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Choice Mums and Children's Education. Does Feminism Matter? A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse and compare the experiences of self-labelled feminist and non-feminist women who have consciously chosen to be single mothers. This article contributes to the literature by providing a Spanish context to the experiences of single mothers by choice. Scant research currently exists on the specific characteristics of this type of family and on the influence of gender composition. Furthermore, no research has been conducted on the comparison between feminist and non-feminist single mothers by choice and how their different perspectives may affect their children's education. The principal argument of this paper is based on four central themes developed from the data: a) The women participating in this study have opted to be single mothers by choice because they have not found a suitable partner; b) Being single mothers by choice has, for all of them, entailed a transgressive and empowering decision with regard to the traditional nuclear family; c) The feminist participants anchor their decision to be a single-mother family by choice in their feminism, which is also reflected in the critical pedagogy that they practise in their children's education and in the choice of secular schooling; and d) For the non-feminist participants, the empowering and emancipatory aspect of being a single mother by choice, their educational level, professional success and economic independence do not have an impact on their patriarchal beliefs, and prefer Catholic schools for their children.

Keywords

Single-Mothers-By-Choice, Children's Education, (Non) Feminism, Spain, Ethnography

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Choice Mums and Children's Education. Does Feminism Matter? A Qualitative Study

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The aim of this article is to analyse and compare the experiences of self-labelled feminist and non-feminist women who have consciously chosen to be single mothers. This article contributes to the literature by providing a Spanish context to the experiences of single mothers by choice. Scant research currently exists on the specific characteristics of this type of family and on the influence of gender composition. Furthermore, no research has been conducted on the comparison between feminist and non-feminist single mothers by choice and how their different perspectives may affect their children's education. The principal argument of this paper is based on four central themes developed from the data: a) The women participating in this study have opted to be single mothers by choice because they have not found a suitable partner; b) Being single mothers by choice has, for all of them, entailed a transgressive and empowering decision with regard to the traditional nuclear family; c) The feminist participants anchor their decision to be a single-mother family by choice in their feminism, which is also reflected in the critical pedagogy that they practise in their children's education and in the choice of secular schooling; and d) For the non-feminist participants, the empowering and emancipatory aspect of being a single mother by choice, their educational level, professional success and economic independence do not have an impact on their patriarchal beliefs, and prefer Catholic schools for their children. Keywords: Single-Mothers-By-Choice, Children's Education, (Non) Feminism, Spain, Ethnography

Theoretical Framework

Given the relationship between family life and inequality, how might the raising of children and the educational practices of single-mothers-by-choice perpetuate or counteract existing inequalities? How do they challenge traditional practices of gender socialisation for their children? This article grows out of the interdisciplinarity into which women's studies, gender studies, social anthropology, psychology, education and feminist methodologies converge. From these perspectives, I examine the praxis in the different motherhoods, which can enrich academic knowledge, thus increasing our understanding of this new type of family. Analysing different motherhoods raises questions about the meaning and implications of this concept, and it is precisely this reason why neither feminism nor feminist theory can ignore the question of motherhood, since it remains an important aspect in the lives of many women, and the decisions over whether, when and how to be a mother continue to be a decision to contemplate in their lives. It is therefore important to pay heed to the narratives of these women's lives, and to represent their needs. Motherhood has become a place where personal actions are political and where socio-cultural values are reflected in personal experience and the experience of their offspring. I agree with Rich (1995), Phoenix, Woollett, and Lloyd (1991), O'Reilly (2009), Hill Collins (1994), Mannis (1999), Mohanty (2003), Green (2011), Minh-ha (1986), and Chase and Rogers (2001) in that there is no one, unique, essential

experience of women and mothers out of which universal analytical categories can be derived, but that there are multiple experiences and interpretations regarding women's realities. Furthermore, the concept of feminism is multidimensional, and changeable, because feminisms are created by people who analyse their own oppression and that of their context for the purpose of social change. Depending on the person and her circumstances, the meaning and experience of motherhood are varied. They examine and describe the subtle effects of patriarchy, defining the problems that we must confront and evaluating the strategies for change, and these are all central themes in this article. Feminist historians (Knott & Taylor, 2005) agree that motherhood is not fundamentally a biological function but is primordially a cultural practice that is continuously being shaped in response to social and economic changes. As a cultural construction, its meanings vary over time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood. The current gender system and the socio-economic structures in which we operate are not at all static. These values are not natural or neutral, but are the reflection of a set of social, political and economic interests that shape and constrain individual options. Some authors (Chodorow, 1978; Hochschild, 1989) reveal the ways in which women's choices in the family interact with unjust social structures outside of the family, specifically with segregated division in work or in the economy. Childcare is a highly time-consuming activity, and those people—mostly women—who raise children alone face far greater difficulties in pursuing a demanding professional career. Thus the structures of work and family form a cycle of vulnerability that conditions their lives and opportunities (Okin, 1989). Feminists (Adkins, 1995; Allen, Walker, & McCann, 2013) indicate the way in which families are part of a system of social structures and cultural expectations that reproduces the social and economic inequality of women. Moreover, parents can choose whether to participate in a gendered family that can affect the lives of their children. Parents' choices can generate unequal opportunities for their children, inequalities that the children have not chosen for themselves. Standpoint theorists (Harding 1987, 2004) argue that the experiences of the marginalised reveal problems that need explaining and that can become agendas for research or social policy issues. According to Harding (1991), social research should begin with the lives of less privileged groups to obtain a more objective knowledge of social reality, which the author calls "strong objectivity." She suggests that this type of research would reveal "hidden aspects of social relations between genders and the institutions that support these relations" (1991, p. 127). It is in this direction that this article proposes that we attain a less distorted and partial understanding of the lives of these women, single mothers by choice.

Being a Single Mother by Choice as Experience and Place of Social Change

The experience of motherhood defined by women is concerned with the meanings that women attribute to it. While the development of the feminist practice of gender socialization is focused on the relationship of the mother with her children and, specifically, on the way in which she raises and educates them, the hegemonic ideals of motherhood can be a place of oppression. However, the experiences of women themselves can be a source of power. The theory and practice of empowered motherhood recognises that both mothers and their children benefit when the mother lives her life and practises motherhood from a position of agency, authority and autonomy (Green, 2011; O'Reilly, 2007). Therefore, what is examined from this perspective is how mothers seek to picture and implement a theory and practice of motherhood that is empowering for women and not oppressive. Nevertheless, the emphasis on experience and empowerment from the individual perspective of women needs to take power, education and social policies into account. So in order to understand the complexity of these terms, we need to broaden our knowledge and awareness of diverse standpoints and meanings of single motherhoods, which do not comprise a monolithic entity. According to Hertz (2006), these

women speak of wanting their daughters to have positive images of women's power and to see them as capable, working in the occupations that they wish to and having a family. They present a model of free women who take the decisions necessary for attaining their wellbeing together with successfully facing the pressures that these choices imply. Furthermore, they may wish that their sons express themselves as individuals who recognise gender as only one of many components of their identity.

Family Composition and Education

Gender is one of the most important pillars upon which socio-cultural life is organized (Blakemore, Berenbaum & Liben, 2009). It moulds much of a child's identity, it influences the way children are spoken to, how fathers and mothers behave, the opportunities that are offered to them, people's reaction to certain behaviours, leisure interests and styles of play. According to Blakemore et al. (2009) and (Witt, 1997, p. 253): "the strongest influence on gender role development seems to occur within the family setting, with parents passing on, both overtly and covertly, to their children their own beliefs about gender. This overview of the impact of parental influence on gender role development leads to the suggestion that an androgynous gender role orientation may be more beneficial to children than strict adherence to traditional gender roles." A structural characteristic of the family that is particularly relevant for the processes that concern gender is the family composition, that is, in this case, a single-mother-by-choice family. It is thought that the family make-up, when non-traditional, has an effect in that its members possess fewer traditional attitudes about gender than their families of origin. Bliblarz and Stacey (2010) examined this hypothesis in an extensive review of the literature and concluded that single-motherhood or homosexual parenthood appears to encourage androgynous parenting practices both in mothers and fathers, since these mothers and fathers have to carry out both roles: of provider and carer (Solomon, Rothblum & Balsam, 2005). It seems reasonable to expect that the children from these non-traditional families would adopt fewer traditional values concerning gender. Research on the influence of gender composition in the family is scant and the results varied. However, the available studies (Endendijk, 2015) suggest that gender composition of the family has a direct influence on the behaviours of mothers or fathers in terms of gender. Moreover, there may be a relation between the gender composition of the family (single mothers, same-sex parents), their behaviour, the child's gender cognition and the child's behaviour. The division of gender roles and the paternal or maternal involvement in the family influences this relation, because these gender-related experiences are incorporated into the child's way of thinking about gender, which in turn influence the behaviour related to the child's gender. For example, there is evidence that mothers whose own mothers worked outside of the home when they were young had more equitable beliefs about gender than those whose mothers did not (Ciabattari, 2007). The socioeconomic status of the family is also an important factor to consider, since there is ample evidence that shows that it is associated with less traditional attitudes about gender (Bolzendahl, & Myers, 2004; Dodson, & Borders, 2006; Ex, & Janssens, 1998). Moreover, women with higher levels of education have less traditional perspectives on gender than women with less formal education (Harris, & Firestone, 1998). Education also strengthens the belief of both women and men in gender equality (Bolzendahl, & Myers, 2004). In fact, paid work, being middle-class and having a university education are all associated with more egalitarian attitudes for men and women, although this association is stronger in women (Baxter, & Kane, 1995). Culture also has a key influence on the gender stereotypes of mothers, fathers and children through the variations of gender roles in different cultures (Best, & Williams, 2001). When gender is an outstanding issue in society, due to its strict division of roles between women and men, these experiences related with gender are likely to be incorporated into the

way that society's citizens think about gender (Bem, 1981). I now turn to examine the socio-cultural and political context where this study was conducted.

The Spanish Context

In recent decades, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of single-parent families. In Spain, 24.3% of all births outside marriage involved adolescent mothers in 1980, most of whom were single. However, by 2007 this figure had fallen to just 8.2%. In the same period, the proportion of unmarried women giving birth over the age of 30 increased from 19.9% to 46.2% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2014). Single-mother families are formed in a number of ways, with parental divorce or separation being the most common reason for children to be raised in single-mother families. However, the newest type of single-mother family comprises single heterosexual women who have chosen to parent alone and have had children through IVF or adoption. These women are generally referred to as "single mothers by choice" (Weinraub, Horvath, & Gringlas, 2002). Exact figures are yet to be provided for this type of family formation, even in countries with detailed records on IVF treatments (European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, 2017). In Spain, despite the scope of the phenomenon, the data on assisted reproduction are partial, since up until now public hospitals and private clinics were not obliged to make their statistics public (Bravo-Moreno, 2017). The number of single-mother-by-choice families has risen sharply since the millennium and is likely to grow given the demographic shift toward older first-time motherhood. Indeed, a significant proportion of those who now seek fertility treatment are women without a male partner (de Wert et al., 2014). Women and mothers have been defined by their relationship, or lack of, with a partner, but never as a person with a family unit by their own right. Even the category of single mother by choice needs to be challenged, since its very definition suggests single mother as "Other," while the discourse on lone motherhood reinforces the dominant nuclear norms. Studies have shown that single mothers by choice are generally well-educated women in professional occupations who become mothers in their late 30s or early 40s (Hertz, 2006). Unlike divorced or unmarried single mothers who have had unplanned pregnancies, single mothers by choice make a conscious decision to parent alone. They therefore differ from those who did not plan to be single mothers. They are women who have considered in depth the question as to whether to have or adopt a child, and their decision to do so is a deliberate one (Mannis, 1999). Children of single mothers by choice, moreover, have not been exposed to parental conflict and are less likely to experience the financial difficulties or maternal psychological issues that often occur as a consequence of marital breakdown or unplanned single parenthood (Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, & Golombok, 2009). To explore these questions, it is worth considering how motherhood is conceptualised in contemporary Spanish society. Two related issues dominate popular discourse about motherhood in contemporary Spain: 1) the difficulties of balancing work and motherhood or, rather, the incorporation of paid employment as part of what it means to be a modern Spanish mother; and 2) the fact that mothers are having their first children later in life (UNICEF, 2011). Spain, along with other southern European countries (e.g., Greece and Italy) has one of the highest gender employment gaps in the EU. Recent studies of gender discrimination in Spain suggest that in addition to inequalities in pay, women experience discrimination in terms of workload and the kinds of work available to them and in terms of the inflexibility of working hours (Social Issues Research Centre, 2012). With the crisis that began in 2007, the salary gap between men and women has increased. According to the Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (2016), it will take women 170 years to close the salary gap with men and to achieve equality in this area. A higher percentage of women are over-qualified for their position, while the low number of women that reach management positions is worrying. According to Conde-

Ruiz (2016, p. 21): “These glass ceilings are explained by the lack of work-family balance, the serious imbalance between qualification and job positions in the case of women, and gender stereotypes.” Women suffer more from wage inequality and part-time work after the age of 35, when many of them choose to be mothers. This phenomenon is what experts call “the maternity penalty” (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007), which carries with it a series of labour consequences for women: greater difficulty in finding employment, greater unwanted part-time work, and the request of practically all leaves of absence for reasons of family care in 2017, at 90.6% (INE, 2017). Sara de la Rica, professor of economics, asserts that after the age of 30, when the decision is made to be a mother, then women are forced to turn to occupations that are compatible with family responsibilities (de la Rica, & Gorjón, 2016). This situation means that the female worker keeps a base salary but loses the bonuses linked to longer hours or greater dedication, and then never recovers them:

Childcare and other caring tasks fall to women due to a lack of joint responsibility in the family unit and due to the shortfalls of public policies. This conditions the type of working day and promotion possibilities, and even ends up distancing women from employment, with the ensuing wage consequences. (Blasco, Secretary for Women and Equality of the trade union Comisiones Obreras [Workers’ Commissions], 2018)

Childcare, caring for sick, disabled or elderly family members is one of the main reasons for which women work part-time, with 13.1% of women giving these reasons, compared to only 1.9% of male part-time workers, according to INE (2017).

Research Methodology and Approach

My grandmother became a solo mother in the early 1940s, a time beset by Franco dictatorship rooted in national Catholicism (1936–1975). The Francoist laws equated the family to legally constituted matrimony according to Canon Law; children born outside of marriage were considered illegitimate. Thus, any other form of family relationship that was not legitimate was not only denied any protection but was also penalized. The consequences of this regime fell directly on the children, who, depending on whether they had been born inside or outside of wedlock, enjoyed more or fewer rights. In 2011 I became a single mother by choice in a democratic Spain, by far Europe’s most active country in assisted reproduction, according to the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE, 2017). Consequently, I have attempted to tackle two axes: my own world and the social world that I wish to comprehend. In such a way that the in-depth interviews and the participant observation has required negotiating between three modes of participation in reality: the emotional, the analytical and the political. The latter dimension derived from a sense of ethical responsibility that originates in feelings of injustice toward the other and that provokes the impulse to act. Transcending in this way the idea of ethnographic fieldwork perceived as intellectual, analytical and academic and not political and pragmatic eliciting a political response.

A qualitative approach was particularly appropriate to explore participants’ experiences of choosing motherhood on their own as qualitative research is interested in the way in which the world is understood, experimented, and produced by people’s lives and interactions, taking into account contexts, processes and change in attempting to comprehend participants’ perspectives. In particular, qualitative research focuses on the meanings people attribute to their actions and thoughts. It is inductive, hermeneutic and interpretative, heterogeneous in methods as well as reflexive and rigorous (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, Lofland, 2001; Behar, 1996; Silverman 2012; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Wacquant, 2004). Indeed, according to

Purdon, Lessof, Woodfield, & Bryson (2001), qualitative approaches enable the investigation of the range of factors that can affect overall outcomes and provide detailed exploration of the factors underpinning participants' experiences. Therefore, a qualitative approach was particularly suited for this study since it is rooted in an interactive research process involving both the researcher and the women's narratives on their life experiences. This study employs a standpoint approach (Harding 2004; Henwood, Griffin, & Phoenix, 2009; Maynard & Purvis 1994; Narayan, 1989) that is based on three principal claims: (1) Knowledge is socio-culturally situated; (2) Research should aim at examining the terms and understandings of the target groups in order to give an in-depth insight into the environment in which participants' ideas on motherhood, mothering and their children's education have been formed and conditioned by multiple factors; and (3) Research, especially that which focuses on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized. Standpoint theory takes women's lived experiences, particularly experiences of (caring) work, as the starting point of scientific enquiry, thus making a contribution to epistemology and to methodology. This approach places relations between political and social power and knowledge centre-stage. It describes and analyses the causal effects of power structures on knowledge, and it also espouses a specific route of enquiry, which starts from standpoints arising from inequalities that are shared in women's lives. There are three levels of analysis to the methodology: socio-cultural, institutional, and experiential. This methodology aims at increasing knowledge and understanding of the complex interaction between women/mothers, socio-cultural contexts, the state, social policy and education.

Location and Sample

Between 2017 and 2018¹, I conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen single mothers by choice, between the ages of 39 and 54 years old, heterosexual, university educated, middle class, Spanish, residing in Madrid or in the region of Andalusia, most working full-time with indefinite contracts though in three cases on temporary contracts. Their children were between the ages of four and fourteen, and were conceived through sperm donation, and in some cases also with egg donation, with the exception of one case of international adoption. These women were chosen through the snowball method which began among different groups of acquaintances and associations of single mothers by choice. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality by using pseudonyms. When I conducted the pilot study I realised that to the question: "what do you think about feminism?" in the context of their decision to become single mothers by choice and their children's education all the women expressed their views forcefully and in a polarized way. Then I decided that this was worth exploring further.

Research Methods and Analysis

Prior to the commencement of this study and under the auspices of my university I was required to gain ethical approval to ensure that this research conformed with general ethical principles and standards. The aim of the ethical review was to protect participants as a valuable part of the research process and not merely a means of accessing data as well as protecting the researcher. In-depth interviews were conducted at the women's homes, workplaces, cafeterias and parks. They lasted on average two hours and were tape-recorded, and I met with six of these women for a second interview as they had other obligations and could not spend more time on our first interview. Interviews were organised around several topics: the decision to

¹ This research project is supported by the European Commission, Marie S. Curie Research Fellowship Programme [award number 177575]. I would also like to thank all the women who participated in this study sharing their time and experiences.

become a single mother by choice, the women's family of origin, support networks, mothering, work-life balance, public policies, feminism, and their children's education. I used an interview guide and after several interviews the questions were flowing. I designed 30 questions that participants could understand and interpret in the way in which they were intended, taking into account terminology, avoiding jargon and ambiguous words, or words that could be misinterpreted. Questions were worded in a balanced way to guard against response bias, taking also into account that some women were caught between their "political correctness" and their antipathy to feminism. As a whole, the questions were grouped into topics in a logical sequence to flow easily. Participant observation was undertaken to ensure validation and reliability, in parks where mothers, for the most part, and their children, aged between one and six, would gather, as well as my participation in parent meetings and children's parties over a five-year period (2012-2017). I also kept a research diary and field notes of my interviews and observations made in different contexts: parks, schools and outdoor excursions. Ethnographic research methods are based on the assumptions of understanding and interpretation of social events being processual, within the frames of naturalism and holism. As Sherry Ortner argues, ethnography in its minimal definition is: "the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing" (2006, p. 42). The data analysis was constructed around themes that were developed from the interviews and it was based on grounded theory to build up an inductive analysis of the social phenomenon (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Once all of the research interviews were transcribed, I began thematic analysis, approaching the data inductively, whereby theme development was directed by the content of the data: identifying issues, similarities and differences, which were revealed through the interpretation of the participants' narratives. For example, the first theme was that of obsolete masculinity, which triggered in the participants the decision to become single mothers by choice to fulfil their dream to have children. The second theme revolved around how the experience of becoming a single mother by choice turned into a feeling of empowerment and transgression in relation to the nuclear family. And the third theme developed from the participants' stance on feminism and how different standpoints impact on their children's education and the school they chose. The final phase involved weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature and the particular context: Spain. I did thematic analysis by hand with an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), identifying data that were related, on a hard copy of the transcripts, by making notes in the margin and by highlighting and giving conceptual labels to sections of text I used the coding to generate themes, building hierarchies of themes which were drawn together from the transcripts to present the findings. My experience as a researcher, in terms of my participation and observation at the research sites, was used to generate a narrative-based interpretation of the events that took place. I present the data from the interviews and observations using quotations from the individual transcripts to illustrate the source of my interpretations (Silverman, 2012). This study was not driven by a concern for "representativeness." Therefore, it is acknowledged that the sample is not representative of the universe of Spanish single mothers by choice. Kvale states that: "the subject matter [in qualitative research] is no longer objective data to be quantified, but meaningful relations to be interpreted" (1996, p. 11). How widely the discoveries exist in the rest of the world cannot be decided by qualitative methods but by quantitative ones. On the other hand, there may be other self-labels that women adopt, different from the identifications of "feminist" and "non-feminist," that may have yielded other results, and would be worthwhile exploring. However, despite these limitations, this study makes a contribution to the literature and public debates on families, women's life choices, motherhood and children's education in a specific sociocultural context that may have an application across societies where women are economically independent. In the next sections I will analyse the

research findings: (a) obsolete versus caring masculinity, (b) emancipatory possibilities of an “alternative” family form, and (c) participants’ stance on feminism and how this influences their children’s education and school choice.

Analysis of the Findings

Obsolete versus Caring Masculinity

In this section I will develop two related ideas. First, women who wished to be mothers have opted to be single mothers by choice because they have not found a suitable partner who will be jointly responsible emotionally and in terms of the childcare and housework that having a family entails. Second, I analyse a type of obsolete masculinity that the participants in this study have condemned and rejected, instead calling for a masculinity that in the literature has been named “caring masculinity” (Scambor et al., 2014). When these women entered adulthood, they believed it would be possible to combine professions in which they would develop their full potential with egalitarian romantic relationships and also parental relationships of joint responsibility. However, none of this study’s participants found partners who fulfilled these criteria. As a result, for these women, the cultural and sexual revolutions combined with assisted reproductive technology converted the idea of maternity outside of the couple as a desirable one. The following quotations sum up the thinking of the eighteen participants: Cati, 43-year-old mother of a five-year-old girl, conceived through assisted reproduction, is a sociologist who currently works in Andalusia. She defines herself as a feminist.

I see the brave side, we’re pioneers, and this trend is going to become common, as in other European countries... and in that sense, I thought, “why not?” be empowered, take the reins of motherhood, assert that we women can. I have come across some men who, when I say that I’m a single mother by choice, emphasising that I have consciously sought to become a mother, have felt bad, rejected. They think: “Ah! This is a radical feminist!” – they also give you the label of radical. Feminism is radical in itself, but even more so. And on top of that, single mother by choice, they think: “This woman doesn’t want men at all!” and they get defensive and say: “You only need our semen. What will this lead to?”

Another participant, Raquel, is 54 and has a fourteen-year-old daughter, conceived by assisted reproduction, and another, nine-year-old daughter, through international adoption. She is a journalist and works in a press office in Madrid. She defines herself as a feminist.

The world of men does not interest me anymore, it’s always the same: economic power, social power, prestige. The world of women is much more enriching for me, they are more intellectually appealing, they are so much more advanced emotionally... The day that men reach the standard of women, maybe their world will interest me. I am heterosexual, I should have been a lesbian because, well ... [she laughs] only one thing interests me in a man... the rest does little for me, emotionally they have brought me very little. I am extremely lucky that my father, my uncles and grandfathers, have given me so much, otherwise it would be terrifying.

Gala is 43 and has a four-year-old daughter, conceived through assisted reproduction. She is a psychologist and social worker, and currently works for an NGO in Madrid. She defines herself as a feminist.

The relationships I have had led me to think that having a partner was going to be very difficult. I would have liked to have my daughter with a partner, but with an egalitarian partner, that would be ideal, but as I saw that ideal so unlikely I decided to have my daughter by myself. I thought, I'm going to separate motherhood from having a partner. If I have a partner one day, I will have one because it is worth it and in the meantime I'm going to be a mother.

Miriam is 53 years old and had her daughter, now seven, by assisted reproduction. She has a PhD in Pharmaceutics and works for a hospital in Andalusia. She rejects feminism: "I knew I wanted to be a mother. Time was going by and I saw that I wasn't going to find the right person to be my partner and the father of my child." The ideal of "having an egalitarian partner" that the interviewees refer to, which they have not found in their lives, is a common theme in the romantic history of every one of the participants, and they reinforce their argument with examples of their friends. They emphasize that their friends do not get a fair deal in their relationships, that is, most of their friends take charge of the relationship, of motherhood, of taking care of the children, and of what Eichler defines as housework: "the sum of all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual tasks that are performed for one's own or someone else's household, and that maintain the daily life of those for whom one has responsibility" (2010, p. 36). Cati endorses the idea that men are not on a par with women, as jointly responsible for shared lives as partners outside of the hierarchical and chauvinistic relations that many traditional couples in her milieu establish and accept. These are reflected in the statistics, as I have addressed earlier. Furthermore, the participants emphasise that they have not found a man who "is up to the mark" and that, therefore, it is not worth being with a partner for the purpose of having a biparental family because they would not be able to put up with a chauvinist, who would be a burden that none of the participants was willing to tolerate. They would like to be with men who do not fit this pattern, but that is extremely difficult: those men are the exception that they have not found. This is how Cati sums it up:

Really, being a feminist means that you don't put up with any old relationship, as it were. I see it in comparison with other mothers who I know have a partner, many of them are about to separate, or they have separated, or they cannot stand their husbands, that's what 80% of my acquaintances would tell you.

Lucía, who is 45, a nurse, has a four-year-old boy conceived through assisted reproduction, and does not define herself as a feminist, explains it in the following way: "the women I know who have a partner are almost more overwhelmed than I am, because they take charge of their work, their children, their home, and their husbands are more a burden than a help. The woman is the one who carries the whole load, so at least I don't have the burden of a husband." Their narratives are evidence of the continuing gender inequalities in tandem with the scant range of possibilities that exist for choosing a partner who will be jointly responsible and equitable. According to these women, what men offer them is obsolete, and they are hopeful that the new generations will revise what they have to give. Friedman (2011) asserts that, despite the fact that in the last four decades the options for women to exit their primary role as mother and wife have expanded substantially, the work-family balance has changed to a far lesser degree. According to Coltrane (1997, 2000), the model of the traditional family continues to reflect social expectations, and Hochschild (1989) refers to this as the "stalled revolution": while

women have entered the labour market and the public sphere more, men have not become jointly responsible in the home and in childcare. Attitudes toward gender are changing, but experiences in the home are not changing at the same rate. In particular, women are expected to get married or have a partner and take on the greater part of the responsibility for housework and childcare, while men are still expected to fulfil their role as breadwinner, as the statistics from Spain show. Women's attitudes have changed at a faster rate than men's, who have been left behind with respect to the levels of joint responsibility in gender equality. The trends in the attitudes of the population reflect that women's entry into the labour market has been supported only to the extent that it has not altered the gender gap in housework and childcare (van Egmond, Baxter, Buchler, & Western, 2010). However, there are studies that show that a caring masculinity is emerging as a central way for the future (Scambor et al., 2014). In some cases this is already a reality, along with an increase in the education of women and professional roles, and the rise in expectations over a gender balance in housework and childcare. The results from the education of the mother were the most consistent, as is shown in the literature: the education of women can contribute to the development of more equitable sons. The results of these studies suggest that the experiences and structures around men and boys as well as women and girls must change so that they live and learn gender equality in their local context. Alongside changing policies and structures, we need to deconstruct the unequitable attitudes and norms that many adults and children continue to internalize regarding gender roles and power (Levtov, Barker, Contreras-Urbina, 2014). In the next section, the second central theme developed from the data will be examined: for these women the decision to be single mothers by choice is transgressive and emancipatory in regard to the traditional nuclear family.

Emancipatory Possibilities of an “Alternative” Family Form

Given the unequal nature of heterosexual relations for the participants, the transition to motherhood by themselves has, according to them, brought about an experience of empowerment and emancipation, enabling them to fulfil their wishes to be mothers and to provide their children with positive models of motherhood. Their experience of asymmetrical gender roles with their ex-partners gave rise to the decision to be single mothers by choice. Vicky, a 54-year-old lawyer who lives in Andalusia and has a ten-year-old son conceived by assisted reproduction, comments thus on her feelings:

I am used to doing things on my own like travelling, moving from one city to another to find a job... I have a profession, I earn money, I have a mortgage... I feel I have freedom of choice in my life. The fact of having a child on my own was a big step further in fulfilling my dream of becoming a mother, knowing that I would be the main provider for my child felt emancipatory.

Carla, who is 42 and works in Human Resources for an international company in Madrid, has a four-year-old daughter conceived through assisted reproduction. She stated:

I loved the fact of not having to argue with a partner over how to educate my child, the choice of school, ethical values, or who is washing the dishes. I know it's a huge responsibility, if things go wrong, I am the only one to blame! (she laughs). But it's worth it!

For the women in this study, the independence and the apparent increase in possibilities that they experience in their lives are emancipating. All the single mothers by choice I interviewed considered their motherhood as empowerment, as being in control of their lives, of their own

fertility, of their finances, of the education of their children and of all their family decisions. This was a role that traditionally belonged exclusively to the man, particularly in the era of the Franco dictatorship under which many of their families of origin lived. Empowerment appears as an ideal state in which these women are, ultimately, those who exercise control over the factors that affect their lives. Empowerment should have the purpose of challenging and transforming the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination. Jayaweera (1999) posed the question of whether education, in general, empowers women to take control of their lives in a society that reinforces and perpetuates the unequal distribution of power between men and women. Participants' accounts show gender inequalities that are in line with the theories of detraditionalization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992), which argue that individualization and life as experimentation are essential. Heelas defines detraditionalization as "a shift of authority: from 'without' to 'within'" (1996, p. 2). It involves the decline in belief in a natural order of established things. While Giddens and Beck are optimistic, as they understand that detraditionalization will bring greater options, opening and reflectiveness, thereby weakening the subjection of old hierarchies, Heelas (1996) argues that parallel processes can exist in a society in which detraditionalization coexists in some aspects at the same time as the traditional is maintained or reconstructed in others (El-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006; Morris, 1996). In this respect, although all the women felt empowered and transgressive in their choice of becoming single mothers, in the case of half of the sample, that feeling coexisted with their rejection of the feminist label and their decision to choose Catholic schools for their children. They chose these schools because, according to them, they taught moral values, therefore maintaining tradition. The other half of the sample interviewed, who defined themselves as feminists, explained what this meant for the education of their children.

Feminist Participants, their Children's Education & School Choice

When I asked participants the questions: "What do you think about feminism? Do you consider yourself a feminist?" The answer in half of the sample was a rotund "yes," and they immediately described why: "to create an equal society" or "to provide people with the freedom of choice," for example. They chose secular state schools for their children and they viewed comprehensiveness and inclusiveness as attributes of state schooling. Sonia, who is 51 years of age and lives in Madrid, works for an NGO, and has an eight-year-old daughter conceived through assisted reproduction, explains:

I wanted a state school for my daughter. I believe in public schooling and public healthcare. We, as citizens, are responsible for paying our taxes and we also have the right to access quality state education and healthcare. I believe in a state school that is inclusive of colours, faiths, socio-economic backgrounds, genders, abilities, everything that my daughter sees in society and will find in her adult life, when she works in different work environments. I do not believe in elitist, private schools or Catholic schools whose purpose is to indoctrinate children. In those schools there is no room for children of minorities, immigrants and special needs... I fully support state schools, it's a matter of democratic principles.

In Spain, it is the State that currently finances almost all compulsory education. A significant part of the current educational system is private only in the sense that this refers to ownership, but not with respect to its sources of funding. Therefore, we can distinguish between state schools (state owned and state funded), grant-maintained schools (privately owned and publicly funded) and private schools (privately owned and privately funded) with a clear

predominance of the first over the second and of the second over the third, which constitutes a tiny exception in the range of Spanish education. Spain tops the list of the most state-subsidized private school places in Europe. The Catholic church controls around six out of every ten state-subsidized private schools through the organization “Catholic Schools,” which makes it the most representative body of this sector (Escuelas Católicas, 2018). Alberta, from Andalusia, is a lawyer, 47 years of age, and has an eight-year-old boy conceived through assisted reproduction, states that:

It cannot be denied that an important aim of education is its ability to facilitate social mobility and economic success, although there is little doubt that there are inefficiencies in the state-school system that need to be straightened. However, it is important to understand that the historical and ongoing struggles to provide equal education to women, minorities and special needs demonstrate that state education has been about more than just providing access to the educational conditions needed to secure a job.

Along the same lines, Lola from Madrid, who is 55, a medical doctor with a ten-year-old daughter conceived through assisted reproduction, asserts: “State education and public healthcare are also about the democratic need to value human dignity in advancement of democracy.” Therefore, half of the sample thinks that state education in a democracy is much more than just an instrumental means to an economic end; it is also an ethical pillar upon which the structure of democracy rests. Rita, who is 53 and works for a law firm in Madrid, has a nine-year-old daughter conceived through assisted reproduction, and she explains what it means for her to choose a state school for her daughter:

I chose a state school because I don’t like private schools. Firstly, private schools hire teachers endogenously: it is through contacts that people get to teach in private schools. To work at a state school, you need to pass a state examination, they study years before they are able to pass that exam. I did not choose a Catholic school either because I don’t want my children to be indoctrinated. I talk to my children about the history of religions, Islamic, Christian, Judaic, and others, but I do not indoctrinate them; when they are older they may choose whatever they want. And thirdly, I think it’s about being lucky, regardless of whether it is a private or a state school there are good and bad teachers in both, so I prefer my children to mingle with students from all sorts of backgrounds and to support state schools by sending my children there.

Schools are viewed by these nine women not only as institutions that impart certain knowledge and skills to students, but also as environments that socialize them. They believe that education is a democratizing force that helps to prepare students to participate actively in all aspects of democratic life, imparting the ability to think critically, commitment to democratic values, as well as the basic need to be able to write, read, and do arithmetic. These women have a desire to actively participate in political life, for example, by engaging in school decision-making processes and participating in school parents’ associations. In a sense, according to these participants, schools that best teach students the skills to participate actively in democracy are themselves institutions that reflect democratic principles not only in word but also in practice. Therefore, half of the sample think that participatory and democratic state school culture makes a significant difference in some of the key building blocks of social responsibility. Ania, who is 43, a teacher in Andalusia, and has a five-year-old son conceived through assisted

reproduction, talks about how it is more likely that state schools put critical pedagogy into practice:

State schools are in a better position than private or subsidized Catholic schools to reject racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society fostering pluralism: gender, ethnic, religious, linguistic, economic, etc... that teachers, communities and students reflect. Multicultural education uses critical pedagogy as its philosophy and focuses on social change, therefore trying to promote democratic principles of social justice.

These women thus believed that state schools were better suited for the education they wanted for their children. They view educators and parents as agents who have the potential to develop a social conscience orientated toward justice, recognising that all knowledge is political, value-laden and contested, and which should be open to criticism. Educators' beliefs and assumptions about social justice are not immune from questioning.

These women also talked about how textbooks are a main source of gender stereotyping. Tania, who is 49 years old, works as a teacher, and has a nine-year-old boy conceived through assisted reproduction, states: "Textbooks all include a lot of gender stereotypes. They are filled with discriminatory representations." Another participant, Silvia, a 42-year-old teacher in Andalusia, says that there is also room for improvement in state teachers' training. She sends her seven-year-old daughter to a state school and describes one incident that took place there:

For Father's day, my daughter's teacher told her pupils to draw a picture of their dad and to comment on what they liked most about him. Then the teacher displayed all the children's comments on a board outside the classroom. When I went to pick up my daughter I started reading the comments and realised that my daughter's comments were nowhere. I asked her teacher: "Didn't my daughter say anything?" And she replied: "Oh yes, she said wonderful things about you." And I asked her: "Why didn't you include her comments on the board?" And the teacher replied: "Oh, well, it was Father's day...not Mother's day..." To which I replied: "Your school mission statement says that you are committed to a diverse and inclusive school. Don't you think that by ignoring my daughter's comments, she may have felt excluded due to the fact that she has a different type of family than the nuclear one?" The teacher kept silent and blamed her assistant for not taking into account that my daughter "didn't have a dad."

To manage being a unique family in a social milieu that privileges heterosexual nuclear families raising children, these mothers made a point of educating family members and their schools. Women who felt that their environment did not support their decision to conceive children as single mothers by choice worked to help them understand the prejudice and discrimination against single-mother families. Silvia, after reflecting on what happened with her daughter, found a children's book entitled: "Tengo una mamá y punto" ("I've got one mum and that's that"). This was a story of a little girl whose family is formed by her mum and her dog. At Silvia's daughter's school, parents could go any Friday to read a story to their children's classroom. Silvia therefore went to read the story of "I've got one mum and that's that," and explained that children have different types of families. The purpose was for the children, their parents and the teacher to reach a place of acceptance towards her daughter's family formed by a single mother, so that her family would become just another family in the larger context

of different types of families. Laura is also representative of this half of the sample. She is a 45-year-old psychologist and has a five-year-old daughter, conceived through assisted reproduction. To the question, “How do you apply feminism in the education of your daughter?” she answered:

I use gender-neutral language when I read stories, I speak with inclusive language to make girls and women visible. I choose books and films that avoid gender stereotyping, and it surprises me that she is picking it up and using it. I speak a lot with her about what happens in class. I try to make her see that girls are as capable as boys. And the other day, she told me that she had had a fight with some girls in her class because they said that two women could not get married...and I had explained that they could. When we arrived at her classroom, she said to me, Mum, let’s go over to the girls: “Isn’t it true that two women can get married and can be mothers?,” and I explained to her friends that they could, and they were surprised. I consider that educating my daughter in feminism via the premises of social justice, equality and social transformation... means that not only can I support social change but my daughter too. I think it’s important that she is aware of this from a young age and that she takes it on as a value from the beginning.

With the awareness that their children would be confronted with questions and prejudices about their family structure or other types of family that did not conform with the heterosexual nuclear family, these feminist mothers also chose to educate their children in order to prepare them for other people’s reactions. They thought it was important to educate their children about issues of social justice, for example by attending different demonstrations with their children, such as the Women’s Day March, the march for women’s abortion rights, or demonstrations in favour of more funding for state education or state health care. In the case of the half of the study sample who see themselves as feminists, motherhood becomes a place of political activism wherein motherhood is consciously fused with their feminism. They take issue with patriarchal ideology in institutions—the family, school, the labour market and work-family balance policies—practising alternative forms of motherhood in their way of educating their children. This thus confirms what Horowitz (2004) maintains about feminist mothering as a process of resistance that involves taking decisions about the practice of motherhood. All these women put critical pedagogy into practice as a tool for their children to become aware of social inequality. Critical pedagogy originated with Paulo Freire (1968), who understood education as a political act and asserted that social justice and democracy are not distinct from teaching and learning. The aim of critical pedagogy is emancipation from oppression through an awakening of critical consciousness, defined by Freire as a state of in-depth understanding about the world (1968). “At a fundamental level, to be critically conscious, a child must be a freethinker able to perceive and analyse the world around them as well as any arising contradictions. This in turn leads to the development of social consciousness” (Giroux 2009, p. 32). Bleazby (2004) suggests that employing critical pedagogy improves a child’s academic success, and that implementing critical pedagogy in a mainstream school setting would teach children and adolescents how to think critically about the world that surrounds them, about social dilemmas, the injustices they experience and how to think, speak and act better with the purpose of contributing to change to improve society. However, although many of the elements of critical pedagogy can be successfully put into practice in alternative types of education, the practice may be inherently in conflict with mainstream education (Carbonell, 2015). The next section will look into the narratives of the other half of the sample who rejected the feminist

label and supported Roman Catholic moral values by sending their children to Roman Catholic schools.

Non-Feminist Participants and Patriarchal Beliefs

When I asked these participants, “What do you think of feminism?” some of the answers were: “I do not consider myself a feminist, women are not better than men” and “we should not treat women differently than men, just because they are women.” In the case of the women in this study who do not label themselves as feminist, they support some of the attitudes and values of the self-labelled feminist participants, for example, the rejection of obsolete masculinity examined earlier. They also support the economic and social independence of women. The profile of these single mothers by choice, university-educated professionals, do not need their maternity legitimised by a man within a nuclear family, and they assert that they have created their own practices of motherhood that are, according to them, far from those they were taught in their nuclear families of origin. However, they reject the feminist label as they feel their identities are challenged or contradicted by it. The empowering and emancipatory aspect of being a single mother by choice for these women coexists with patriarchal ideas about women in society. A case in point is Mila, who is 54 years old, has a PhD in Biology, is the head of a hospital department, and has a seven-year-old daughter. I asked her what she thought about feminism, and she responded:

I don't have a very clear concept of feminism as such... I don't consider myself a feminist...because I don't think that we should stress these differences with men either. Neither men nor women are worse, each one has to carry out the role assigned to them at any given moment as naturally as possible.

Feminism is here viewed as an attempt to upset the “proper” way women and men should act. I was surprised that Mila made no criticism of the sexist education that she herself had acknowledged in her family of origin, with the unequal treatment her parents gave her sister and her, compared to their brother. When I asked Mila if she saw anything lacking in social policies, she answered:

Yes, in the labour sphere, single mothers do not have rights... I have been lucky that my colleagues did not insist on me being on 24-hour call... otherwise I would have had to be on call after my daughter turned one. And I would have had to get by, living alone in this city, and find someone to stay with my daughter. It seems unfair to me, to have to leave a one-year-old child with someone who is not family – what do you really know what that person might do with your child?

Ana: And what did the unions say when you consulted them?

Mila: That there was no case precedent in law, that nobody had made this type of complaint, and that I could do so, but they didn't know how it would end up, spending my money with no guarantee of what I would achieve.

Despite acknowledging: (a) the unequal treatment in her family of origin, (b) the lack of policies of work-family balance in her job, and (c) the burden borne by her female friends whose husbands did not take joint responsibility of their children and housework, she does not relate any of it to the existing structural inequalities between men and women in society. Rhode, speaking of the denial of gender inequality, explains: “And when all else fails, we fall back on biological excuses for sex-based inequalities. Since men and women just *are* different, we

cannot expect society to equalize their status” (1997, p. 13). Another significant and representative case of this half of the sample is Daniela, 47-year-old managing director of one of the largest shopping centres of a city in Andalusia, who holds an MBA, and has a six-year-old son, conceived through assisted reproduction. She told me that in her previous job, for a company in Madrid, they did not renew her contract because she was pregnant. Daniela excused the company because “pregnant women cause a company losses,” implying that women’s choices explain women’s disadvantages in an attempt to justify that inequality (Rhode, 1997, p. 9). Today, as the managing director of a shopping centre, she states:

Women have a bad name in companies, but it’s that, sometimes, it’s true. In this company there are women who have used their pregnancy to get sick leave, and pregnancy is not an illness, what they have is a lot of cheek.

This quotation makes sense in light of the Queen Bee phenomenon (Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan 2012), whereby “Queen Bees” are senior women in masculine organisational cultures who have fulfilled their career aspirations by dissociating themselves from their gender while simultaneously contributing to the gender stereotyping of other women. They implicitly legitimize rather than question the disadvantaged position of women within their organization and perpetuate the organizational culture in which they became successful. Later in the interview, Daniela recognises that:

Men have everything much easier: they leave their children with their wife and can work as many hours as they like, then they get home to food on the table and the children already ready for bed.

As I explained earlier, in Spain women are often responsible for restructuring hours to accommodate family needs. Despite her assertion, Daniela does not see the need for feminism and criticises positive action, such as measures targeted at women to readdress discriminations or to offset disadvantages arising from existing attitudes, behaviours and social structures in the companies she used to work for and at her present company. Another participant, Sandra, a 50-year-old pharmacist from Andalusia, who has a five-year-old son conceived through assisted reproduction, invited me to join an outing with four heterosexual couples and two single mothers by choice, along with our children, who were aged between four and ten. I described my observations in my fieldwork diary:

We went to a restaurant, and children and adults were going to sit at different tables. When the adults were about to sit at their table Sandra almost shouted: “Please let the men go to that part of the table and we (women) can sit here, nearer the play area so that we can check on the kids.”

Through this statement, Sandra, a single mother by choice who claims to be independent and empowered by becoming a single mother, differentiates the role men and women play in families and reproduces representations of femininity and masculinity, such as independence as opposed to “feminine” qualities attributed to the ideal mother: dedication to the family, care and sacrifice for her children (and husband). Similarly, I wrote in my field notes about Nadia’s comments to her son. Nadia is a 54-year-old entrepreneur from Madrid, and her son, who is nine, was conceived through assisted reproduction. During our interview her son started crying because he had fallen to the ground, and once she had seen that his wound was superficial, she said to him: “you are a big boy, people are going to think you are like a little girl.” The message that this boy is receiving about what it means to be male is limiting and stereotypical. This

message may also come from peers, the media and elsewhere, telling boys and men how to behave and feel, relate to each other and girls and women, and what their role and importance is in society. Nadia is not aware that when boys are taught to act a certain way, to oppose qualities traditionally viewed as “feminine,” gender stereotypes may contribute to gender differences. However, for these nine women it seems that the responsibility for perpetuating the cycle of sexism lies elsewhere. In general, despite the fact that these participants reject feminism, they benefit from the advances of the feminist movement, such as the right to vote, the right to contraception, the right to abortion, and the right to divorce. In particular, these women have made use of the progressive Law 35/1988 (BOE 1988) and Law 14/2006 (BOE 2006) on assisted reproduction, which brought about a technical and scientific advance on the legislation of neighbouring countries (France, Germany, United Kingdom and Italy). These laws are still a benchmark, both for the techniques that it regulates and for those who can use them independent of their civil status and sexual orientation, and it allows the use of assisted reproduction not only for fertility problems but to postpone motherhood with own or others’ oocytes, and as an option to create a single-mother family. In the case of this half of the sample, it might be thought that the women’s choice to be single mothers, their financial independence and their university education, all of which nourish their feeling of empowerment, would mean that they participated in feminist practices. However, they rarely attributed the imbalance of power between men and women in contexts of work, family or friends, to inequality. Rawat (2014), in her study on patriarchal beliefs, women’s empowerment and general well-being, concludes that educational level, professional success and economic independence do not have an impact on patriarchal beliefs. Yoon et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study based on a sample of American women and identified three correlated factors of the patriarchal beliefs scale: modern sexism (i.e., covert and subtle sexism), antifeminist attitudes, and some egalitarian attitudes (versus traditional attitudes) toward women. Sample items included: “economic and social freedom is worth far more to women than acceptance of the ideal of femininity which has been set up by men” (270). Jackman (1994), Jost and Banaji (1994), and Sidanius and Pratto (1999) argue that subordinate groups often contribute to their own subordination by accepting the ideology of the dominant group as valid. Furthermore, Bhasin and Khan (1999) state that feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression from an ideological and material context of women’s work, fertility, sexuality, family, the labour market, and society in general, and needs conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation. Gender consciousness is the extent to which one interprets experiences through a gendered lens (Gurin & Markus, 1989). Nevertheless, these nine participants lack that awareness or gender consciousness, denying either that gender inequality is a serious problem or that it is one that they have a personal or political responsibility to address.

Non-Feminist Participants and their Children’s Education

When I asked these nine women: “When you and your child watch cartoons, films or read stories in which gender stereotypes normally exist, do you analyse them with your child?” Eva, a forty-eight-year-old lawyer with an eight-year-old son, who defines herself as a non-feminist, epitomises the thinking of this half of the sample:

My son lives with me in an environment where there are women who are the breadwinners, who are strong. My sister is a doctor [she says “medico” instead of “médica,” using the traditional, masculine word to describe her sister’s profession, which shows that she continues to reproduce linguistic sexism]. My son is often around my female workmates, many of whom run their homes alone

with their children. Perhaps I have not started to explain him things in a proactive way. I think that, little by little, he is becoming imbued with this...that...well, that women are just as strong as men and can do the same things...

Nonetheless, according to Giroux (2009) it is not enough for children to have a “strong” mother who works outside and inside the home, but that an effort must be made to pedagogically explain the injustices and inequalities of power in society so that children are aware of them and do not go on to reproduce them. All these participants chose Catholic schools for their children, and all of them stated that “Catholic schools teach values.” Elsa, who is 45, a judge from Andalusia, and has a four-year-old daughter, explains why she chose a Catholic school for her daughter:

At the age of 3 my daughter was singing “Our Father in heaven.” They pray every day (she smiled)... this school will teach her values, at least. Apart from the fact that I may be more or less religious...I don’t go to church every Sunday (she smiled) but I believe in God. I chose it because they say it is a very good school, children start from the age of 3 and can continue up to the age of 18, most children from our apartment block go to that school so it is good for her, and it is easy for me to drive her there. I didn’t think of anything else: they were good enough reasons for me.

Patricia, who is 43, a gynaecologist from Madrid, and has a five-year-old son, comments on why she chose a Catholic school:

I was educated in a Catholic school. I wanted my son to have moral values, self-discipline and an excellent education. I prefer a Catholic school where you know what kind of children get in. I didn’t want a ghetto school populated by mostly children of immigrants or by gypsies that could slow the learning of my child. I chose students’ selection and moral values.

These mothers are concerned about the impact of “social mixture” in state schools, which include children from poor socio-economic background, children from minority groups and children of immigrants. They therefore enrol them in private, state-subsidized Catholic schools that are located in middle-class neighbourhoods and which provide a more “exclusive” environment. At the time that the interviews took place, the national news media was discussing the Pope’s views on reproductive technologies, which he called into question because they “introduced the ability to manipulate the reproductive act,” and on single mothers, stating that “the absence of a father gravely affects family life and the upbringing of children and their integration into society” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016). At the same time, national news also spoke about allegations of sexism in Catholic schools in Madrid, when a Catholic school was investigated after it emerged that while boys were offered an extracurricular trip to the Real Madrid stadium, girls were offered crochet classes (Galaup, 2017). Indeed, numerous studies demonstrate the relation between sexism and religiosity and the reinforcement of sexist attitudes in the students of religious schools (Glick, Lameiras, & Castro, 2002; Maltby & Hall 2014; Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014; Seguino, 2011; Stitzlein, 2008). However, none of these participants knew about the Pope’s views on reproductive technologies and single mothers. Rita, 44 years old, a journalist from Madrid who has a daughter through assisted reproduction, responded: “I didn’t know what the Pope thought, but my daughter is very happy in her [Catholic] school, and we were not treated differently because of my being a single mum.”

Another participant, Ada, who is from Andalusia, is 40 years old, and is a nurse with a four-year-old daughter by assisted reproduction, remarked: “En todos los sitios cuecen habas” (“we all have something to hide”). In other words, she asserted that there may be sexism anywhere, minimizing the importance of sexism in Catholic schools, as well as the Pope’s views on families who do not follow the heterosexual nuclear family structure. Tamayo Acosta, professor of theology and the science of religions, argues that religions have a patriarchal structure, transmitting an androcentric ideology, imposing a sexist morality and developing sexist practices. He alleges that Judaism and Christianity are the basis of western patriarchy, and he states that they have been one of the greatest obstacles to women’s emancipation (2011). Patriarchal structures are internalized as patriarchal beliefs at an individual level. As Yoon et al. (2015, p. 264) explain: “patriarchal beliefs are developed through social learning and also serve to reinforce the patriarchal system by informing gendered behaviours and decision making. In spite of increased equality for women as a group, patriarchal beliefs are so deeply engrained in daily lives and social systems that it is often difficult to tease them apart from our consciousness.” The origin of “implicit” prejudice goes back to early childhood: when children learn about the world that surrounds them and neuronal associations are created in the brain that relate concepts and memories in an unconscious manner (Carnes et al., 2015). These associations are cultural, but they are set as pathways in our brain and unconsciously accompany us throughout our lives, and they also predispose us to have prejudices about gender, skin colour, religion, and socioeconomic status. In particular, conscious gender bias can begin at the age of five, but if it is not supported by the environment it can disappear around the ages of ten to twelve. If these stereotypes are supported by the children’s environment, the die is cast. Implicit biases, however, can be developed as young as three years old (Roberts, Gelman, & Ho, 2016). Once established at pre-school age, they can be difficult to change. While conscious biases are not sustained in many children, implicit or unconscious biases normally remain constant throughout adulthood (Johnston, 2017). Bartky argues: “Exposure to stereotypes can cause women to internalize these ideas and believe them, both consciously and unconsciously” (1990, p. 25). For Bourdieu & Wacquant, gender relations are the paradigm case of the operation of symbolic violence, which denotes more than a form of violence operating symbolically. It is “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (1992, p. 167). Other authors argue that there is an internalization of sexism to justify the hostility of women towards women (Cowan & Ullman, 2006), or a combination of internalization and subtyping, i.e. the Queen Bee phenomenon (Ellemers et al., 2012), to explain women’s endorsement of sexist beliefs. Zimmermann and Gyax (2016) suggest that the tendency for some socially shared norms to be interpreted as inevitable may complement these explanations of women’s endorsement of sexist beliefs.

Reflections

The emphasis of this research was focused on why 18 women, half of them self-labelled as feminist and the other half as non-feminist, decided to become single mothers by choice, and on what they experienced, and how their educational choices may challenge traditional practices of gender socialisation for their children. All the women interviewed define their motherhood as empowering and transgressive with respect to the traditional nuclear family, and all of them criticise the obsolete masculinity of their former partners and male acquaintances, as well as being hopeful that in future generations obsolete masculinity will be replaced by caring masculinity. However, despite the fact that the literature indicates that family composition, when non-traditional, has an effect because its members possess fewer traditional attitudes about gender than their families of origin, and that women’s university education, financial independence, professional success and belonging to the middle class, can

all encourage more egalitarian attitudes, none has brought about a profound change in the patriarchal ideology of the non-feminist participants.

These participants hold women accountable for inequality: women's choices explain women's disadvantages. They are uncomfortable with feminism because it threatens their understanding of their identity and worldview. They do not see social structures as contributing to inequality and view positive action measures as mistaken. They lack gender consciousness and deny either that gender inequality is a serious problem or that it is one that they have a personal or political responsibility to confront. They do not have the self-awareness of belonging to a historically discriminated group.

This strong resistance points to the systematic historical, cultural, psychological and structural character of patriarchal organisation. As we have seen, different concepts can be applied to this, such as: Bourdieu's symbolic violence; the acceptance of the ideology of the dominant group as valid; the internalization of sexism to justify the hostility of women towards women; or a combination of internalization and subtyping, or the tendency for some socially shared norms to be interpreted as inevitable to explain women's endorsement of sexist beliefs. Johnston (2017) uses the concept of unconscious bias, that is, cultural associations learned in our childhood that predispose us to have prejudices about gender, skin colour, religion, and socioeconomic status.

Uncovering the interconnections of the socio-cultural network in which these women live and from which they have extracted elements to construct their own identity is no easy task. They reject feminism and have not acquired an awareness that requires actions to transform the present situation. Yet they hope that their children, because they are offspring of single-mother families by choice, comprehend that both men and women "can do the same things" and have the right to be socially and economically independent. Nonetheless, they show patriarchal beliefs and they have chosen Roman Catholic schools for their children, a choice that ideologically repeats and perpetuates sexism. Enloe (2017, p. 81) argues that patriarchy "is as current as our contemporary governments, economic systems, and policies. It is adaptive, dynamic, and sustainable, and it is our reluctance to examine patriarchal structures, values, beliefs, and behaviours that enables it to survive". Therefore, change will require active attentiveness, reflection, questioning, and investigation if we want to illuminate how interwoven ideas about sex, gender and difference are in the world we live in.

Conversely, the other half of this study's sample define themselves as feminist. They espouse critical pedagogy in their children's education, exercising critical consciousness focused on attaining an understanding of the world that identifies political, economic and social contradictions and acting against the oppressive elements in their lives, as well as intervening in the reality that surrounds them with the aim of changing it. Thus they educate their children in the belief that sex and gender should not determine their place in the world, problematizing and challenging the government for their lack of public policies and mainstream schools for reproducing, in many cases, patriarchal beliefs. They offer alternative family models with the commitment that they can change society and serve as a link so that their children change it in the direction indicated by Feldman Barrett (2017, p. 158): "It's possible for each person to change their concepts and therefore their behaviour."

These women do not claim that feminism, critical pedagogy and secular schools are the solution to social inequality. However, they recognise the inextricable link between personal transformation and social transformation, creating a pathway between their sense of injustice, their actions and their participation in feminist and social justice movements. The challenge is not simply to encourage change and to criticize systems but to put it into practice. They point to the centrality of gender consciousness in relation to feminist attitudes and political activism. Duncan (2010) shows that feminist identity mediates the relationships between political activism and authoritarianism, education and experiences with sexism. We cannot change

society without changing ourselves, and we cannot change ourselves without recognising our embeddedness and interconnectedness in sociocultural processes and institutions. Thus, to be able to transform society, it is crucial that families and schools participate in the processes of change, since it is through key institutions such as these, amongst other factors, that patriarchal belief systems are transmitted and reproduced.

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