

*“The state of your life is only a reflection of the state of your mind”*

Wayne Dyer

**Analyzing the influence of gender-related beliefs on psychosocial health.**

***Methodology:*** Qualitative – Semi-structured interview

***Study:*** Psychosocial and sexual health factors of Spanish women who participate in ecofeminist spirituality

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the spiritual movements emerging from ecofeminism as possible environments where psychosocial and sexual factors are promoted for the Spanish women who participate in them. The study is based on a qualitative exploratory research using the semi-structured interview method. Twelve women between the ages of 33 and 52 were interviewed, all of whom ascribe to this diverse model of spirituality. Data were analyzed using grounded theory. Results reveal that in these ecofeminist spiritual environments, some mental health factors are promoted. Considering these results, some ecofeminist spiritual movements may be acting as community health agents for Spanish women.

*Keywords:* feminism, gender, spirituality, health, sexuality

## **Introduction**

In this paper, we look closely and thoroughly -from a psychological science perspective- at the spiritual movements stemming from the “Divine Feminine”, as Angie Simonis (2012) refers to it. It is a model of spiritual ecofeminism that English-speaking female writers refer to as “earth-based”, where immanence supersedes transcendence, and where God is a Goddess. It is a model in which sexuality is not proscribed because it is sacredly guarded as a source of health and well-being. Its ethical paradigm focuses on self-learning, exploration of the self through the body and experience, feelings and emotions, myths, and pagan rituals in communion, not with a supra-natural masculinized being, but with nature itself in all its light and darkness.

In this paper, we aim to achieve a better understanding of this alternative model of ecofeminist spirituality and the role it plays in the psychosocial and sexual health of Spanish women who participate in it.

### **Justification for the study**

Despite the noticeable rise in spiritual movements among women, there are still very few research studies at the international level, and specifically in Spain, for several reasons. First, these movements are heterogeneous and very rarely form organizations, and the diversity of beliefs and practices is rather overwhelming. Second, there is a lack of sensitivity when carrying out studies in mostly Christian settings where spiritual diversity is almost non-existent in surveys or investigations. Late 20<sup>th</sup> century stigma and persecution view these movements as sects or potentially dangerous organizations. The third reason is the general invisibility related to gender because, in most cases, these are feminine movements.

Some reference books on the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality (PRS) do not take any of this into account: neither the manual from the American Psychological

Association (APA, 2013) nor the one by Paloutzian & Park (2 ed., 2014), and there is only one chapter in the Oxford manual (2012) that describes the basics rather sparingly.

In spite of the lack of information in most PRS manuals, there are other important publications that provide good descriptions of it, such as “Woman Soul: the Inner Life of Women’s Spirituality” by Lillian Comas-Díaz & Carole A. Rayburn, as well as articles dealing with the relationships among spirituality, health, and women from a psychological science perspective. Some examples are Mattis’ studies of spirituality in African-American women and other research on the role that spirituality plays in women who face drug abuse (Brome, Owens, Allen, & Vevaina, 2000), HIV-AIDS (Dalmida, 2006; Simoni, Martone & Kerwin, 2002), breast cancer (Holt, Lukwago & Kreuter, 2003; Romero, Friedman, Kalidas, Elledge, Chang & Liscum, 2006), and male violence (Fowler & Hill, 2004; Gillum, Sullivan & Bybee, 2006; Senter & Caldwell, 2002).

All of these reasons justify an exploration of ecofeminist spiritualities and their effects on the psychosocial health of women who embrace this spiritual paradigm in a predominantly Catholic Christian country. The history of Spain has one of the greatest inquisitorial persecutions of these spiritual movements within the European context. It is worth remembering that for centuries thousands of women related to paganism, natural healing, or witchcraft have been executed at the stake. Although Spain is currently a country with freedom of worship, there is a social stigma associated to any female spiritual movement related to nature. Consequently, Spanish women who embrace ecofeminist spirituality have to face mockery and discredit on many occasions, developing their rituals, activities and meetings outside the public space.

### **Research questions and aims**

Several questions have been raised about the different ecofeminist spirituality movements and their potential psychosocial effects on women: What ecofeminist spirituality movements currently exist in Spain and what are their characteristics? Are psychosocial health factors promoted within these spiritual milieus? Do they help women to identify the repercussions of hegemonic gender roles in their lives? Do they promote diversity and sexual rights?

Therefore, the main aim of this research study is to identify whether factors that promote sexual and psychosocial health exist within women's ecofeminist spiritual movements. To do so, three specific aims have been established to try to answer the questions posed. These three aims are: 1) to define the key concepts of the ecofeminist spirituality model that have a potential impact on psychosocial and sexual health, 2) to identify the impact of this model on the psychosocial health of women, and 3) to analyze the model's influence on sexual health.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Twelve women between the ages of 28 and 51 took part in this study, with 11 of them holding a university degree. 10 women are currently employed: 1 professor, 4 teachers, 1 psychologist, 1 artist, 2 social workers and 1 dressmaker. 2 women are unemployed at the moment.

This study involves two areas circumscribed to intimacy: spirituality and sexuality. Therefore, it was important to stress the difficulty of reaching agreements and promoting the participation of women willing to make these parts of their lives visible.

### **Recruitment**

At first, some women professing any kind of ecofeminist spirituality were contacted, and they were responsible for finding other volunteers for the investigation from

different ecofeminist circles. In this first attempt, 22 women were contacted, 12 of whom agreed to be interviewed.

The investigation was carried out according to the established ethical parameters, with full authorization and consent from all the participants. To ensure anonymity, the participants' experiences will be identified with numbers instead of their names or initials.

### **Analyses**

Data were collected using grounded theory: first, the investigation was designed to ensure the main aim and the specific ones, along with the research questions. The design of the interview takes Warr's model of Mental Health (1987) as a benchmark for the formulation of questions. This model states that Mental Health stems from the integration of various principal components, each of which can be considered a continuum: affective well-being (with an emphasis on satisfaction, the axes of anxiety-contentment and depression-enthusiasm); competence (or the number of appropriate resources a person has to overcome pressure and other requirements from the environment); autonomy (or the ability to endure the influences from the environment and determine one's own actions); aspiration (to what extent a person reflects a motivated behavior, is aware of new opportunities, and strives to meet desirable aims and challenges); and integrated functioning (the functioning of a person as a whole, including the other four components). It is a widely recognized model that has been used in different scenarios, as well as in organizations and other kinds of environments. The design was later contrasted and agreed upon by several expert researchers on gender and health psychology.

Taking advantage of the high cultural level of the participants, a semi-structured interview was planned and carried out that had to be answered on paper. Each

participant was contacted personally, and they all received instructions on completing the interview. A communication channel was kept open in order to resolve any doubts about the interview. Then, data codification and analysis were conducted using Atlas.ti version 1.0.50. A first open coding was developed through a thorough reading to identify relevant ideas and fragments. After that, an axial coding was performed, where fragments were categorized in 4 main categories and 8 subcategories, based on the research aims.

Choosing the paper-based semi-structured interview technique meets a research need because the participants live in distant locations across the Spanish peninsula, which made it impossible for them to be interviewed in person.

## **Results**

The amount of information collected, the diversity of styles and registers, and the prominence of all these experiences make it indispensable to structure the contents of this analysis in four large parts: part one describes these spiritual movements; part two leads to the discussion of the findings about the psychosocial health promotion factors; part three is related to linkage and human relations; and finally, part four deals with sexuality.

### **Diversity of ecofeminist spiritualities**

The first aim of this study consists of characterizing the new ecofeminist spirituality movements that have been arising in Spain. All the participants come from families ascribed to Catholicism or non-religious families highly influenced by Catholicism in their environments. In this regard, it is relevant to consider sociological investigations that state that secularization is taking place not only in Spain (CIS, 2008), but also in Europe, especially among young people living in urban areas (Pew Research Center,

2015). This situation coincides with the population segment that engages in this model of ecofeminist spirituality.

Unlike what is generally believed, most of the participants entered this spiritual paradigm in a formal way in the past ten years, and the fact that they are highly educated women also coincides with some sociological studies about this topic (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Pérez-Agote & Santiago, 2005). The participants have always lived an alternative model of spirituality, albeit in a more informal manner. They do not normally do so based on any sort of individual or collective influence (as opposed to some religious movements, there is no such thing as an “apostolate” in these types of spiritualities). The participants, however, talk about their own spiritual curiosities, which cannot be fulfilled by the hegemonic Catholic model, partly due to factors such as sexism, sexophobia, the lack of environmental awareness, and the void that the traditional Catholic ideology produces, which makes modern life incompatible with it:

I'm so against a value system that denies and objectifies Nature in all possible ways. The way I see it: patriarchal monotheism is the root of wild capitalism, and therefore of climate change. Guilt and the misinterpretation of Femininity as driving forces of any sort of spirituality are so noxious that it makes it difficult for me to understand how there can be intelligent, sensitive, and well-educated people who belong to this Catholic institution (Participant 3).

This leads them to seek answers, mostly from their childhood:

My first memory linked to spirituality: I was four, and it was when I performed a ritual: I looked for a special place, with a



rectangular stone that already existed, and I crafted a specific accessory (a simple hairpiece made with palm leaves and a necklace made with the same material), a chant that consisted of just one invented word that I would repeat over again that I can still remember, and a circular dance. It was an initiation ritual that I performed several times... I have no idea where all this imagery comes from, so tribal. I don't recall sharing these rituals that I had always performed on any other occasions. (Participant 3).

On these occasions, the pursuit finds its answers in teenage or children's literature:

As a little girl, I felt deeply attracted to the world of nature, the mythology of different cultures, and everything that had to do with magic and witchcraft... since I was very little I owned my secondhand books of spells and incantations that I would buy at the flea market... (Participant 1).

The search for models and access to other forms of spirituality is usually complete during adolescence, when a process of detachment from Catholicism begins, and many answers are found, as well as other ways of experiencing the dimensions of spirituality: "at the age of 16, I started to investigate and approached Wicca in its tradition: Reclaiming" (Participant 6); "At 11, I was taught how to relax at school during an after-school activity. I haven't stopped doing it since then... I started getting information about energies and new ways of being in the world" (Participant 2).

Most participants feel that they have finally found their peers after a long quest. They feel that they are not alone, that there is a model of spirituality in which they can engage with all their intuitive beliefs:

When I was 10 or 11, I already cast spells and invoked female deities and the Moon. At 17, I discovered Wicca and found out that there was a name for all the beliefs I used to have as a child, and just a little later I came across the Way of the Goddess within paganism, and so everything started to make perfect sense to me (Participant 1).

However, not all the participants have taken part in organized circles or groups. The heterogeneity of these spiritual movements means that some women enter one group or another, whereas others live their models in solitude. This situation becomes apparent when considering the large variety and types of names these women use to define their spiritual currents. Sometimes spirituality gets mixed up with religion in some of their narratives: feminine spirituality, Wicca, Wicca Reclaiming, Paganism, Neo-Paganism, The Current of the Goddess, Feminine Mystique, Tradition of the Great Mother, Tradition of HispAnna Iberia, feminine spiritual Psychology, and spiritual Healing through goddess archetypes. Some of them do not have a name to describe their spirituality, and this is not a real problem for them. Nevertheless, the origins of the separation from the hegemonic model are clearly integrated and understood, and they have been intrinsically incorporated into the principles that steer feminism:

The hegemonic model is sustained by the belief of separation, which generates an identity and mindset that are Egoic (separated), and the unconsciousness of our creative capacities. The power comes from an outer force, a God, which normally ends up in a hierarchical system of domination/submission and in the creation of disempowering archetypes, such as victim, martyr, and servant. In addition, it

is a system that's patriarchal, where the father is the one who's got the power and the right to exist, to do, and to possess. The violence this generates is extreme. The infinite creative abilities are limited, and so is human diversity, along with self-esteem... There's a gender instability where masculinity is overestimated and controls the social, the political, the economic, and the religious environments. People are disempowered: no freedom, no decision-making on their own, no self-healing... Dependency on a superior being emerges (on a God that is external and out-of-reach, a spiritual guide/priest, a ruler, a doctor, a partner, etc.). Ancestral knowledge is usually seen as dangerous (pseudoscience, witchcraft, etc.) (Participant 5).

In short, the participants' general conception about the reasons for their rupture with the hegemonic model coincides with Ress's research (2010) and with the model of ecofeminist spirituality, in that it paves the way for an open, relational, and vitalist spirituality, giving them the possibility to grow in accordance with the values of feminism (Woodhead, 2007). In addition, the tenets related to the religious term are substituted by those associated with the term of spirituality, which is conceived as a more positive term (Woodhead & Heelas, 2005).

### **Factors for the promotion of psychosocial health**

The main aim of this study is to explore whether these spiritual milieus are optimal for promoting factors of psychosocial health. For this reason, Warr's model of Mental Health has been selected, a model consisting of 5 dimensions that also serve as subcategories in the analysis of the content of the interviews. In most cases, quotes

reveal the interference of the model used. Table I shows the number of quotes related to each of the model's dimensions accounted for in each interview.

Table I. Quotes accounted for in interviews with regard to the dimensions of the model of Mental Health.

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Overall
Age	28	38	47	29	40	41	51	42	31	47	40	45	
Aspiration	3	2	1	2	1		1	2	2	2	1		17
Autonomy	1	1		4	2	1	1			1	3	1	15
Affective well-being		5	2	3		2	4	1	2	2	1	1	23
Competence		2	3	4	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	27
Integrated functioning	1		1		1		1	1		2	1		8

Source: personally compiled

The resulting data show that the participants' narratives describe a model of spirituality that has significantly brought them affective well-being and other tools to deal with their lives (competence), not limitations or bad experiences have been reported. For the most part, well-being is defined as a high capacity for emotional regulation, as well as the feeling of being at ease with themselves:

It definitely gives me more emotional stability, a bigger view of what's happening around me, more tranquility. In my personal life, I feel more focused. I feel I have found something that gives me security and allows me to live my life to the fullest, with less anxiety. (Participant 10)

The participants also show the integration of tools to cope with the contingencies in life from within this spiritual model:

With all these tools, it's easier to manage your daily life. It helps me to look at things with greater love. If one day ends

up being a disaster, it's much easier now to find solutions.

Even the constant worrying about stupid things, I can now manage more easily and efficiently. I also express myself better, which definitely improves my social relations.

(Participant 4)

With regard to autonomy, the participants' narratives hinge on several key concepts, such as assertiveness:

I've become a more assertive person, which means I don't have to submit to more than I should. Christianity regards self-sacrifice very highly, especially from women, which leads us to do thousands of things that will end up strangling us with pressures and requirements. (Participant 12)

And the limitations of relationships:

My goddess is feminine, and that encourages me to cherish myself and set my own limits, something that's always been difficult for me. It's helped me a lot in setting limits because it's helped me to love who I am and respect myself.

(Participant 7)

Most participants did not report any difficult situations in their closest circles regarding their choice of an alternative model of spirituality. However, they describe swimming against the tide in a primarily Christian environment as an exercise in autonomy that has helped them to be more autonomous in other areas of their lives.

Most of these participants have outperformed themselves professionally. Many embrace a new feeling of security in taking on responsibilities, in stepping out of their comfort zone, and in undertaking new goals in life. Most of them are now PhD and

college students, lifelong learners, or starting over in their professions. They all feel extremely confident about doing their best in their social lives:

It gives me the confidence to believe in myself and in the gratitude of the universe. Everything's possible if you're connected to the infinite source and your everlasting flair. I now engage in new personal and professional goals with serenity, a feeling of capability... (Participant 5)

The narratives show that these types of spiritualities are psycho-spiritual because they not only uphold the premises of humanitarian psychology, taking it back to its etymological origins (*psykhé*): the study of the human soul, but they also generate “holistic milieus”, therapeutic environments or spaces of personal growth where spirituality, feminism, and health converge. This interpretation is supported by scientific literature worldwide (Heelas and Woodhead) and in the Spanish setting (Cornejo-Valle & Blázquez-Rodríguez), where the World Health Organization describes health broadly as: the state of well-being that is not only somatic, but also psychological and social, individually and collectively (Navarro, 2012). Therefore, the ecofeminist spirituality movements could be considered health agents.

### **Models of linkage and personal relationships**

Interpersonal relationships are extremely important to these participants in their lives. They are completely aware of the fact that these relationships can serve as a powerful source of health, self-knowledge, and well-being, or as a niche of conflicts and negative emotions that may end up deteriorating their health: “I live my relationships as a union of myself. The relationships I establish are as intense as my level of consciousness because I am who I am because of them, raising consciousness in myself through them” (Participant 3).

They distinguish four relationship settings: family, friends in general, women in particular, and their partners.

Regarding the family, they have come a long way in terms of the differences they have understood and accepted because some of these families have been unable to comprehend the feminist ideology or the model of spirituality. This was a source of conflicts in the beginning, but it has evolved toward mutual understanding: “The relationship with my mother, which used to be more tumultuous back then, has improved considerably thanks to sympathy, acceptance and positive communication” (Participant 5).

As for friendships, assertiveness and autonomy anchor relationships based on equality and reciprocity, staying away from toxic relationships. It is vital for them to have healthy people around:

There’s more freedom in friendships now: there are no commitments, no meeting someone as an obligation. It’s about reciprocity: if I’m not interested in them, I’ll let them know. I now have a family I chose, not genetically imposed, although I have a good relationship with my biological family. (Participant 12)

All the participants reveal that their beliefs protect them from unequal partner relationships, or others that could end up in harassment. There is evidence of factors that could prevent sexual violence:

Regarding couple relationships, because self-respect is unquestionable in my religion, I have had to end relationships that were threatening, with too much controlling, manipulation or psychological harassment even. The fact that

we're all divine and deserve love and respect makes it easier to say no to what's not beneficial... there's no jealousy, we have things in common, hobbies, common friendships, and friends of our own. There are no power struggles or fights over controlling one another; we share everything, the chores, obligations, etc. (Participant 1)

The connection with other women is significant here: they all show a change in the way they relate to other women or in women's groups. Generally speaking, their discourse revolves around the feminist concept of "sorority," a concept that has had a deeper influence in the Hispanic setting thanks to feminist anthropologist Marcela Lagarde. It refers to a change in the relational paradigm among women, which moves through the ethical, the political, and the practical in contemporary feminism, and defends cooperation and relationship alliances among women through gratitude and mutual support:

You no longer look at other women as rivals. You see them as sisters with the same difficulties as yours. The value of women's relationships increases, raising awareness of the multiple benefits they bring us. The levels of admiration and veneration towards other women rise, due to all our extraordinary capabilities (Participant 8).

In light of these results, we observe that psychosocial health factors are promoted in these spaces: affective well-being, competence, aspiration and autonomy. There is a questioning of relational models and an investment in healthier relationships through: (1) self-knowledge and the questioning of the patriarchal precepts of culture; (2) the analysis and review of linkage models as health-disease generating agents; (3) the



regulation and expression of emotions and their links to health; (4) the development of agency in women: assertiveness, autonomy, self-confidence, and activity; (5) the generation of networks of support and empowerment; (6) Dialogic learning in community groups; (7) the promotion of well-being, paying attention to the biophysical dimension.

There are countless publications that relate the quality of interpersonal relationships, assertiveness, empathy, autonomy, attachment models, the family system, and other factors associated with psychosocial health, including how all these factors determine, shape, and modify our brains, their biochemistry, connections and functioning (Cozolino, 2014).

### **Sexual health**

Feminist theology breaks with centuries of dissociation between the sexed body and the spiritual dimension, where carnality is the opposite of spirituality. The origins of this split (spirituality-sexuality) are actually pre-Christian, and the Stoics and Epicureans viewed erotic pleasures as a distraction on the spiritual path. Later Christianity elevates this "distraction" to the level of sin: in order to be spiritual one should be asexuated like the angels. For this reason, celibacy was first established for priests and nuns, and sexuality was later circumscribed to the reproductive scope within marriage for the whole congregation (Greenberg, 1990). However, ecofeminist spirituality advocates an incarnated spirituality, and so it is manifested in the participants. It is important to recover the body as a theological locus and associate it with spirituality, to destroy and then build another more healing look at our bodies from the experience of sexuality, to demand a new ethic based on the experiences of the bodies themselves, with their long history, wisdom, and desires (Ress, 2010). It is necessary to experience nature and celebrate sexuality, which involves a disinhibition of

the female body and a sexual freedom that male-dominated religions have pursued and punished as the greatest and most important of their anathema (Simonis, 2012).

There is controversy among the participants. We find that many have integrated the theoretical discourse. Basically, they can accede to the listener or corporal conscience: "I have learned to listen to my body, if it asks for sex, I manage to satisfy it and not to repress myself" (Participant 9), "I conceive the body as an important part of myself, something to take care of, that allows me to be here and now and to work for my spiritual development." (Participant 10).

Participants mention a disappearance of the sexual blame, both in self-pleasure and in relationships with partner(s):

The taboo of female masturbation disappears and helps you to find your own pleasure, but also to transfer it to your partner without reservations, without that embarrassment, and he (in my case) or she also enjoys a different way (Participant 1).

However, many continue to circumscribe eroticism only to a stable couple: "Getting rid of cultural constructs is a very slow and painful process, and certainly unworkable in its entirety (monogamy)... it is very difficult to explore alternative ways to traditional models of relationships" (Participant 3).

They live sexuality as a sacred act: "We speak of a religion that conceives of sex as something sacred and one of the rituals of the Goddess, and it has a festival dedicated exclusively to the sexual act and the fertility of the earth." (Participant 1). In this regard, the uterus becomes important as a generator of life and pleasure, and therefore sacred, and menstrual cycles are to be heard and used in everyday life.

One of the main characteristics of this model of spirituality the participants describe is corporeality and, consequently, the acceptance of sexuality as a positive and healthy

element. Thus, according to the WHO definition of sexual health:

sexual health is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relations, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. (WHO, 2016)

We observe that these precepts are present in the discourses of the participants, promoting sexual health factors such as: (1) the development of self-perception of the body, its cycles and its rhythms; (2) the questioning of patriarchal impositions on the canons of feminine beauty and the acceptance of diversity in the composition of the self-image; (3) the promotion of sexual rights (WASS, 2014); and (4) the experience of pleasurable, free, and safe sexual experiences from a positive and non-guilty perspective, and a reconciliation especially with genitality and menstruation.

It should also be noted that, although the participants are clear about the theoretical discourse of feminist sexual liberation, many say that it is extremely complex to deploy these premises in their lives. This is basically because they are women who have developed within a Catholic Christian culture, integrating a model of culprit sexuality if it is not associated with marriage and procreation. These social mandates have been integrated since childhood and are difficult to dismantle, especially when they are still in force for the majority of the population.

## **Discussion**

The model of ecofeminist spirituality has been developed predominantly in the twentieth century counter-cultural movements and, therefore, includes values of feminism, pacifism, environmentalism, indigenous struggles and anti-racism, and sexual liberation movements. The content analysis of the interviews revealed that in these ecofeminist spiritual environments, the participants are promoting both psychosocial

health and sexual health factors aligned with those proposed by the World Health Organization.

Some tools present in ecofeminist spiritualities that could be promoting psychosocial and sexual health factors are: generating resources to cope with stress; coping with grief due to significant losses, either through separation or the death of a loved one; analyzing and reviewing linkage models as health or disease generating agents; developing agency in women: assertiveness, autonomy, self-confidence, and activity; questioning patriarchal impositions on the canons of feminine beauty and the acceptance of diversity in the composition of the self-image, improving self-confidence, which could prevent self-image disorders; promoting sexual rights (WASS, 2014) and experiencing pleasurable, free, and safe sexual experiences from a positive and non-guilty perspective, thus allowing reconciliation, especially with women's sexuality, or helping in sex abuse cases.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

As a proposal for future research, the number of participants should be increased in order to include greater heterogeneity of the spiritual movements that emerge in the ecofeminist model and greater diversity of women such as different ethnicity, social status or sexual diversity. More studies are needed to explore whether these post-Christian spiritualities are generally promoting psychosocial and sexual health factors in women.

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