

Antropología Experimental

<http://revistaselectronicas.ujaen.es/index.php/rae>
2024. nº 24. Texto 30: 417-427

Universidad de Jaén (España)
ISSN: 1578-4282 Depósito legal: J-154-200

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.17561/rae.v24.8874>
Recibido: 02-03-2023 Admitido: 23-05-2024

“Drunk on Tattoos”**Narratives of resistance among pioneering women tattooists in Spain**

“Borracha de tatuaje.” Narrativas de resistencia entre las pioneras del tatuaje en España

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Resumen

El tatuaje se ha analizado como herramienta de resistencia, reivindicación y empoderamiento. El régimen de Franco (1939-1975) implicó una poderosa política corporal que moldeó profundamente las experiencias corporales de las mujeres españolas. Sostenemos que la aparición tardía de las prácticas de modificación corporal en la década de 1980 en España debe entenderse a la luz de este contexto político represivo. Este trabajo presenta las narrativas personales de las primeras mujeres profesionales dedicadas al mundo de la modificación corporal en España, articulando sus experiencias dentro del entorno sociopolítico más amplio. Las narrativas y experiencias aquí presentadas forman parte de un estudio etnográfico sobre la cultura del tatuaje en España. Las primeras mujeres tatuadoras demuestran la importancia de utilizar una metodología cualitativa situada para acercarse al rico mundo del tatuaje desde una perspectiva feminista. Sus estrategias de resistencia y superación fueron creativas, valientes y, como muestran sus narraciones, eficaces. La subversión de los estereotipos en torno a la feminidad encarnada por las mujeres pioneras del tatuaje en España es un recordatorio necesario de que, frente a los mecanismos pendientes de control y vigilancia de la vida y el cuerpo de las mujeres, también hay lugar para la resistencia activa y creativa.

Abstract

Tattooing has been analyzed as a tool for resistance, reclamation and empowerment. Franco's regime (1939-1975) involved a powerful body politics that deeply shaped Spanish women's embodied experiences. We argue that the late appearance of body modification practices in the 1980s in Spain needs to be understood in light of this repressive political context. This paper presents the personal narratives of the first women professionals dedicated to the world of body modification in Spain, articulating their experiences within the broader sociopolitical environment. The narratives and experiences presented here are a part of an ethnographic study on Spanish tattoo culture. The first women tattooists demonstrate the importance of using a qualitative situated methodology to approach the rich world of tattooing from a feminist perspective. Their resistance and coping strategies were creative, courageous and, as their narratives show, effective. The subversion of stereotypes around femininity embodied by the women pioneers of tattooing in Spain is a necessary reminder that in the face of the pending mechanisms of control and surveillance of women's lives and bodies, there is also room for active and creative resistance.

Palabras Clave

Tatuadoras. España. Resistencia. Franquismo. Políticas del cuerpo. Narrativas personales
Women tattooists. Spain. Resistance. Francoism. Body politics. Personal narratives

Introduction

The first traces of feminist organisations in Spain date back to the early 1900s, linked to suffragism. The movement arrived with some delay compared to other Western countries (Folguera, 2022; Ryan, 2006). For 36 years, until 1975, Franco's dictatorship marked a radical change in the sociocultural and political development of the country. On a symbolic level women's bodies were placed at the service of the construction of national identity. This "nationalisation of the female body" meant that apart from their "role as 'national womb', women had no legitimacy in the construction of the national project, which explains their status as second-class citizens and the 'colonisation' of their bodies by Franco's regime" (Bergès, 2012, §16).

Nationalist discourses were based on women's corporeality (di Febo, 2006; Moraga García, 2008), reducing women to the reproductive and domestic spheres. A clear example of the control around women's corporeality was found in dress: "Since 1941 the General Directorate of Security gave instructions in terms of morality for the summer period, "imposing fines on those who did not observe appropriate behaviour" (Pelka, 2014, p.41). However, Pelka (2014) points out that these impositions did not achieve the desired results, taking as an example the lack of decorum observed by some reports of the regime. Dissent through dress was much more common in coastal towns such as Barcelona or Huelva and particularly during the second period of Francoism (1959-1955), when international tourists began to travel to Spain. This situation illustrates the persistence of resistant acts even in a highly repressive environment.

Although clandestine women's organisations and civil resistance by women were present during the dictatorship (Díaz Sánchez, 2005), it was not until the transition to democracy that feminism, repressed during the previous 36 years, was reactivated. Anti-feminist Francoism contributed to the late appearance of gender studies in Spanish universities, which had a direct impact on the scarcity of feminist theoretical approaches to subcultures, youth cultures and issues dealing with feminism and body politics.

Several scholars have addressed tattooing and women in the West (DeMello, 1995; Mifflin, 2013; Atkinson, 2002; Pitts, 1998, 2003; Thompson, 2015), describing how long-standing associations between criminality, social deviance and tattooing encouraged negative views of the practice on a social scale. These authors tend to describe Western tattooing as a uniform whole and point out the masculinization of its codes and spaces. Their research is mainly based in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States; therefore, this theoretical framework cannot be easily applied to the particularities of the Spanish context and the experiences of women tattooists within it.

Nevertheless, Mifflin's text on tattooing, subversion and feminism (2013) could be of interest for the Spanish case. Mifflin highlights the historical link in the West between moments of greater presence of feminist vindications and women's acquisition of tattoos. Thus, she explains, it is no coincidence that in the years of suffragism it became fashionable to get tattoos in European countries such as the United Kingdom or Germany, or that in the 1970s, when women joined a large number of occupations, many decided to take up tattooing as a profession. Her hypothesis is interesting in terms of the possible connection between the revival of the feminist movement after Francoism and women's growing interest in tattooing in this context.

In any case, the countercultural proposals of subcultural scenes such as punk were a highly influential starting point for the later demands of feminist movements in Spain. Although "it cannot be said that there is a purely feminist visual discourse in the origins of punk in Spain; [...] there is a problematization of the feminine" (Gómez Alonso, 2017, p.80) that opens a way for women's resistance and emancipation. This vision of the punk scene could be easily applied to the world of tattooing, also a countercultural and masculinized one, especially in the early years of post-Francoist Spain. In the Spanish scene, political characteristics are essential for understanding youth cultures and the realities of women in subcultural scenes in particular.

Before exploring the women's personal narratives that will make up most of this paper, it is worth noting that although the practice of tattooing did not disappear completely from Spanish territory during Francoism (1939-1975), it was relegated to mainly masculine spaces such as military or prison environments (Rocha, 2022) The delay in the emergence of counterculture and youth cultures (Feixa, 2004), due

to the social and political repression of 36 years of dictatorship, explains why the world of tattooing did not become popular until the 1980s in Spain.

This paper proposes an ethnographic approach to the body politics behind the late appearance of tattoo culture in the Spanish context. Tattooing has been analysed in terms of resistance, reclamation and empowerment (DeMello, 1995; Pitts, 1998; Thompson, 2015) and as “a refusal to submit to the cultural inscriptions written on women's bodies” (Braunberger, 2000, pp. 19-20). Qualitative approaches to the topic are scarce as are studies that “consider the multiplicity of women's experiences” (Callaghan et al., 2016, p.49). Hence, we present here the personal narratives of four of the pioneers¹ women tattooists in Spain, articulating their experiences within a broader scenario highly marked by Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) whose influence on body politics and Spanish society is powerful to this day.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the narratives of the women pioneers dedicated to the world of body modification² in the Spanish context, “from a theoretical and political position that aims to question the androcentric categories and methodologies that have ignored and silenced groups situated in positions of subalternity” (Gregorio Gil, 2019, p.107). The narratives and experiences presented are part of an ethnographic research on tattoo culture carried out between 2020 and 2021. The fieldwork (which included in-depth interviews with 21 people) led to a digital (Hjorth et al., 2016) and feminist (Stacey, 1988; Gregorio Gil, 2019) ethnographic study on the experiences of women in the world of tattooing in Spain.

Contacting the women pioneers was a complicated task as texts on the history of tattooing in the Spanish context are scarce (Rojo Ojados, 2014). After an exhaustive search on newspapers and blogs and face to face conversations with contemporary tattoo artists, we managed to get in touch with four of these pioneers: three tattooists, Andrea (59³ years old, resident in Valencia); Isa (56, Valencia); Mara (60, Santander); and a piercer, Mariona (48, Bilbao). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews we conducted –understood more as fluid conversations than scripted encounters (Guber, 2001)– took place by videocall.

Although the field work was eminently digital, in-person participant observation was also carried out during the tattoo sessions of Julia Pérez Amigo, who throughout the three years of research, underwent more than 15 sessions to tattoo different areas of her body, including the full back. Although the ideal would have been to also attend, for example, tattoo conventions held in the Spanish context, the fact that the observation was carried out using other methods did not diminish the relevance or validity of the data resulting from the digital research.

During the research, our intention was to combine the collection and analysis of data, generating a dialectical process between both spheres. As Saéz (2010) explains, “dialectical logic establishes links between diverse phenomena, while a positivist logic establishes strict separations” (p. 208). To help us manage and organize the personal narratives collected, we used the NVivo analysis tool (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia).

The position of personal and professional familiarity with the study context of one of the researchers⁴ facilitated contact with the participants. Her situation coincides with that of Roberts (2017), when he recalls, regarding possible reluctance to participate in research, that “in a social research project, [...] my visible modifications and previous experience as a tattoo shop employee eased their initial concerns about being misrepresented in an academic study” (p. 364). With the use of personal narratives resulting from in-depths interviews, we particularly seek to reject “errors and partial presentations” about the history of tattooing (Lodder, 2022, p. 33). Therefore, this paper aims to open up a research path in two directions: on one hand, towards documenting the history of tattooing in Spain; and, on the other hand, towards a historically contextualised, critical and feminist approach to the narratives which shape it.

¹ We use pioneers since prior to this date we could not find information about any female tattoo artist in Spain.

² We will focus on tattoos and piercings as these are the most common practices in the Spanish context, leaving aside other modifications such as scarifications or subcutaneous implants.

³ Ages and towns of residence at the time of the interview. We use their first names with their approval.

⁴ Julia Pérez Amigo worked as a piercer in four different tattoo studios in the South of Spain, and she is also a heavily tattooed woman.

Results

Entering a male dominated world

Before the 1980s, there were tattoo studios in port areas such as Rota, Cartagena or Barcelona (Pierrat, 2022), linked to the presence of American soldiers who got tattooed regularly; or in spaces where other activities were carried out, such as taverns. Even if there were places where tattooing took place, these were "...normally located in the underworld of large cities or in the port suburbs" (Luengo, 2009, p.268) and/or linked to specific highly masculinised environments (Rocha, 2022).

It was against this backdrop that Andrea landed in Spain from England in the 1980s. She had learned how to tattoo with her father and opened a studio in Valencia with her then husband. According to Andrea, *Tatuarte* was the first establishment to obtain a business licence in Spain, in 1984. It was her father who helped them prepare for the opening, as at that time it was not easy to obtain tattooing equipment in Spain and the materials, from machines to inks, came from abroad. She expresses the difficulties they had to deal with during those early years and how her husband had to do other jobs such as picking oranges to keep the business going.

Andrea's story ties in with that of Isa, who was born in the Netherlands. A multidisciplinary artist and tireless traveller, she moved to Mexico in the 1980s, where she learned to bullfight, dedicating herself professionally to bullfighting for some years. In the early 1990s, Isa settled in Andalusia and began tattooing in Rota, where she worked in a studio dedicated mainly to tattooing sailors from the American base and Spanish military personnel from nearby San Fernando. A few years later, Isa moved to Malaga where she opened her own tattoo studio, with no fixed opening times, in order to increase her clientele:

I arrived in Malaga and set up a studio in an old sweet shop in a slum area, in the Princess neighborhood. And I went by word of mouth, there was no internet or anything like that, no mobile phones or anything. It meant being available day and night; and if customers liked what you were doing, they would spread the word (Isa, 56, Valencia).

Mariona, from Catalonia, sports a safety pin tattoo on her arm. In the late 1980s, people interested in body piercing in Spain pierced themselves with them. A piercer with over 28 years' experience, she recalls how she got one of her first tattoos in Cádiz, in a studio that was heir to the military tradition we have been analysing. Since the early 1990s, different studios have opened their doors across Spain and interest in the world of body modifications began to spread. Cities like Barcelona and Valencia and the streets of coastal areas with a large influx of tourists housed studios or adverts with the contact details of people who tattooed in a nomadic way, as in the case of Mara, a tattooist born in Santander who moved to Ibiza in the early 90s to tattoo in her own home and in nightclubs late at night:

You could tattoo in a disco, in a pub, well, I'm telling you, back then there was no internet, so you would go there with posters that you would cut at the bottom so people could take your phone number and of course people would be in a disco, they'd see the poster, take the phone number and your phone would ring at 3 o'clock in the morning: "hey girl! -And there with the music... «I saw your phone number and I want to get a tattoo». And I would say, "good God, it's 3 o'clock in the morning" [laughs], but that's how it was, it was another world. And there I was, working like an animal, with four daughters, imagine that. But I was very happy, I mean I was discovering tattooing because really tattooing was discovering me too (Mara, 60, Santander).

This social explosion in the use of tattooing and piercing happened largely thanks to scenes such as punk and rock 'n' roll, subcultures and youth cultures that arrived from Europe. Mariona reflects on her contact with punk and body modification practices in Barcelona:

I think that in my case it has been very mixed with punk, I also listened to a lot of hardcore music and the good thing about Barcelona is that it had loads of bands from the United States. So, the first time I saw an eyebrow piercing was at a concert in Barcelona (Mariona, 48, Bilbao).

The difference from other European environments seems to be a key explanation for the difficulties they had to face when they started tattooing professionally in Spain, as Mara, who started tattooing on a freelance basis in Ibiza (without belonging to the team of any established studio) points out: “it was already red hot in the 80s in England, and in the 90s it was unleashed. And here we were still banging our heads against the walls wherever we went” (Mara, 60, Santander). For them, there was the added difficulty of finding their way in a highly masculinised world.

In the face of difficulties, resistance emerges

In those years when tattoo culture was expanding from the marginal to the commercial, body modifications were closely linked to stereotypes inherited from the past, when the tattooed body was associated with criminals and rogues. As Mara proposes, it is interesting to consider rescuing more unknown stories from the last century, when tattoos were also an emblem of those who approached other realities or of aristocrats who could afford to travel outside Spain:

The Count of Barcelona, the King's grandfather, had tattoos, why? Because he had travelled and so they had tattoos there and he had them all over his arms, and he was delighted with his tattoos, and they were not considered at all negative, but of course they were considered like that here because the people who had them were, well, from the underworld, because there was no one to do them. I think that if there had been a shop here where they could get them done properly then they would have had them done... I'm not going to say Franco's family [laughs] but whoever it was, then I think it would have been seen as more natural (Mara, 60, Santander).

Investigating this context, it is worth asking where women were to be found: Did they get tattooed, and if so, in what way? Andrea recalls that the first woman she tattooed was “a girl, she was a skinhead type, a punk, a punky girl. And I gave her a scorpion, but apart from that there were very few girls at the beginning” (Andrea, 59, Valencia). She acknowledges that almost all of them belonged to different ‘urban tribes’, a term used at the time to refer to youth cultures.

Gradually, however, women from different backgrounds became interested in tattooing as society opened up and the feminist movement gained political presence and social strength. From a certain initial shyness or reserve, more women were acquiring tattoos, although in most cases they were small and remained in less visible places on the body, where they were easier to conceal:

I think it was in '94 or thereabouts that we started to... there were already women getting tattoos, but we started to have a lot of work and almost all the women started to get a tattoo on the shoulder or the groin where it was not going to be seen, and generally a little rose, almost always a little rose (Andrea, 59, Valencia).

From the mid-1990s, a profound change took place, and women began to approach needles with a more open outlook and a veiled desire to reclaim their own bodies in the face of the impositions that still weighed on them and the undeniable legacy of the years of dictatorship. Mara recalls how, in fact, more women than men got tattooed, even if they did it in a less ‘showy’ way. Even if women were struggling to make their way in a world closely linked to hegemonic masculinities and its dynamics, for the women pioneers the difficulties in getting into tattooing or piercing became a source of encouragement and impetus to find their own way of doing things:

I've been piercing for 27-28 years now; I've been self-employed for 22 years with my own shop and I decided to set up my own shop because as a woman in the profession it is very difficult. Normally the tattooist is always in charge, and it's usually a guy, and I thought it was necessary to have a shop where the power was in the hands of girls and where you could feel that feminine touch (Mariona, 48, Bilbao).

Andrea explains how in the case of the tattoo profession, “as in all jobs, women in this type of work are not completely equal or work like men” (Andrea, 59, Valencia), and goes on to emphasise that, even so, she travelled, met people and was known thanks to her work, even on an international scale. At conventions, she remembers a sense of openness and that her work was generally well received, although she also recalls discriminatory situations when she approached a tattoo artist and he did not consider her as “an equal”.

Isa assertively expresses her vision of sexism in tattooing and bullfighting. Both worlds were characterized at that time by a marked greater presence of men, which generated obstacles for the few women who decided to dedicate themselves to them. As in any other masculinized environment, the presence of women was constantly questioned, suspected of deviation and error. Isa wanted to go beyond gender stereotypes and empower herself by exercising professions traditionally considered masculine:

It's a macho world where I felt like walking through it bam bam bam because I wanted to. There was something of, “ah, right, I can't? Well, you'll see.” I've always had that, that's why now that I'm older there are places where I don't go because if there's a no, I go [...] I say, let's see! And sometimes it's a lot of struggles for nothing, not that anything is going to happen to me, but a lot of struggles to prove what? To prove nothing. Do you understand? Now I live in a village and I suck. Nobody's interested in me, not even the four tattoo studios in five years, nobody's said, “come and have a coffee, I want to talk to you”. No one. And I told them: I am this. I'm your grandmother in tattooing! (Isa, 56, Valencia).

Being a tattoo artist, like being a bullfighter, was somewhat unusual in those years. It was difficult for society to classify these women. They broke the rules of femininity, while at the same time destabilising the rules of masculinity by demonstrating that exercising a profession was not forbidden to women who wanted to dedicate themselves to it. Sexist dynamics were undeniably present, but, according to Isa, confronting them was easier precisely because of their transparent and direct nature, which could be approached from an assertive position:

When I started, when I was 15, there was machismo, but it was a very apparent, very clear machismo, very easy to handle, because that's how it was: it was spoken. There was no political correctness, so you didn't hide what was there. It said: “Hey you, pussy, what do you think you are doing?” OK, man, shush, shush, grrr. And you made friends the way you could, full stop. When I was a girl, being a woman was less of a problem. It's always been fucked up... (Isa, 56, Valencia).

The first conventions held in Spain were a great boost to the dissemination of tattoo culture. But they were also markedly masculine spaces, where the presence of women was reduced to certain positions, as Mariona points out:

The truth is that it has been quite a masculine environment in general. It's as easy as walking around a tattoo convention in the old days, where 70 per cent were men and 30 per cent women. The men with the stands and the girls on the cover of the tattoo magazine. Girls were often in the entrance hall, in the information room, secretaries, errand girls, but they weren't seen as valid for work. For me personally, as my Mexican friends say, I've had to break a lot of rocks, to make a space for myself. You have to work much harder (Mariona, 48, Bilbao).

Women had to expend more effort to become professional tattooists or piercers. On one hand, they faced a highly masculinised environment, and on the other hand, they had to deal with a clientele that was not used to being tattooed by a woman. Moreover, the clientele could judge them harshly because of their own tattooed bodies, as Andrea expresses:

What I remember is that very often when the person, usually a man, sat down in the chair to get the tattoo, he would look at me and say, "are you going to tattoo me?" And because I had tattoos, yes, they looked at you a lot, they still look at me, they still look at me because I have tattoos because now, I'm much older and I have tattoos, so... [laughs], they look at me for having tattoos (Andrea, 59. Valencia).

In the stories we collected, there is an interesting combination of veiled rejection of women tattooists and an understandable social and media fascination with their non-standard lives. This is how Mara relates her own experience, following a reflection on the difficulties she encountered in getting a loan from the bank:

I even said I was a thermographer and they said, "what's that?". Of course, it was to hide myself a little, because if you said tattoo artist, they wouldn't give it to you. But this is real, I mean, I always felt discriminated against in that aspect. Because of course that hurt me a lot because you saw that you couldn't advance, they didn't let you socially. [...] I set up the studio, so I took a very big flat in the city. We lived at the back and in the front, I set up the reception, the tattoo booth... And as it was something which was so unusual and so talked about, the television and the radio came immediately, and I was really surprised (Mara, 60, Santander).

Another aspect we were interested in investigating was the role models of these pioneers: did they remember other contemporary women tattooists? Andrea remembers Isobel Varley, an inspiration for heavily tattooed women, who started getting tattooed in England when she was about 60 years old. Andrea met her because Isobel used to attend many international conventions. However, when asked about a professional women tattooist, she admits that she cannot remember any. Her daughter, who was also present during the video call, then intervened to remind her that there was a tattoo artist, Silvana, who visited *Tatuarte* in those early years as a guest artist.

When asked about a pioneering woman tattooist in Spain, Mara refers to Isa. She recalls that, as well as being known for being a bullfighter, she was also a heavily tattooed woman, and a traveller that settled in Malaga, although she admits that she lost track of her and never got to know her personally. Isa, on the other hand, mentions a foreign artist as a great inspiration and the driving force behind her curiosity and creative aspirations: Australian multifaceted artist Vali Myers. Vali had tattooed face and hands, and also drew and tattooed herself. Finally, Isa recalls Kandi Everett, another reference for Western tattooing, who she worked with for a while in Hawaii and whom she deeply admires.

Andrea recalls how at *Tatuarte* there was a time when there were 12 tattooists working in the team, of which she was the only woman. She recognizes that the leap from the 80s to today is enormous, although according to her, women tattooists are still a minority compared to men. Isa, Mara, Andrea and Mariona could become the role models for many of the tattoo artists and piercers starting out on the body modification scene today, especially if their stories begin to occupy the central space that belongs to them in the contemporary world.

The women pioneers and their journey towards contemporaneity

Parallel to the professional, artistic and commercial growth of the practice, Spanish society, still stupefied, was opening its eyes to the increase of tattooed bodies. During the 1990s, the world of body modification was still often linked to underground scenes such as punk, or to communities gathered around non-normative sexual practices such as BDSM⁵.

When it was like the mid-90s we were seen as real freaks. They went from saying we were crazy to saying how cool you are. I don't know if I'm explaining myself properly;

⁵ BDSM: abbreviation for bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism (or submission), masochism: sexual activity that involves, for example, tying a partner up, games in which one partner controls another, or giving and receiving pain for pleasure" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

the evolution has gone from being treated as something marginal, and punk and BDSM and leather stuff, to becoming a fashion, and being in Vogue. It's been a weird evolution and we've always been last (Mariona, 48, Bilbao).

Andrea says that tattooing was “a marginalized thing, a bit underground”, as it was still linked to “junkies, legionnaires and prisoners and people in jail” (Andrea, 59, Valencia). Mariona thus recounts the tensions between the rejection and fetishization of tattooed bodies. The latter made them hit magazine covers and inspired luxury fashion collections, which may certainly have contributed to greater social acceptance but may also have led to a certain fetishization of the tattooed body as a consumer product. However, in Mara’s case, the media repercussion resulted in a big change:

My family all died when I was very young, I had an uncle who was very old and he always said to me, as if I had become a prostitute, he said to me, “oh Mara, child, why, but couldn't you do something else, anything else, woman? Anything really, I don't know how to tell you, it's what people in prison and prostitutes do,” he said [laughs], and of course when he saw me appear on a television programme and on the news, well, he couldn't believe it, he started saying, “well let's see, of course my niece, she has like a clinic”. I want to tell you that he was proud, for the first time he was proud because of course he had been introduced to the other side, where it was accepted (Mara, 60, Santander).

In this scenario, the bodily experiences of tattooed women were indeed located in a space of freedom that confronted the traditional notions of femininity attributed to women's bodies. By getting tattooed, many women were clearly rejecting the expectations and pressures society continued to place on their corporeality:

how I have experienced it in my body... Well, I'm going to refer to a very good book I've had for years that says, “my body, my battlefield”. In the end it's this: the only thing that belongs to you is your body and you have the right to modify it as you wish, as long as you do it responsibly and using your head. I think in the end it's very much a fakir concept, isn't it? Sometimes when you're very young, you don't have anything... the only thing you have is your body. And the freedom to modify it. It seems to me a point of freedom, of individual freedom we might say, that it's very important that we don't lose. That somebody modifications are more accepted than others? Well, yes, it is more accepted to siliconize one's lips than to tattoo one's face. [...] it's more accepted to get a 95 bra than to get a tattoo on your hands or to wear expansions. You can pull this way, but you can't pull that way. What I always try to do is respect all body modifications, even if they're not my favorite, simply because I want them to respect mine (Mariona, 48, Bilbao).

The idea of respect appears in the stories as an essential passport to acceptance, not only of the practice itself, but of the decisions women make about their bodies in general. Andrea also explains how the change towards greater acceptance of tattooing on a social scale, unlike in other European places, “might take a little longer in Spain” (Andrea, 59, Valencia). This would be related to the delay in the expansion of the practice in Spain. In addition, as the English tattoo artist goes on to say, “England and Germany are more relaxed about it, with the way they dress and, well, their image in general, so tattoos are included in that” (Andrea, 59, Valencia). According to her, stigmas will gradually decrease until it is no longer abnormal for a person with visible tattoos to serve us at the bank or supermarket.

Hard and persistent work emerges in our interviews as a constant when it comes to making a career as a tattooist or piercer. Along with this, the explicit reference to passionate, enthusiastic dedication appears on countless occasions. Mariona recognizes that in the face of the gender inequalities that persist in the world of body modification, “it's all we have left; in the end they're our little weapons as women, to try hard and do it with passion” (Mariona, 48 Bilbao). This professional passion manages to go beyond

the limits of artistic practice, and also permeates into aspects of our interviewees' lives in relation to their tattooed bodies. In addition, tattooing seems to become a differentiating element that enhances the wearer's identity and position in the world, as in Isa's passionate story:

I have a habit of existing through my tattoos, of giving myself a bit of weight in life, you know, of "that's me, so take me into account", through my tattoos, so when they are not visible, I feel displaced, so I have put various things in places where they are visible because I needed to. I needed them to interact with people, because the reaction of others tells you a lot about who you've got in front of you, it's like a shortcut, like on the computer, a shortcut to see who I have... and sometimes I do the same with... it's not necessary for me to dye my hair two colours or wear two-toned shoes, it's not necessary, but it helps me to order my relationships with people. Look... like in the jungle, the bugs, and I, grrr, look, that bug [weirdo] is me, can you handle me, or do you prefer to cross over the road? Okay then, all right, cross over the road, okay, and I don't waste my time, ciao! (Isa, 56, Valencia).

Life mixes with the profession on the stage of the body, which becomes a territory of vindication and intense experience on a professional but also intimate scale. Along with the problematics specifically linked to gender, the lack of regulation and the absence of legislation in the early days could explain why dedicating oneself to the world of tattooing and piercing required passion and commitment beyond the professional; otherwise, many would perhaps have given up, abandoning their careers due to the constant difficulties and pressures. Mara recalls herself as "drunk on tattoos" because of her enthusiastic dedication to tattooing in the first few years:

It really became a passion. I started out of a need to take up a trade and settle down, and in the end, I ended up really involved, drunk on tattoos. I'm telling you; 16 hours is a lot, it was madness. And it was every day, well, I dreamt at night. I said, "I don't get paid at night and I'm dreaming that I'm tattooing". Of course, when you do something with so much intensity, I was sleeping and dreaming that I was tattooing [laughs], come on, it was exhausting. But it was because it was a different time (Mara, 60, Santander).

Conclusions

The personal narratives of pioneering women tattooists in Spain demonstrate the importance of using a qualitative methodology to approach tattooing from a feminist perspective. It is necessary to clarify the particular historical and sociopolitical contexts from which these narratives emerge. Even though the public opinion on tattooing in general in the Spanish context was negatively portrayed, judgements around women's decisions were much fiercer due to the anti-feminist influence on gender and body politics promoted by Franco's authoritarian regime.

Although the prevailing sexism of Spanish society created barriers for the first women tattooists and piercers, their resistance and coping strategies were creative, courageous and, as their personal narratives show, effective. Their stories "shed light on ordinary acts of resistance rather than headline-grabbing events that typically serve historical narrative" (Morcillo, 2022, p.18). It is even more pertinent to consider that the demands placed on women's bodies in terms of dress, aesthetics or sexuality were still powerful at the time when they began to engage in tattooing and piercing.

The Spanish case further complicates academic texts on Western tattooing by adding new perspectives in terms of history, society and gender. For example, the fact that more women than men were getting tattooed in Spain (even if in a less showy way in the early years) increases the complexity around women's tattoo practices as depicted in other texts on the topic from different geographical, historical and sociopolitical contexts. That more women than men got tattooed in post-Franco Spain indicates a felt need for reclamation and reappropriation. It points to a specific bodily experience at odds with traditional notions of femininity in place during and after a dictatorship.

The passionate dedication of the first women professionals of body modification in Spain is an invitation to delve into the experiences of women within this culture. The subversion of stereotypes around femininity embodied by the women pioneers of tattooing in the Spanish context is a necessary reminder that in the face of the pending mechanisms of control and surveillance of women's lives and bodies, there is also room for active and creative resistance.

Acknowledgements

We thank Doctor Matt Lodder for his helpful comments on this paper.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper.

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