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[Cayetano Fernández-Sola](#) , [María del Mar Jiménez-Lasserrotte](#) <sup>\*</sup> , [María Toledano-Sierra](#) , [María Dolores Ruiz-Fernández](#) , [Fernando Plaza Del Pino](#) , [José Manuel Hernández-Padilla](#) , [José Granero-Molina](#)

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## Article

# A Qualitative Study on Violence against Women during Franco's Dictatorship in Spain

Cayetano Fernández-Sola <sup>1,2</sup>, María del Mar Jiménez-Lasserrotte <sup>1,\*</sup>, María Toledano-Sierra <sup>3</sup>,  
María Dolores Ruiz-Fernández <sup>1</sup>, Fernando Plaza Del Pino <sup>1</sup>, José Manuel Hernández-Padilla <sup>1,4</sup>  
and José Granero-Molina <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Nursing, Physiotherapy and Medicine, University of Almería, Almería, 04120, Spain; cfernand@ual.es (C.F.-S.); md.ruizfernandez@ual.es (M.D.R.-F.); ferplaza@ual.es (F.P.D.P.); j.hernandez-padilla@ual.es (J.M.H.-P.); jgranero@ual.es (J.G.-M.).

<sup>2</sup> Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Temuco 7500000, Chile

<sup>3</sup> University of Almería, Almería, 04120, Spain; mariat.s0194@gmail.com (M.T.-S.).

<sup>4</sup> Visitor Lecturer, Department of Adult, Child and Midwifery, School of Health and Education, Middlesex University, London, UK

\* Correspondence: mjl095@ual.es; Tel.: +34-950214610

**Abstract:** (1) Background: Franco's dictatorship was an authoritarian regime in Europe in the twentieth century. The political and historical context has a significant influence on the socio-cultural make-up of each era, having consequences on equality and violence against women. The objective of our study is to explore and understand women's experiences of violence against women during the Franco regime and how it affects them today; (2) Methods: This qualitative study explores violence against women in Francoist Spain. Data was collected between January and March 2022 through twenty-one interviews were carried out with female survivors of Francoism; (3) Results: Three themes emerged from the analysis: underlying social conditions that allow for violence against women; forms of violence against women: from punishment to forced silence; different standpoints about violence against women: the feminist struggle versus denial; (4) Conclusions: We concluded that the imposed patriarchy during Francoist repression was harmful for Spanish women for decades. Women suffered violence against women and they are still bearing the consequences, passing on attitudes that could contribute to the persistence of violence against women.

**Keywords:** Domestic Violence; Francoism; Historical Memory; Qualitative research; Repression; Spain; Violence against Women

## 1. Introduction

Violence Against Women (VAW) is defined as any act of violence against a woman that can produce physical, psychological or sexual damage. This includes threats, coercion or denying freedom, whether in public or at home [1]. VAW includes various types of violence, be it financial or restricting freedom [2,3]. The World Health Organization (WHO) [1], estimates that one in three women worldwide will experience violence in her lifetime. Furthermore, it is estimated that 40% of homicides of women worldwide are committed by their partners or ex-partners [4]. In Western countries, VAW is a social and public health problem [3,5]. In Europe, one in five women has suffered physical and/or sexual violence [6]. In Spain, in 2021, forty-three women were murdered by their partner or ex-partner [7]. VAW has serious consequences for women's health, such as mental distress, depression, chronic pain and a poorer health status [8,9]. This condition is not isolated; women who have suffered or suffer VAW face profound consequences for the rest of their lives [10].

Gender equality is considered to be the main factor explaining VAW [9,11], because it perpetuates the imbalance that exists in power relations between men and women. It is structural violence that upholds the notion of women's inferiority, that makes them invisible and grants a different power to each gender identity, reflecting the social structure itself [10,12]. Accepting an asymmetrical model between men and women establishes a system of subordination and domination

over women, and legitimises a patriarchal control of traditional sexist stereotypes present in culture and society, which favours gender-based violence [11]. In Spain, VAW mortality rates were higher in autonomous communities with greater gender inequality [13]. However, VAW was not recognised by society until a few decades ago. During the Franco regime, the patriarchal family model was reinforced, in which women were subjected to a high level of institutional violence, unable to denounce or reveal their aggressor [14].

The political and historical context has a significant influence on the socio-cultural make-up of each era [15], having consequences on equality and VAW [5,16]. In the first half of the 20th century, a series of authoritarian regimes spread across Europe, such as Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy [17]. In Spain, there was a military uprising against the legitimate government of the Second Spanish Republic, which led to a civil war (1936-1939). This conflict, with a strong ideological character, subjected the Spanish population to a major clash of political, economic and social ideas, which resulted in the "national uprising" in 1936, represented by the Popular Front and the Nationalists, supporters of the rebellion against the Republic [18,19]. On the 1st of April 1939 the Republic was defeated, establishing the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, who proclaimed himself Head of State and imposed a fascist regime (Francoism) in Spain that lasted until the approval of the Law for Political Reform in 1977 [19,20]. The dictatorship was characterised by severe repression that lasted significantly longer than in other Western countries [21]. This repression under Franco affected social life, freedoms and customs. It attempted to restore a social, political, economic, religious and gender order that was the basis of Franco's ultra-patriarchal society. It inevitably had a particular impact on the lives of women [16,22,23]. This context, characterised by a political and gender ideology, in which women were perceived to be intellectually inferior to men and unreliable [19], was the breeding ground for a surge in VAW at the time [22].

Many women were victims of physical, financial and psychological violence with the pretence of social organisation and moral cleansing [19,24]. According to Rodríguez-Teijeiro's study [14], based on court rulings, some women were abused and injured to such an extent that they had miscarriages or died. When divorce was outlawed, women had to be obedient to their husbands, and were punished for adultery, abortion or the use of contraceptives. Even uxoricide was regulated, giving lenient treatment to a man who killed his wife or daughter for adultery [14,23]. In a highly patriarchal context, women lost their political rights through a discriminatory and paternalistic change in legislation [23]. They were confined to the domestic sphere, which became their life's purpose [16], and were humiliated if they transgressed gender values characterised by domesticity and female submissiveness [19].

The repression suffered by women was rendered invisible due to domestic confinement and social acceptance of violent behaviour [24]. Catholic ideals penetrated all social spheres: family and school were vehicles for a sacred education [25]. In line with the national-Catholic discourse, the schools of the Women's Section and Catholic Action conditioned a model of an austere, passive, helpful woman, who was a mother of a large family, based on three fundamental pillars: family, God and homeland [14,25]. All of these values were disseminated in educational manuals, in women's magazines, in the cinema and on the radio, with the intention of making women hold a subordinate place in society complying with their traditional role within a Catholic family [24]. As well as female submission, the regime sought to hinder social mobilisation by publicly punishing women [23]. Many of the women identified with the values of the regime and were even agents of repression. Others, however, who identified with the Popular Front, were affected by political persecution and suffered gender-based violence under Franco's regime [22]. They suffered a high degree of cruelty, few murders, but rapes, hair shaving or the ingestion of castor oil as a symbol of punishment and purification in society [23,26]. After the death of the dictator Franco in 1975, a process of democratisation began in Spain, which led to the development in the 1980s of specific legislation on VAW in the fields of health, education, the judiciary, social services, state security and the media [14,27]. The entry into force of the Spanish Constitution in 1978 was a boost to effective equality between people, especially between men and women. This equality is included in the Spanish Constitution 1978 [28], Article 14 (Title I) stating that: "Spaniards are equal before the law without

any discrimination based on sex, age, ethnicity or religion" (p. 29.316). It is a firm commitment to the fundamental right to equality, which has been extended and developed by different regulatory bodies [29–31]. However, despite legislative efforts by democratic governments to end VAW, it continues to increase. In 2019, 186,168 complaints of gender violence were registered in Spain, of which 40,720 women victims had a protection order or precautionary measures [32]. Exploring the magnitude of trauma and reconstructing the memory of the horror and violence suffered has proven successful in raising awareness among young women [33]. Fields such as Sociobiology have demonstrated the importance of studying sexual conflict within the broader framework of social evolution [34]. Even though there have been extensive studies into the causes [3,35], and the consequences [36] of VAW, as well as an approach to understanding of women's reality under Franco from a forensic [19] and legal [14] anthropological perspective, there is a lack of research from a social perspective on the experiences and consequences of Spanish women victims of VAW during the Franco era [16]. The experience of these women can be revealing for understanding real-life experiences, which is a blind spot in the fight against gender-based violence [37]. Analysing and giving continuity to these sources highlights the fundamental role that gender repression had in the past and how it lives on nowadays. The objective of our study is to explore and understand women's experiences of VAW during the Franco regime and how it affects them today.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study design

A qualitative study was designed based on Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology [38], allowing for the researcher to understand the person within the experience that they construct from their reality and knowledge. Understanding a phenomenon requires the fusion between the horizon of the researcher, who is an interpreter based in the present, and the participant's horizon of meaning, which is based in their past [39]. We are not objects in the face of history. Instead, we are part of it, meaning that history does not belong to us but rather we belong to it [38]. The phases of the Gadamerian method developed by Fleming, Gaidys & Robb were followed [40]: Firstly, check the coherence of the research question and the method. The experience of female victims of VAW during a past period of time in their lives is a phenomenon of the life world that can be interpreted as the search for understanding. Secondly, identifying the pre-understanding of the researchers with the study's object: it is not an era in which any of the researchers lived. However, all of the researchers are familiar with accounts from that particular era and are not distanced from a period of time that gives rise to heated debates in which the whole of Spanish society takes part. Furthermore, some of the researchers have previously studied and researched the socio-political context.

### 2.2. Participants and setting

The recruitment of participants took place using intentional sampling amongst women in long-term care settings and others that lived at home in three provinces in the southeast of Spain (Granada, Almería and Murcia). This was a Republican zone in the Civil War, that was the last to be occupied by Franco's troops; it is an area that was predominantly rural, not industrialized and victim of the post-war famine, depending on a subsistence economy. Prior to the interview with women in long-term care settings, a meeting took place with key informers (psychologist, occupational therapist, nurse etc) of the institutions in which the study was carried out. They helped with the selection of the participants and introduced them to the interviewers. The women who lived at home were contacted by the interviewers through snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were that the women were at least 70 years old and had been victims of VAW during the Francoist era; to have Spanish nationality and to have lived in the country from 1939 to 1975. The exclusion criteria were to have cognitive impairment that would impede the processing of information; to not be able to maintain a fluent conversation or to have been victims of exile. When twenty-one women were interviewed, no new themes emerged, at which point the researchers considered to have reached data saturation and thus data collection was ended. The sociodemographic data of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic data of the participants (n=21).

Participants	Age*	Profession	Children	Marital status	War band
Participant 1	80	Housewife	6	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 2	80	Farm worker	3	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 3	96	Shoemaker	4	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 4	87	Housewife	3	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 5	72	Healthcare assistant	2	Married	Popular Front
Participant 6	70	Teacher	0	Married	Nationalist
Participant 7	89	Housewife	4	Widow	Nationalist
Participant 8	92	Housewife	0	Single	Popular Front
Participant 9	90	Farm worker	3	Widow	Nationalist
Participant 10	91	Farm worker	1	Married	Popular Front
Participant 11	70	Teacher	3	Married	Nationalist
Participant 12	84	Housewife	4	Widow	Nationalist
Participant 13	81	Housewife	8	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 14	81	Farm worker	2	Widow	Nationalist
Participant 15	85	Housewife	2	Married	Nationalist
Participant 16	86	Teacher	3	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 17	83	Housewife	3	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 18	82	Farm worker	2	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 19	79	Housewife	1	Widow	Popular Front
Participant 20	84	Housewife	4	Widow	Nationalist
Participant 21	78	Teacher	2	Married	Popular Front

\*X= 82.8, SD = 6.91.

2.3. Data collection

Data collection was carried out between January and March 2022 through in-depth interviews. The interviews took place in private without anybody else present. The women in long-term care settings were interviewed in a private room in the nursing home and those who lived at home were interviewed there. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes and were recorded with prior informed consent. In order to carry out the interviews, the researchers followed the interview protocol (Table 2), which was practised previously so that the interview would resemble a natural conversation. During the interviews, the interviewers made notes of non-verbal communication (gestures, silences, etc.).

**Table 2.** Interview protocol (Script of questions and ethical aspects).

Phase	Matter	Content / Examples of questions
Presentation	Motives	Belief that their experience provides a lesson that must be known to all
	Intentions	Carry out a study to understand this experience
Preliminary	Information and ethical aspects	We need to record the conversation. It will only be used for the purposes of the study. We ensure confidentiality. Participation is voluntary. The interview can be paused or suspended at any point in time. In the publication, pseudonyms or the word ‘participant’ followed by a number will be used instead of names.
	Consent	Signing the following document
Start	General introductory question	Tell me about your life. What is your job? When did you get married? What job did your husband do?



Development	Conversation script	What was life like for women in the era? How did you experience it?
		What was the relationship between women and men like? How did you regard abuse towards women then? How do you regard it now?
		What beliefs were there about VAW? How did that influence you throughout the rest of your life?
Conclusion	Final questions	Would you like to say anything else regarding the topic?
	Thanks	Thank you for the time dedicated to the study Remember that your account will be very useful to us

2.4. Data analysis

All of the recordings and notes were transcribed with a word processor. All of the transcriptions and notes were incorporated into an ATLAS.ti Software Project and were analysed subsequently. The analysis followed the steps described by Fleming et al. [40]: First: reach an understanding through dialogue with the participants. During the interviews a spontaneous understanding of the phenomenon is produced, notes are taken in the field notebook and clarification questions are made. For example: What do you think about the fact that men were the only ones able to control household finances? Second: Understanding through dialogue with the text (transcript analysis). A complete reading of the transcripts to extract the general idea; re-reading line by line to select the most important quotations; assignment of codes that capture meaning of the quotations, grouping of codes into units of meaning, subthemes and themes. An example of the codification process can be seen in Table 3. Third: Rigour: Reliability was achieved by presenting all of the participants’ opinions and points of view. Various participants agreed with the structure of the themes and subthemes. A revision of the themes was carried out by expert researchers.

Table 3. Example of the codification and quotations analysis process.

Quote	Initial codes	Unit of meaning	Subtheme	Theme
<i>My sister, the irresponsible one, would go out alone at night to work in the suburbs of the city (...) I don't know what she worked in but I know she didn't do a normal job like the rest of us (...) We didn't know but based on the rumours, she was seen as promiscuous. (P-14)</i>	Frowned upon work, work in a normal job, rumours, the object of rumours, a promiscuous woman.	Social repression	The imposition and normalisation of female submission. "God gave freedom to those who deserved it".	The underlying social conditions that allow for VAW
<i>I liked a guy who was called Jx who lived near me and I know that he liked me too but my parents already had plans for me, you know? I married a wealthier man who had two large farms. (P-6)</i>	Love another, marry for status, planned wedding by parents, marriage with motive	Loveless marriages	The woman's destiny to dedicate herself to marriage or religion	

2.5. Ethical aspects

Authorisation from the management of the different care homes was obtained, as well as informed consent from each of the participants. The women’s anonymity was safeguarded throughout the study. The ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki were taken into account when conducting this study, which was approved by the Department of Nursing, Pyhsiotherapy and Medicine Ethics and Research Committee from the University of Almería (protocol number 28/2017).

3. Results

The data analysis provided six subthemes, grouped into three overarching themes that allow for the understanding of female VAW victims’ experiences during Francois repression. (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Themes, subthemes and units of meaning from the data analysis.

Theme	Subtheme	Units of meaning
The underlying social conditions that allow for VAW	The imposition and normalisation of female submission. “God gives freedom to those who deserve it”.	Social repression, political repression, patriarchy, submission of the wife, keeping up appearances.
	The woman’s destiny to dedicate herself to marriage or religion	Loveless marriages, prevention of professional development, coercion of a woman’s individual freedom, the husband’s total control.
Forms of VAW: from punishment to forced silence.	Physical, psychological and financial abuse as control mechanisms	Instilling fear, physical violence, emotional blackmail, financial dependence, psychological abuse.
	Imposed discretion. When the “crime” is voicing it.	Abuse as a domestic matter, discretion as a value, accusations seen as a lack of respect, ignorance of accusations., stigmatization of women who made accusations.
Different standpoints in the face of VAW: the feminist struggle vs denial.	Never again. Mistrust of men and defence of the accusations.	Fear of repeating, fear of men, defence of the feminist struggle, recognition of social developments.
	“Everyone has something to hide”. Justification and denial of VAW.	The defence of men, the trivialisation of violence, shame in making accusations, the denial of VAW.

3.1. Theme 1. The underlying social conditions that allow for VAW

The participants stated that Francoism gave rise to harsh repression that enveloped all personal and social spheres: politics, art, science, sexuality and culture. Values that were based on nationalism and catholic fundamentalism (National Catholicism) were imposed on society, creating a breeding ground for a powerful patriarchy that facilitated and justified violence against women within their relationships and limited a woman’s freedom.

*“There wasn’t freedom. We women couldn’t go to the bank without our husbands. It didn’t even occur to use to get our driving license” (P-3).*

3.1.1. Subtheme 1. The imposition and normalisation of female submission: “God gives freedom to those who deserve it”.

Spain lived through a severe and aggressive dictatorship in which the political and religious powers exercised control to impose their ideology. The participants alluded to various control

mechanisms such as fear, physical and psychological persecution of “the sinners” and even the imprisonment or disappearance of the regime’s dissidents as a means to set an example.

*“I was part of a secret group that there was back then. We would hide well and have meetings with our people but you had to be very careful because if they caught you, they would make you disappear” (P-19).*

Many participants also alluded to social pressure in the form of criticism or hearsay amongst neighbours as a means of control and imposition of certain expected behaviour. It was easy to pigeonhole a family as “bad” for not adhering to the established norms. Even the slightest glimpse of disobedience of the social norms would lead to stigmatisation.

*“My sister, the irresponsible one, would go out alone at night to work in the suburbs of the city (...) I don’t know what she worked in but I know she didn’t do a normal job like the rest of us (...) We didn’t know but based on the rumours, she was seen as promiscuous” (P-14).*

The man, who was supposed to work to support the family, was the visible head of the family unit and the figure of authority in society. Appearances were important, which is why it was vital for woman to be well-behaved and submissive when with their husbands in public.

*“I never responded to him badly in public. Watch, listen and be quiet. You were reprimanded for “stepping out of line” when out. When I was allowed to go out the norm was to only show the love we had for one another and how happy we were, even though it wasn’t the case” (P-17).*

The submissive position of women was normalised amongst young adults who had been educated with these ultra-catholic values, which lead them to fulfil the roles that had been instilled in them. It was a woman’s duty to be obedient and submissive to their husbands, without questioning whether the situation should be different. They simply lived the life that they had been assigned.

*“We couldn’t do what we wanted because we had a husband. It was our duty. Our mothers taught us that this is how it was supposed to be but I didn’t realise (...)” (P-12).*

The Civil war was an ideological battle in which the victors represented a large proportion of the country’s most conservative members of society. This ultraconservative sector normalised and internalised values such as women’s obedience. The interviewees who were of Francoist ideology normalised the situation, removing any political connotation or demand for equality, and even questioned the lack of freedom.

*“I don’t really understand this supposed repression, but I’ll tell you that only we know what happened, nobody else. Not everything that they say was like that. I was very happy and I didn’t notice anything. God gave freedom to those who deserved it (...)” (P-9).*

### 3.1.2. Subtheme 2. The woman’s destiny to dedicate herself to marriage or religion

One of the types of violence was to reduce a woman’s life to her role as a wife and carer within the family. The conception of a single, professional woman who had relationships freely, that had become widespread in the 1920s and throughout the Republic, became somewhat unimaginable during Francoism, according to the participants. A woman would dedicate herself to marriage or religion, which was the only way that she was deemed honourable and respectable. The women that did not get married or join a religious order, had to dedicate their lives to their families (caring for their parents, nephews/nieces...) and to the religious community (maintenance of the parish church). This was such the case that even now, the expression “to dress the Saints” means to remain unmarried.

*“You either got married or you didn’t have a social life. You either became a nun or looked after your family. My sister remained single and dedicated her life to looking after our parents until they died. She “dressed the Saints” (P-14).*



On many occasions, marriage was forced, used as a means of maintaining a woman's honour if she fell pregnant or simply had a sexual relationship out of wedlock. The dominant moral framework that was based on patriarchy and National Catholicism imposed these implicit norms on society as a means to control, dominate and humiliate women. Many of the women interviewed made reference to forced, loveless marriages at a young age under the pressure of their families and the established social norms:

*"I fell pregnant from having relations with my boyfriend and when you could start to notice, my parents married me off so that people would not gossip. I didn't want to get married so early but that's the way things were" (P-4).*

The financial and social status of your future husband was of utmost importance to the woman's family. Parents would organise financially motivated arranged marriages, overlooking the woman's desires or willingness.

*"I used to like a guy who was called Jx who lived near me. I know that he liked me too but my parents had other plans for me, you know? I got married to a wealthier man who had to large farms" (P-6).*

Loyalty and trust within the family was understood as an obligation to exclusively dedicate yourself to it, meaning that many women left their jobs and neglected their professional careers to exclusively look after their husbands, children and homes.

*"For me it was important to work as a teacher with small children, you know? It was my dream. However, once I was married my only duty was to dedicate myself to my household and my husband. He was a very good person but I will never forget that he didn't let me study (...) I had to be loyal to my family and be like the rest of women, a lady of her house (...) It was our duty" (P-7).*

At the heart of those families in which the woman had been coerced, there was a supposed happiness that had to be reflected outside of the household. However, appearances did not always reflect reality. Women frequently felt unhappy whilst, in contrast, men were not subject to the strict moral norms that enslaved women. Men could be unfaithful and use women as they deemed appropriate.

*"For men it was paradise, they didn't have to give explanations for anything. They just enjoyed themselves, controlled us and had us at their service. None of my friends were married to good men and none of them were faithful" (P-8).*

It was accepted for a man to have total control over his wife, whom he could consider his property. Jealousy was enough of a motive to deprive a woman of freedom, a form of slavery in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century.

*"I remember a time that he locked me in at home and left. He didn't want me to go out because there was a very charming man who was in love with me (...) He had me watched for months. He confined me to our home every day. Then, it wasn't necessary, I didn't even consider leaving the house, out of habit" (P-18).*

### 3.2. Theme 2. Forms of Violence Against Women: from punishment to forced silence.

This theme considers the participants' comments in relation to the different forms of violence and abuse to which women were subjected at the heart of family life. The participants described physical abuse towards wives and children, verbal abuse, a silent form of psychological abuse and financial abuse that was used by men as a means to control and dominate.

*"Everyone talked and gossiped, not about him for hitting her, but about her for voicing it" (P-5).*

### 3.2.1. Subtheme 1. Physical, psychological and financial abuse as control mechanisms.

The violence suffered by women was used to impose male power within the marriage and ensure a wife's submission to her husband, denying her of a voice in making decisions and giving opinions. The consequences of not accepting this role imposed by a dominant, patriarchal society could be terrible. Some of the participants admitted to having been victims of physical abuse:

*"You had to fully respect him because he used to get angry very often and very quickly. More than once I wanted to speak to him about things, (...) but he just used force on me. He hit me a lot (...)" (P-7).*

*"He used to whip me with his belt when we argued. It was the norm because he also did it to our children. That's what really hurt because if he was going to do it to me, OK, but not to them" (P-1).*

As well as physical violence, women also suffered from psychological violence, a verbal violence including emotional blackmail such as threats to take away their children. This obliged them to live in an unwanted setting with devastating emotional consequences for the victims.

*"He treated me really badly, (...), and no, he didn't hit me, but he insulted me, he treated me as if I were crazy. He said I was brazen and that every time I went out with my friends it was to get a man. One time, he didn't let me go out for a week, not even to see my parents or sister" (P-10).*

*"He threatened me with taking away my children who were only five and seven years old. I was tired of it all and I said I was going to leave but he was very clever and blackmailed me. I had to stay with him because he told me he would take them away from me" (P-3).*

As the man was the only one with a salary in the family, financial abuse was also commonplace. A husband's control over the household's money was a way to control his wife. Divorce was no longer an option since the end of the Republic and the possibilities to separate without financial autonomy were a fantasy.

*"Of course men had control over the money. He gave me a weekly allowance and I used it to buy everything I needed for our home. If I wanted to buy something for myself, I could only spend what was left over, which was a pittance" (P-5).*

*"He always hid the money and I never thought to look for it because I didn't want to think what would have happened to me if he had caught me" (P-1).*

The participants who were in line with Francoist ideology denied men's control and violence towards women. They legitimised violence that women faced at the hands of men by accepting that this was the norm and could be expected in any "decent" society.

*"Nobody hit one another, that's ridiculous. Whoever says that is lying. I don't know of anyone who was hit by their husband. The ones who say that didn't love their husbands and weren't faithful to them (...) One has to be respectful" (P-9).*

### 3.2.2. Subtheme 2. Imposed discretion. When the "crime" is voicing it.

VAW was normalised in the society of the era and it was well known that VAW took place in many families. Neighbours and family members were aware of what was happening and were accessories to it, ensuring that these acts were not discussed. Victims of VAW were taught that their weapon against such acts was discretion, which was necessary to keep the family's honour intact and to avoid embarrassing their husbands. VAW was experienced as a private matter.

*"Each one in their home and outside of it, nobody needed to know what was going on inside. What goes on in the home stays in the home. If there were upsets in the house, nobody had to know about them because everyone had to deal with their own business" (P-8).*

The social nature of gender violence forming part of a family's intimate matters meant that victims of VAW or others who were aware of it, did not make accusations, allowing the abusers to have full impunity.

*"Accusations? It didn't even occur to us. It was a huge lack of respect towards your husband and family. We couldn't go out freely to tell our stories or our sorrows. Nobody would have listened to us anyway, despite the fact that they all knew what was going on" (P-2).*

In the cases of abuse accusations filed by police or made in public, the consequences for the woman were negative and did not put an end to the violence.

*"A friend of mine dared to tell people in public that she was going to file a report against her husband because he attacked her (...) or at least that's what she claimed. Nobody paid any attention to it, what she did was even worse because it was shameful even for her children" (P-21).*

### 3.3. Theme 3. Different standpoints in the face of VAW: the feminist struggle vs denial.

The participants had either been "Republicans" or "Nationalist" and this old polarisation resurfaces in the present in the form of a strong ideological battle which makes VAW a point of confrontation. The women who accepted their submissive role believed that the current complaints about what happened are a result of political disorder and "feminist ideology". The women who felt enslaved at the time were much more sympathetic towards the current feminist struggle against VAW.

*"I think that men behaved well. If my duty was my home and my children, that was my position. I don't think that there was anything bad about that" (P-15).*

*"Back then we saw it as something normal but it's true that now we realise that it was abuse. We were enslaved" (P-13).*

#### 3.3.1. Subtheme 1. Never again. Mistrust of men and defence of the accusations.

The experiences that some participants had with their husbands in the past have made it difficult to have male friendships in the present. The mistrust towards all men is still present in some cases, resulting in resistance to establishing new relationships out of fear of violence repeating itself.

*"My husband died more than ten years ago and if I hadn't gone through that hell, maybe I would feel like meeting a new man but (...) I'm afraid of something similar happening to me to when my husband was alive. All men are the same (...) You shouldn't get too close" (P-10).*

Some of the participants felt free for the first time, not when the dictator died, but when their husbands died. This suggests that the social consequences of the ideology, of which marriage was a key institution, have lasted beyond the duration of the political regime that imposed them.

*"What happened to us when we were younger is everlasting. When people started to condemn what happened, we didn't dare. Now I feel great because my husband is dead and I can finally breathe and do what I want" (P-16).*

Other women have changed their vision and recognised that what they thought was normal in the past, would not be tolerated nowadays. They are aware of the social developments in terms of prevention and rejection of VAW and they are regretful about the era in which they had to live.

*"Things are different now. Women are brave and they go out and fight against "patriotism" or "sexism". Back then I couldn't even answer back to my husband. Things have advanced so much (...) if only I hadn't lived through those days" (P-6).*

### 3.3.2. Subtheme 2. Everyone has something to hide. The justification and denial of VAW.

Some of our participants justified VAW and questioned the current social movement against it, as well as the increase of accusations made. In line with the National Catholic ideology that oppressed women in the Franco era, they denied the existence of VAW.

*"Women nowadays complain a lot. I see women on TV making a fuss on the street against men...one must not be against them but on their side. They gave us food and a home (...) We've all slapped each other one time or another" (P-20).*

*"Nowadays the same is happening as back then, not more. Every family has something to hide and I think we are going down the wrong path (...). Talking about it, making formal accusations, aren't they embarrassed? So many accusations, for God's sake! They're shaming their families" (P-11).*

VAW was normalised to such an extent that some of the women interviewed still justify it nowadays, even if the victim is their own daughter. Their opposition to the feminist struggle against VAW was evident in their comments.

*"My daughter, for example, has reported my son-in-law for abuse, I think, but back then it was all like that. Now that it's a part of modern life to file reports, it doesn't give you the right to do it over every little thing. We've all suffered from the occasional blow. I'm not saying she deserves it but now we are scandalised by these [unimportant] little issues" (P-11).*

## 4. Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore and understand women's experiences of VAW during the Franco regime and how it affects them today. Using Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology has allowed us to understand the experience of a generation of women whose repressed life under Franco has determined their life today. A fundamental precept of Hermeneutics is the temporary nature of meaning. For Gadamer [38], time is not necessarily an abyss from which one must be saved but is rather the foundation for the events whose roots are in the present. From this standpoint, understanding these women's experiences of VAW during a period of repression in Spain required the fusion of horizons between the past and the present. The participants were subject to severe repression under Franco under the pretense of restoring social and gender order, that encompassed all spheres of life, imposing cultural and social values that had serious consequences on their past, present and future life experiences [22,36]. Our study concurs with others that highlight the harsh experiences of women throughout Francoism [19,41] and that repression was not similar for men and women, the latter being the most affected [14,42]. The repression and legitimate violence that women faced in that era is explained by the dominant patriarchal culture that tied a woman to her domestic role [25] as well as class, ideology and gender differences that rejected any type of liberalism [10,22]. The Francoist regime laid the foundation for controlling women through its National-Catholic discourse, in a context in which family and school were vehicles of Catholic indoctrination [25], assigning women a traditional role of sexual procreator [14,43]. Women were obliged to be subordinate, dependent and obedient in their relationship with their husbands [16], and their Catholic education/training was designed for them to fulfil their role in society of serving, caring for and pleasing male figures (father/husband) [14,25]. They were fully dependent and were even considered as "inactive members" of society and intellectually inferior to men [5,44].

These women's memories evoke difficult circumstances, characterised by violence, fear and oppression [41], protected by a social system that condoned and justified VAW as an expression of male power [14,44] to ensure that a woman fulfilled the traditional Catholic family roles imposed on her by society [24]. Some of the women in our study stated that they were physically abused by their husbands, who used violence as a weapon to control them and their children. Furthermore, financial violence was used to make women subordinate, deny them from being involved in social life and having a paid job, and limit them to agricultural or domestic work [45,46]. Within this patriarchal context, women lost their rights [23]. When husbands forbade their wives from training and remunerated work, it consolidated male dominance over financial matters while reducing a woman

to her subordinate role within the family [16]. As stated in other studies [47,48], financial dependence was an added risk for facing violence given that women were unable to leave their husbands. The violence that these women suffered has conditioned them for life. The inability to report their situation and the silence imposed by Francoist society for decades [14,24], has increased the likelihood of neurological disorders and psychological problems of anxiety or post-traumatic stress for the rest of their lives [10]. This is compounded by health problems such as nutritional deficiencies, chronic pain and poorer health [8,9,49]. They are still unable to start a life with someone new out of fear of suffering from violence as they did in the past. Furthermore, they pass on their fears from the past to the new generations. The social and political repression of the Francoist regime has had long-lasting effects on Spanish society, leaving a mark on the dignity and identity of people, families and collectives [50], underlining a continuity that transcends from generation to generation through entrenched values and attitudes [51].

The participants have expressed different standpoints on current feminist movements that condemn VAW. This can be interpreted as the persistence of “the two Spains” that faced one another in a war of strong ideological character [52]. This division is apparent in the current political climate in Spain [53]; the extreme right, who yearns for Francoism, has made their opposition to the current equality policies and their denial of VAW one of their ideological flags [54].

The relationship between the State and the community, as well as the lack of policies, laws and institutional practices, allows for the justification of VAW [55]. The socio-political organisations must design and implement strategies to transform traditional gender roles, involve the interested parties, empower women and establish a service to prevent VAW [56]. It is therefore necessary to build an equitable, critical society, and make the magnitude of this problem more visible [14].

#### *Limitations.*

Our sample is heterogeneous in terms of ideology, social class and rural/urban home dwelling. These variables had an influence on the women’s experience because not all women were treated equally. The actors (government, church, neighbours...) were harsher with the Republican women than the Nationalists. Furthermore, conditions were more severe in rural settings than in urban environments. However, comparisons were not made between the women using these variables as we intended to achieve a more global vision of the issue. A quantitative design to compare the women’s statements in relation to their ideology, environment or other variables could provide more robust results. Furthermore, there is a large difference between the extremely repressive nature of the first years of the regime (autarchy) and the socio-political climate from the 1960s onwards (economic development). This was not taken into account when selecting the sample nor when conducting the interviews given that the aim was to have a more global vision in examining Franco’s regime as a whole.

## **5. Conclusions**

Franco's regime of political repression especially affected women, who suffered from forced marriages to institutionalised violence that legitimised an asymmetrical model of domination, patriarchal control and the normalisation of violence towards women if they transgressed the ideal values of domesticity and female submission. In this oppressive context, a mere complaint was considered an aggravating factor, subversion of the system or an outright "crime". The sociocultural consequences of that era have transcended into the present. Women who were victims of VAW are still afraid to find a new partner due to the enduring fears that tormented them in the past. Some of them are still marginalised and unable to adapt to current society, passing their fears on to their children, which can contribute to perpetuating and hiding the problem of violence against women.

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