: “siendo [el hombre y la mujer] diferentes, sus cualidades se complementan y forman un todo armónico. No habrá armonía en la vida futura si todos estos elementos no entran proporcionalmente en su constitución”.³⁵ Women’s subordination was a result of a combination of factors—women’s cultural backwardness (levels of illiteracy were extremely high among working-class women at the time, because most were sent to work at a very young age) as well as devaluation of women as workers. Only a multi-faceted approach, encompassing both education in the broadest sense, and incorporation into the labor movement as equals, would allow women to achieve true emancipation.³⁶ And in that work, men had to engage, along with women. As Mary Nash has summarized, “Lucía Sánchez Saornil stated that her goal, which should be the goal of every true anarchist, was to enable the majority of working women to have the education [formación] necessary for them to take on their own emancipation, whether as women or as workers.”³⁷

³³ Lucía SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: “La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios, V”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 30 octubre 1935, p. 2; see also the article by María Luísa COBOS, inspired by Lucía’s writings: “A la mujer, no; a vosotros, proletarios”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 8 octubre 1935, p. 3. See also the discussion of this point in SANFELIU: “Educando y viviendo en la ‘libertad sexual’”, pp. 338-9; and Helena ANDRÉS GRANEL: “Mujeres Libres. Diferencia sexual y autonomía feminista en la movilización revolucionaria de las trabajadoras” en *Mujeres Libres y feminismo en tiempos de cambio*, op. cit., p. 206

³⁴ Mariano R. VÁZQUEZ: “Avance: Por la elevación de la mujer”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 10 octubre 1935

³⁵ Lucía SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: “Resumen al margen de la cuestión femenina”, *Solidaridad obrera*, 8 noviembre 1935

³⁶ See also SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: “El problema sexual y la revolución”, *Mujeres Libres* 9. Further, in an interview published in *Tierra y Libertad* in May of 1938, she said that ‘uno de los mayores obstáculos para la emancipación de la mujer era la incapacidad de los hombres para comprender su importancia’. Cited in CAPDEVILA-ARGÜELLES: op. cit., p. 172.

³⁷ NASH: “Dos intelectuales anarquistas”, p. 92.

Thus, while *Mujeres Libres* did not claim the label of “feminism”—understood to mean antagonism to men or a demand for equality of women within existing hierarchical structures—Lucía was clear about her commitment to overcoming women’s subordination. As she stated in an interview in 1938,

Ya sé que se murmura y hasta se dice en voz alta que somos una organización feminista... ¡Feminismo!... si se entiende por feminismo el afán de superación, el esfuerzo por colocarnos a un nivel de cultura y de derechos sociales iguales al hombre, somos feministas; si se entiende por feminismo el no cultivar un complejo de inferioridad creado por una educación atrabiliaria sino, por el contrario, hacer esfuerzos por librarnos de él somos feministas ¡qué duda cabe!³⁸

Her life was a life of activism—initially within the CNT, then, once the war began, founding and becoming National Secretary of *Mujeres Libres*, and also as Secretary of Press and Propaganda of SIA (Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista). In that latter role, she traveled around Spain, and, often, into France, to gather supplies and provide shelter for women and children displaced by the war. Although the journal *Mujeres Libres* was established before the war (its first issue appeared in May 1936), the organization, itself, was founded in August, 1937. The war was to make her concerns all-the-more immediate and critical. She had a powerful presence. Sara Berenguer, for example, described her as forceful and charismatic, despite her small physique: “Mujer sumamente enérgica y convincente, cuando hablaba, nosotras, que éramos más jóvenes, quedábamos impresionadas”.³⁹

Her personal life—at least before and during the war-- was fully congruent with her activism. True to her nature, she was among those who stormed Madrid armories in response to the generals’ rebellion, and was very active in organizing resistance and daily life in the days and weeks to follow.⁴⁰ Many of those who knew her—whether as family members or as comrades in struggle—remembered her as one who had no patience with the sort of off-hand remarks that we might term “casual sexism”. For example, a niece recalled a meeting in which a male activist—in what was clearly meant to be a statement of praise—said “has sido tan valiente como un hombre!” But, the niece continued,

Cuando nos lo contaba, nos reímos porque conociéndola a ella nos figuramos el efecto que le haría. Se limitó a decirle, ‘Te equivocas he sido tan valiente como somos la

³⁸ Lucía SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL: interview reported “La Federación Nacional ‘Mujeres Libres’”, in *Ilustración Ibérica*, N° 2 (marzo 1938), p.2

³⁹ Sara BERENGUER: op. cit., p. 242. Many other young activists described her—and her impact on them—in similar ways. See, for example, VEGA, “Mujeres Libres. Una luz que se encendió”, pp. 107-9; and FONTANILLAS BORRAS and MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ, op. cit. pp. 43-45

⁴⁰ See, for example, FONTANILLAS BORRAS and MARTÍNEZ MUÑOZ, p. 41

mayoría de las mujeres' (Eso que para darle categoría a las mujeres las compararan con los hombres, lo llevaba muy mal)".⁴¹

Lucía's later writings critical of the institution of marriage⁴²-- which followed logically from her earlier plea not to ignore "women" in favor of "mothers"-- take on even more power when we realize that she was a lesbian, and lived openly with her partner, América Barroso, during a period when such sexual nonconformity—even within the libertarian movement—was far from common.⁴³ Indeed, they continued to live together both during their post-war exile in France, and after their clandestine return to Valencia (roughly in 1941 or 42), until Lucía's death in 1970. Nevertheless, during the years of the dictatorship, Lucía lived in virtual anonymity. Even former movement colleagues lost touch with her. She supported herself by retouching photographs, and continued to write poetry—but none of this late poetry was ever published.

Another of the three founders of what was to be *Mujeres Libres*, **Mercedes Comaposada**, was born into a working-class family in Barcelona in 1900. As was the case with many other female activists, she was introduced to left-wing ideas by her father, a strongly-committed socialist, who believed in the value of education. He had escaped from the extreme poverty of his youth to become a shoemaker, but was, as Mercedes described him, a "cultural worker," waking at 4 or 5 a.m. to study, and teasing his children about needing so much sleep.

His activities and commitments left a deep imprint on Mercedes, marking her—and others around her-- with his humanism and concern for workers. At age 12, Mercedes learned to type, and went to work for a film company, where she learned editing and mounting. "Todos eran de la CNT, así que yo también me afilié. Mi primer carnet sindical fue el del cine".⁴⁴ During 1916-17, she studied in Madrid, where she began to be aware of the particular situation of women, as well as of working people in general.

Estuve viviendo en Madrid, donde la condición de las mujeres era muy mala, mucho peor que en Cataluña. Y me impresionó mucho la CNT. Era tan directa, tan sensata. Además,

⁴¹ M^a Elena Samada Barroso, cited in Yanira HERMIDA, *Luchaban por un mundo nuevo*, pp. 83-4.

⁴² "Proyecto para la creación de una fábrica de bodas en serie", *Mujeres Libres* 7; also "La ceremonia matrimonial o la cobardía del espíritu", *Horas de revolución*, Barcelona: Mujeres Libres, 1937, pp. 24-26.

⁴³ Mary NASH makes a similar point, in *Rojas: Las mujeres Republicanas en la Guerra Civil*, Madrid: Taurus, 1999, p. 143. Although Antonia Fontanillas insists that there is no basis for the claim that Lucía was a lesbian (FONTANILLAS BORRÁS and MARTÍN MUÑOZ, pp. 63-68), both Suceso Portales and Pepita Carpena stated, on more than one occasion, that Lucía never denied that she was a lesbian (see *De toda la vida*; also Ackelsberg, p. 210). In addition, scholars who have studied her poetry (CAPDEVILA-ARGÜELLES, MARTÍN CASAMITJAN) and Yanira HERMIDA all say that there is no doubt about this aspect of her life. See also SANFELIU, "Lucía Sánchez Saornil: Una vida y una obra.alternativas", pp. 340-42.

⁴⁴ Mercedes COMAPOSADA: Interview with author, Paris, France, 3 January 1982

trabajaban con un proletariado que estaba—si me perdona la expresión, no lo digo en sentido despectivo—menos preparado que el da la UGT. Así que me afilié.⁴⁵

In 1933, while she was studying law in Madrid, Orobón Fernández invited her to teach a class to workers (in an *ateneo*). Lucía Sánchez Saornil was also in attendance, and there they met for the first time. The event provided an opportunity (if one can call it that) for them to experience, at first hand, the negative attitudes about women held even by some CNT activists: the men in attendance interrupted Lucía as she tried to teach, and ridiculed her as a woman. Both women were affronted by the experience. They left the meeting and began to talk—conversations which led, eventually, to the founding of *Mujeres Libres*:

Salimos fuera Lucía y yo. Nos pusimos de acuerdo enseguida. Durante meses nos reuníamos en el Parque del Retiro, nos sentábamos en un banco, hablábamos, paseábamos un poco más...Entonces, en 1935, empezamos a enviar notas. Lucía trabajaba para el sindicato de ferroviarios y tenía acceso a las listas de todos los grupos de mujeres afiliados al movimiento anarcosindicalista (tanto a los que operaban dentro de los sindicatos como a los de fuera). Escribimos a todos los grupos de la lista y a todos los que conocíamos. Les preguntábamos qué cuestiones les parecían importantes, de cuáles les interesaba informarse...Y, por supuesto, nuestra mayor alegría fueron las respuestas. Estaban entusiasmadas; nos llegaron cartas de todas partes, Asturias, el País Vasco, Andalucía...y siempre había más.⁴⁶

Younger women like Soledad Estorach, Pepita Carpena, Conchita Guillén and Sara Berenguer, who became active in *Mujeres Libres*, recalled Mercedes as a formidable, even demanding, presence. Perhaps not surprisingly, given her own background, her main emphasis and focus within the organization was on education [*formación*]*—on preparing women, enabling them to find their voice, and encouraging them to take on the work of public speaking, writing, and action to engage others. While the younger women all appreciated what they learned from her, and how she pushed them to take on responsibilities that they did not know they were capable of, they all also acknowledged that—at one point or another—they had been awed, and somewhat intimidated, by her strength and her expectations of them.*⁴⁷ Sara Berenguer Guillén captured the sense of Mercedes that I heard from many who worked with her:

Mercedes...llevó a cabo una labor admirable en cuanto a la preparación cultural y la orientación en la propaganda de muchas de nuestras jóvenes. Muchas son las que recuerdan la influencia que ejerció sobre ellas. ¿Influencia? ¡No! Planificar con tacto y

⁴⁵ COMAPOSADA: interviews with author, Paris, 3 and 5 January 1982, and 22 April 1988

⁴⁶ Mercedes COMAPOSADA: interviews with author, Paris, 3 and 5 January, 1982 and 22 April 1988

⁴⁷ Pepita CARPENA: interviews with author, Montpellier, France, 30 December 1981 and in Barcelona, 3 May 1988; Conchita GUILLÉN and Amada DE NÓ: interviews with author, Montady, France, 29 and 30 April 1988

sabiduría la formación social, con buena base para poder encauzar la acción de cara a otras mujeres. Cada una de nosotras éramos como flores silvestres, puras de forma y colorido, a quienes nos faltaba algo más para poder realizar nuestro anhelo de liberación femenina. Nos hacía falta una entidad social más vasta... Los cursillos que daba abrían senderos y daban cierto reflejo de luz hacia lo que se había aprendido...⁴⁸

After they completed courses with Mercedes, for example, Pepita Carpena, Sara Berenguer, and Soledad Estorach participated in *Mujeres Libres*' speaking tours (in collaboration with CNT unions) in towns and villages around Barcelona.⁴⁹

Soledad Estorach and Sara Berenguer: Two younger women's paths into *Mujeres Libres*.

Mercedes and Lucía, together with Dr. Amparo Poch y Gascón, a physician based in Barcelona, established the magazine *Mujeres Libres*, which published its first issue in May of 1936. But, as Mercedes noted, groups of movement-affiliated women had been meeting both in Madrid and in Barcelona starting in the early 1930s, attempting to address different aspects of the issues that Lucía had raised. In Barcelona, for example, **Soledad Estorach**, who was active both in her *ateneo* and in the CNT, also found existing movement organizations unable to fully incorporate women, because of the sexism (whether intentional, or not) of the men:

Por lo menos en Cataluña, la postura dominante era que debían participar hombres y mujeres. Pero el problema era que los hombres no sabían cómo integrar a las mujeres como militantes. Los hombres y muchas de las mujeres seguían considerándolas como de segundo orden. Querían [los hombres] ser militantes las veinticuatro horas del día, y en esas condiciones, desde luego, era imposible que se diera la igualdad. Los hombres estaban tan comprometidos que las mujeres se quedaron atrás casi por necesidad⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Sara BERENGUER, describing the classes that Mercedes offered, in her memoir, op. cit., pp. 255-56. See also the similar comments by Eulàlia VEGA, based on her interviews with other younger activists in *Mujeres Libres*, in "Mujeres Libres. Una luz que se encendió", pp. 109-114, and *Pioneras y revolucionarias*, pp. 195-198.

⁴⁹ Pepita CARPENA: interview with author, Montpellier, France, 30 December 1981. Addressing culture and education was to be a critical dimension of the work of *Mujeres Libres*. A budget of the Comité Regional de *Mujeres Libres* de Cataluña in 1938 listed 12 members of the committee, seven of whom had posts related to culture and propaganda. Those named included Sara Berenguer, Propaganda; Angela Colomé, Pepita Margallo, Angelina Cortez, and Pepita Carpena, Cultura; and María Luísa Cobos and Agueda Abad, Propagandistas y Organizadoras. "Presupuesto de los gastos mensuales del Comité Regional 'Mujeres Libres' de Cataluña," Barcelona, 3 noviembre 1938, IISH/CNT: 40.c.4

⁵⁰ Soledad ESTORACH: interview with author, París, 6 January 1982. See also Eulàlia VEGA: "Mujeres y militancia", pp. 70-76; NASH: *Mujer y movimiento obrero*, ch. 2; and NASH: *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, Denver, CO, Arden Press, Inc., 1995, pp. 23-33, 78-92

Who was Soledad? And what was her route into *Mujeres Libres*? Soledad Estorach was born in 1915, in Albatàrrec (Lleida), about 200 km outside of Barcelona, although—as she explained—she did not live “the life of a traditional peasant”. Her father was an educated man who had spent years living outside of Spain.⁵¹ He gave classes to adults, and also taught Soledad to read and write—highly unusual for working-class girls. His politics were leftist; but her mother’s family was much more conservative.

After her father died when she was 11, Soledad went to work to enable the family to avoid destitution. For a number of years, she was able to continue learning with a teacher in a nearby village, for a few hours a week. But once she turned 15, her mother began pressuring her to find a man to marry, who would support her and the family. As Soledad reported,

Fui fiel a mi padre, su mundo y sus ideas. Quería viajar como él, aprender...No quería vivir mi vida dentro de las cuatro paredes de una casa...Convencí a mi madre de que me dejara ir a Barcelona, donde podría ganar dinero para mantener a la familia y obtener una educación.⁵²

Soledad went to Barcelona; her mother and sister followed soon thereafter. At first, she worked in the shop of an uncle, but economic crisis forced him to close the shop and she found work in domestic service. The hours there were long, and the pay low, however; so she began working in a factory, with the hope of both earning more money and having time to “cultivate” herself. Much of her self-education was accomplished through reading the anarchist press, for example, *La Revista Blanca*, or *Estudios*. Toward the end of 1930, she began attending night classes, and meeting members of the CNT (which was operating clandestinely).

After the fall of the monarchy in 1931—and, at least in part, in an attempt to meet those who were writing in the anarchist press-- she made her way to an *ateneo*. There she met one of the most well-known “*obreros conscientes*” of the libertarian movement, Abelardo Saavedra, who impressed her deeply with his personality and the force of his ideas: “Era para gente joven como un libro que nunca se cerraba!”⁵³ She joined a youth group at the *ateneo* and became an activist. Soon, she was spending virtually all of her time in meetings or preparing for meetings, elated by the community and the excitement of collective action. Nevertheless, by 1934, she was also discussing with other women the difficulties that women were experiencing both at work and in movement organizations:

Lo que pasaba era que las mujeres venían una vez, quizá incluso se afiliaban, pero luego no volvías a verlas. Así que, muchas compañeras llegaron a la conclusión de que era una buena idea formar un grupo aparte para estas mujeres. En Barcelona, el movimiento

⁵¹ Soledad was hardly the only woman to become active in *Mujeres Libres* who was deeply influenced by her father. As noted above, that was also the case with Mercedes Comaposada. Fathers seem to have had similar impacts on the activist trajectories of, among others, Sara Berenguer, Julia Hermosilla, Concha Guillén, Conchita Liaño and Conxa Pérez. Note Eulàlia VEGA’s reports of her interviews with them in *Pioneras y revolucionarias, passim*

⁵² Interview, 6 January 1982

⁵³ *Ibid.*

era amplio y poderoso, y había muchas mujeres en los sindicatos de algunos ramos, en especial en el textil y la confección. Pero incluso en ese sindicato era rara la mujer que hablaba. Empezamos a preocuparnos por la cantidad de mujeres que estábamos perdiendo. A finales de 1934, un pequeño grupo de nosotras empezó a tratar estas cuestiones. En 1935, hicimos un llamamiento a todas las mujeres del movimiento libertario. No pudimos convencer a las militantes más mayores, que ocupaban lugares de honor entre los hombres—veteranas como Federica [Montseny] o Libertad Ródenas—para que se unieran a nosotras, así que nos centramos principalmente en las compañeras más jóvenes. Llamamos a nuestro grupo ‘Grupo Cultural Femenino, CNT’.⁵⁴

Although the group focused primarily on addressing the particular situation of women within the movement, their broader commitment was to the libertarian cause. Thus, for example, Soledad and some other members of the group met throughout the night of July 18, 1936, in expectation of the military rising. When Marianet and the rest of the CNT leadership went off to storm the military barracks at Atarazanas, at the foot of the Ramblas, she went with other women gather arms. But she soon returned with others to the union hall. A few of them then went to the Casa Cambó, “uno de los más hermosos edificios de Barcelona, en la Vía Laietana”. They built barricades outside, and carried rubble inside to fortify it. “Y cuando los compañeros regresaron, victoriosos, por supuesto, y vieron qué edificio tan hermosos era, lo tomaron como la Casa CNT-FAI”.⁵⁵

As Soledad and many other women recounted, perhaps some of the most important things women did in those first hours and days of the revolution (in addition to the heroic acts of resistance in which so many, men and women, participated) was to go up to the roofs of buildings, with paper megaphones, and call out to the soldiers “to come to our side, to take off their uniforms and join the people”. In addition, women built barricades and undertook the work of provisioning both the militias and the city.⁵⁶ Soledad reported that

⁵⁴ Soledad ESTORACH: interview with author, París, 4 January 1982. On the very different experiences—and views—of the “veteranas” like Federica Montseny, see NASH: “Dos intelectuales anarquistas frente al problema de la mujer”, *op. cit.*; Susana TAVERA: “Federica Montseny o las paradojas de una biografía militante”, *Historia Social* 48 (2004), pp. 111-128 and TAVERA: *Federica Montseny: La indomable*, Barcelona, Temas de Hoy, 2005.

⁵⁵ Soledad ESTORACH, interview, 4 January 1982. See also Soledad ESTORACH: “Mujeres Libres de Cataluña: La agrupación Cultural Femenina de Barcelona”, pp. 49-54 en *Mujeres Libres: Luchadoras libertarias*.

⁵⁶ On the critical work of women in the “rearguard,” see, among others, Helena ANDRÉS GRANELL: “Discursos y experiencias femeninas en el anarquismo español: Mujeres Libres en la retaguardia oscense (1936-1938)”, *Argensola* no. 116 (2006), pp. 240ff, and CASANOVA: *A Short History*, pp. 108-110

Requisamos los grandes cines y los convertimos en comedores populares. ¿De dónde sacábamos la comida? ¡De donde podíamos! Íbamos a las tiendas de la zona y la pedíamos. Los pobres comerciantes tenían que darnos todo lo que tenían. No les hacía mucha gracia, claro...no se podía hacer otra cosa, eran los primeros días de la revolución, había que conseguir comida para la gente. Hombre, después, íbamos con camiones a los grandes mercados y cogíamos la comida de allí.⁵⁷

Sara Berenguer was another young woman who found her way to Mujeres Libres, although by a somewhat different route. Sara was born in January 1919 to a mother who was a seamstress, and a father who was an anarchist activist. She, herself, had not been involved in any movement organizations before the outbreak of the Civil War, but was working from home as a seamstress. On the day of the military rebellion, Sara was headed to the beach with her mother and siblings, when they heard that shots had been fired, the military was rising, and the revolution was beginning. They returned home. Two days later her father reappeared, along with two CNT comrades. Almost as soon as they entered the house, a fire-fight broke out between them and others on the streets. Sara insisted on staying with her father, while her mother shouted at her to come down, lest she be killed. When the fighting ended, her father took her down to a storage space, and taught her how to use a rifle. Sara asked to go with her father to the front--“I wanted to be part of the struggle that was beginning”-- but he took her, instead, to the Revolutionary Committee in her neighborhood, Las Corts. She was active there through the years of the war, in addition to working as secretary to the Comité regional de las Industrias de la Edificación, Madera y Decoración de Cataluña, and working with SIA, where she came to know Lucía Sánchez Saornil.⁵⁸

Sara did not join Mujeres Libres until late in 1937; initially, she was opposed to the idea of a separate organization for women:

No estaba de acuerdo con que se formara un grupo de mujeres. Creía que la lucha afectaba tanto a las mujeres como a los hombres. Todos luchamos por una sociedad mejor, ¿para qué una organización aparte? Un día que estaba con un grupo de las Juventudes, fuimos a un acto que había organizado Mujeres Libres en la sede de la FIIL, donde tenía además una oficina. Los muchachos empezaron a burlarse de las oradoras, lo que me enfureció. Cuando la mujer que estaba hablando terminó, los muchachos empezaron a hacer preguntas y a decir que no tenía sentido que las mujeres se organizaran por separado, pues de todos modos no harían nada. El tono de sus comentarios me molestó incluso más y salí en defensa de Mujeres Libres...al final, me

⁵⁷ Soledad ESTORACH: Interview, 4 January 1982. As Enriqueta ROVIRA noted, “todos hacían algo”. Interview with author, Castellaudary, France, 29 December 1981.

⁵⁸ BERENGUER: *Entre el sol y la tormenta*, pp. 16-18.

nombraron delegada de nuestra barriada para la reunión de la Federación Local de Mujeres Libres de Barcelona.⁵⁹

Yanira Hermida, in her recent study of Sara, argues that her story is representative of those of many women who, while not especially active before the war, were caught up in the events and radicalized in the process:

...[her] biography helps us to understand the trajectory of a young woman who came into the libertarian movement completely aside from any feminist goals, but who, in experiencing patriarchal behaviors in that revolutionary context,...and as a result of her own development as an anarchist, came to commit herself to women's struggles within the movement.⁶⁰

Although Sara started out opposed to the idea of an organization specifically for women, her own experiences of anarchist men demeaning women led her to active engagement with Mujeres Libres.

Civil War and Social Revolution: Personal and Political in the Programs of Mujeres Libres

We can see clearly the imprint of many of these women's experiences-- both from their "personal lives" and within movement organizations-- in the programs of Mujeres Libres. Even those who had long been active in the movement—especially Lucía and Mercedes, but also Soledad—had confronted demeaning and dismissive attitudes and behaviors toward themselves and other women, including from their movement comrades. Thus, particularly as the initial resistance to the generals' coup turned into an ongoing civil war, and the work of recruiting [*captación*] of working people (including women) took on ever more importance, the seemingly "personal", "non-political", work of changing both men's and women's attitudes and behaviors became ever *more*, not less, important. How could they bring women into a movement that did not respect them? How would the movement be able to retain their loyalty? This was particularly the case in a movement that insisted that war and revolution were profoundly linked, and that it was only revolutionary fervor, and commitments to a better world, that would enable popular forces to defeat a professional army, especially one supported by outside forces.⁶¹ If men in the movement did not change, and if women could not be helped to see themselves as capable and

⁵⁹ Sara BERENGUER: interview with author, Montady (France), 28 December 1981. Information about the life and activism of Sara appears, also in the documentaries *De toda la vida*, realización y producción, Lisa BERGER and Carol MAZER (1986) and *Indomables: Una historia de Mujeres Libres* (2012), Co-produced by CGT-Euskadi and Zer Ikusi A; in HERMIDA: *Luchaban por un mundo nuevo*, ch. 5, in VEGA: "Mujeres Libres, Una luz que se encendió", and in VEGA: *Pioneras y revolucionarias*

⁶⁰ HERMIDA: op. cit., pp. 96-97.

⁶¹ On the role of international powers, see ACKELSBERG: *Mujeres Libres*, Ch. III, pp. 139-145, and ch. VI, and sources cited there; also CASANOVA: *A Short History*, ch. 3; CASANOVA: *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, ch. 8

competent, the entire revolutionary project was in jeopardy—and, with it, the struggle to win against the military rebels.⁶²

Anarchists insisted that war and revolution were inseparable, at the same time that they acknowledged that the war created—and necessitated—new roles for women. In the initial rush to put down the rebellion, and to form a revolutionary army, some women joined the militias. Indeed, as Mary Nash and Julián Casanova have noted, in the early stages of the war, the armed militiawoman became a symbol of revolutionary fervor.⁶³ While, on the one hand, the image was probably aimed more at men than at women—using women’s transgression of traditional gendered norms to “shame” men into volunteering—nevertheless, it captured challenges to norms in a very immediate way. Still, those women who *did* join the militias often found themselves doing tasks that were more traditionally defined as feminine—making food, providing support services, etc. And virtually all of them reported continuing struggles to be treated with anything approaching equality.⁶⁴ Further, once the militias were militarized, beginning in September 1936, most women were forced to abandon combat roles and return home, the new slogan being: “men to the front, women on the home front”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, some women resisted and stayed at the fronts; and, of course Mika Etchebéhère, a miliciana who had replaced her dead compañero as leader of her company, was, effectively, the exception who proved the rule.⁶⁶

⁶² The struggles and dilemmas they confronted have echoes in those of many women in social movements, encapsulated in later years by the words “double struggle” [“doble lucha”]—the need of women to struggle for equality, respect and dignity *within* the movement while, at the same time, working *with* others in the movement for broader social justice goals, whether socialism, anti-fascism, Spain’s “democratic transition” or others. See, e.g. NASH: *Defying Male Civilization*, pp. 177-185; Fernanda ROMEU ALFARO: *El silencio roto: Mujeres contra el Franquismo*, Madrid, 1994, pp. 179ff; Llum QUIÑONERO: *Nosotras que perdimos la paz*, Madrid: Foca, 2005; Julia VARELA, Pilar PARRA, and Alejandra VAL CUBERO: *Memorias para hacer camino: Relatos de vida de once mujeres españolas de la generación del 68*, Sebastián de los Reyes (Madrid), Ediciones Morata, 2016; Nadia VARÓ: *Treballadores, conflictivitat laboral i moviment obrer a l'àrea de Barcelona durant el franquisme. El cas de Comissions Obreres (1964-1975)*, Tesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2014

⁶³ See, for example, CASANOVA: *A Short History*, p. 108; CASANOVA: *The Spanish Republic and Civil War*, p. 319; NASH: *Defying Male Civilization*, especially ch. 4.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Anna DELSO: *Trois cents hommes et moi, ou Estampe d'un revolution*, Montreal, La pleine lune, 1989; Helena ANDRÉS GRANEL: “Transgrediendo las fronteras del género. Milicianas en la Guerra civil española”, pp. 161-175 in *Mujeres Libres y feminismo en tiempos de cambio*; ACKELSBERG: *Mujeres Libres*, pp. 118-123; and NASH: *Defying Male Civilization*, pp. 101-108

⁶⁵ NASH: *Defying Male Civilization*, p. 120; CASANOVA: *A Short History*, pp. 108-109; ANDRÉS GRANEL: “Transgrediendo”, p. 168.

⁶⁶ ANDRÉS GRANEL: pp. 165-170; ETCHEBÉHÈRE: *Ma guerre d'Espagne à moi*, Paris, Denoël, 1976; and “La capitana de Somosierra”, *Mujeres Libres*, 10.

The context of war and revolution, of course, affected the gendered division of labor—and understandings of the relationship between personal and political—on the homefront, as well as at the battlefield. As Mary Nash has noted,

The experience of surviving the war also brought a new dimension to the traditional roles of mother and housewife, as women's duties were projected onto the larger community and beyond the bounds of their immediate family to embrace, on numerous occasions, the civilian populations. The collective dimension of women's nurturing role was groundbreaking and accurately reflected the blurring of the boundaries of public and private life at the republican homefront.⁶⁷

The women of *Mujeres Libres*, however, argued that these new roles for women should not be limited to wartime necessity, but viewed as opening opportunities for women to move permanently into what had traditionally been perceived as male-only “public” spaces.

Thus, the clearest evidence of the connection between “personal” and “political” is to be found in *Mujeres Libres*' programs of education and empowerment [*capacitación*], its efforts to adapt anarchist principles of “preparation” to the particular situation of women in Spain, and to respond to very specific obstacles to active engagement that women faced in the movement.⁶⁸ Key to understanding these programs was *Mujeres Libres*' analysis of women's subordination and women's “difference”—issues that, as we have seen, Lucía Sánchez Saornil addressed in her articles in *Solidaridad Obrera* as early as 1935. The organization focused on the links among economic, cultural, and sexual subordination. A review of their writings on these topics makes clear their recognition that gender relations (roles, expectations, power) are *socially*-constructed, even though they did not use that language. Just as they saw larger economic forces creating and reinforcing the subordination of the working class, they insisted that what appeared as women's “personal” limitations—e.g. high rates of illiteracy, lack of preparation for paid jobs, lack of knowledge about body and sexuality—were, themselves, products of larger social structures, and needed to be addressed as such. Thus, the expectation that women will be at home (whether as daughters, wives, mothers), economically dependent on men, contributes to their sexual subordination. Since they are not expected to work for pay, there is little pressure for women to be educated; but that lack of education also contributes to a lack of respect for women—whether self-respect or respect from others. Further, those women who *are* in the paid workforce fare little better: low salaries are “justified” on the grounds that women are uneducated, secondary workers, not supporting a family. And those same low salaries contribute to women's subordinate status, and the reluctance of many union organizations even to try to organize them.

⁶⁷ NASH: *Defying Male Civilization*, p. 141

⁶⁸ These programs are discussed at length in Chapter V of ACKELSBURG: *Mujeres Libres*. See also ACKELSBURG: “*Mujeres Libres: Identity, Community, Sexuality and Power*”, *Anarchist Studies* 8 (2000), pp. 99-117; VEGA: “*Mujeres y milicianas*”; and *Pioneras y revolucionarias*; NASH: *Mujer y movimiento obrero*.

Finally, the combination of economic subordination and relative cultural backwardness make women particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation—whether in marriage or outside it.⁶⁹

No one approach would be sufficient to overcome women’s subordination: it was a complex problem that would need to be addressed from many angles at once. *Mujeres Libres* mounted a coordinated effort in many different arenas, offering basic education to overcome illiteracy and overall cultural backwardness; programs of apprenticeship and “job readiness” to enable women to take their places in the paid labor force; programs of what we would now call “consciousness-raising” to support women’s sense of self and their activism within the movement; and programs to address women’s ignorance about sexuality, birth control, motherhood, and the education of children.⁷⁰ Lucía’s insistence that “there is no solution to the women’s problem apart from economics” was central to their work. The emancipation of women would be a *collective* project—ideally, one involving men as well as women, but one in which women would take responsibility for their own liberation.⁷¹

Many twentieth-century feminists came to political/structural analysis by beginning with the personal, and realizing that their gendered experiences were grounded in socio-economic systems that had a deep impact on their lives. The activists of *Mujeres Libres*—rooted in the anarcho-syndicalist movement—came to analyze the personal (and, in particular, gender relations) by beginning with political-structural realities. While addressing problems that women confronted *as individuals*, they were not interested in *individual solutions*. Rather, their goal was to develop programs that would empower women to take their places alongside other women (and men) in workplaces and in movement activism, while, at the same time, supported by other women, to take more effective charge of their lives, their households, their sexuality, and the education of their children. As the war dragged on, and demanded ever more in the way of sacrifices, material and otherwise, some of the more radical demands (particularly in the arena of sexuality) seem to have been relegated to a secondary status.⁷² But even in the midst of civil war, *Mujeres Libres* insisted on the importance of respect and dignity for women, and the continued importance of programs of *capacitación*. In doing so, they were reflecting not only the overall commitment of the libertarian movement to the inseparability of war and revolution, but also

⁶⁹ Many of these arguments were made, initially, by SÁNCHEZ SAORNIL in her 1935 articles responding to Mariano Vázquez in *Solidaridad obrera*. See also ACKELSBURG: *Mujeres Libres*, Ch. 5 and MUJERES LIBRES: “El problema sexual y la revolución,” *Mujeres Libres* 9

⁷⁰ See also BERENGUER: *Entre el sol... passim*; and “Labor constructiva y cultural de *Mujeres Libres*”, pp. 113-115 in *Mujeres Libres: Luchadoras libertarias*.

⁷¹ See also ANDRÉS GRANEL: “*Mujeres Libres. Diferencia sexual y autonomía feminista*”, pp. 201-211; and “Discursos y experiencias femeninas”

⁷² On the limits of *Mujeres Libres*’ sexual radicalism, in the context of the war, see, ACKELSBURG: *Mujeres Libres*, pp. 203-212; and “Identity, Community, Sexuality and Power,” *passim*.

their own goals of *captación* and *capacitación*, a recognition of the inseparability of personal and collective liberation, the interweaving of “the personal” and “the political”.

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