

# Feeding the City and Making the Revolution: Women and Urban Agriculture in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)

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**Abstract:** The everyday difficulties faced by working-class women, including access to food, are aggravated in critical periods, such as wars and economic crises. However, the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) was accompanied by a revolution, in the Republican zones, where women opened spaces for their emancipation. By examining social reproduction practices surrounding food in Barcelona during the years 1936–1939, we contribute to critical research on food sovereignty in the urban contexts. Our core findings inform the role of women in food provision and production, through individual subsistence agriculture, involvement in Barcelona's anarcho-syndicalist agricultural collective, as well as in agriculture education and training programmes. Our research is based on original archival data, historical press and interviews with witnesses of the war. We conclude that revolutionary and transformative actions, including current food sovereignty practices, need to make gender justice a central goal.

**Resum:** Les dificultats quotidianes a què s'enfronten les dones de la classe treballadora, inclòs l'accés als aliments, s'agreugen en períodes crítics, com ara en guerres i crisis econòmiques. Amb tot, la Guerra Civil Espanyola (1936-1939) va anar acompanyada d'una revolució a les zones republicanes, en què les dones van obrir espais per la seva emancipació. En examinar les pràctiques de reproducció social al voltant de l'alimentació a Barcelona durant els anys 1936-1939, contribuïm a la recerca crítica sobre la sobirania alimentària en els contextos urbans. Els nostres principals resultats informen sobre el paper de la dona en la provisió i producció d'aliments, a través de l'agricultura de subsistència individual i sobre la seva participació en la col·lectivització agrícola anarcosindicalista de Barcelona, així com en els programes d'educació i formació agrícoles. La nostra recerca es basa en dades d'arxiu originals, premsa històrica i entrevistes a testimonis de la guerra. Concloem que les accions revolucionàries i transformadores, incloses les pràctiques actuals de sobirania alimentària, han de fer de la justícia de gènere un objectiu central.

**Keywords:** urban agriculture, land collectivisation, food sovereignty, collective organisation, social reproduction, gender, Barcelona

## Introduction

In the middle of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the anarchist organisation *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) published an advertisement in the Republican press calling for women war refugees to join agricultural courses in the city of Barcelona (La Vanguardia 1938). As the war progressed and more men were called up to the battlefronts to fight against the insurgent army of General Franco, women stepped up to fill the jobs left vacant and contribute to the war effort. Small scale food production in urban and peri-urban lands was part of this endeavour. Due to their high dependence on food produced elsewhere, urban areas are typically vulnerable to food shortages. During the Spanish Civil War, the lack of food provision was particularly severe in the Republican zone (Hernández Burgos 2019). Rationing, shortages and hunger were part of the daily life experiences in the urban rearguard. In Barcelona, the local population organised to start growing vegetables in urban and peri-urban lands, from individual-family gardens to gardens in schools, collectivised factories and even a large, grassroots agrarian collective supported by the anarcho-syndicalists: the *Colectividad Agrícola de Barcelona y su Radio* (henceforth CAdB) (Camps-Calvet et al. 2021). In all these spaces, women played a key role as food producers and providers in the context of the political struggle against fascism.

Since the late 1970s, a growing body of literature has studied the collectivisation of the agricultural sector during the Spanish Civil War (see, for instance, Bernecker 1982; Castillo Cañiz 2016; Centre d'Estudis Comarcals del Baix Llobregat 1989; Gavalda 2016; Leval 1977; Peirats 1990; Puig Vallverdú 2020). Less attention, however, has been paid to the role of women in this process (Ackelsberg 1993; Willemse 2002) and to agricultural collectivism in urban spaces (Castells Durán 1993). Our work is inspired by *Antipode's* Special Issue on social anarchism and the environment published in the late 1970s (Breitbart 1978a), which included empirical and theoretical contributions on industrial and agrarian collectivisations during the Spanish Civil War (Amsden 1978; Breitbart 1978c; Garcia-Ramon 1978), as well as by the more recent academic research that has explored anarchist thought and practice in geography (see, for instance, Ferretti et al. 2018; Gorostiza et al. 2013; Springer et al. 2012).

In this paper we use the lens of food sovereignty to examine the involvement of women in food production and provision in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. We explore social reproduction practices surrounding food, including: (1) women's role as providers of food for their communities and their struggles to access food; (2) their involvement in food production, both in individual and collective agriculture; and (3) their collective organisation through the development of agricultural training programmes.

We contribute to critical research on food sovereignty in two main ways. First, while most studies of food sovereignty have focused on peasant and family farmers in rural areas (Agarwal 2014), our research contributes to the growing literature on urban and peri-urban spaces (see, for instance, Bowness and Wittman 2021; García-Sempere et al. 2018; Resler and Hagolani-Albov 2021; Siebert 2020). Second, few empirical studies have focused on the gender dimensions of local food sovereignty practices (Bezner Kerr et al. 2019; Masson

et al. 2017; Turner et al. 2020). In particular, the analysis of women's daily food provisioning activities is an overlooked aspect in the food sovereignty literature (Turner et al. 2020). We add to new and ongoing debates about the role of women in food sovereignty by detailing the role of women in struggles over food, and how they relate to bottom-up organisation, mutual aid practices, and the fight against social subordination and gender inequalities. Some authors have understood these practices as instances of food sovereignty and argued that, to some extent, food sovereignty contains anarchist principles (Wald 2015). However, these practices remain insufficiently addressed.

Our sources include archival materials from the Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (CDMH, Salamanca); the Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (ANC, Sant Cugat); the Arxiu Municipal de Barcelona; the Arxiu del Pavelló de la República (CRAI, Barcelona); and the International Institute of Social History (IISH, Amsterdam). In the collections of the ANC we found detailed reports about collective agriculture in Barcelona, 397 work certificates, and a list of the women employed by the CADB.<sup>1</sup> With the work certificates we developed a database of the workers' socioeconomic profiles. We complemented these archival sources with four semi-structured interviews with persons who were 16–20 years old during the war. The interviews aimed at understanding women's everyday life during this period, their knowledge of the agricultural practices within the city, and their role as food providers. We also consulted the recordings of the interviews carried out by Lisa Berger and Carol Mazer in the 1980s with several members of *Mujeres Libres*, available at the FilMOTECA de Catalunya.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, we located several films of war refugees employed in agriculture in Barcelona at the Swiss Social Archive.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we reviewed news and reports about agriculture in Barcelona from several periodicals published during the Spanish Civil War, such as *¡¡Campo!!*, *Mujeres Libres*, *Tierra y Libertad*, and *Solidaridad Obrera*, among others.

The article is structured as follows. The next section briefly introduces the emerging debate on gender, food sovereignty, and social reproduction. The following section provides some historical background to the case study: first, we illustrate some international examples, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of women's struggles for food; second, we focus on women's collective actions in Barcelona during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; third, we introduce the socio-political context of the Spanish Civil War; and, fourth, we explain women's struggles for freedom during the war. The third and central section of the paper presents our core findings regarding women's participation in food provision and production, and in agriculture training in Barcelona during the years 1936–1939. We conclude by discussing some key components of food sovereignty observed in our case, and how women's participation in the public sphere confronted and tried to transform unequal social class and gender relations.

## Food Sovereignty, Gender, and Social Reproduction

Food sovereignty has been defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Vía

Campesina 2007). Since the emergence of food sovereignty in global debates, the concept has been shifting and expanding, but some objectives such as justice in resource access and the creation of participatory decision-making spaces remain key (Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Routledge 2015; Wittman 2011). Therefore, food sovereignty moves beyond food security by including just production and distribution processes as well (Patel 2009; Vía Campesina 1996). Food sovereignty is not an isolated social movement; rather it represents a key element inside other movements promoted by a variety of actors defining alternative political agendas, and raising the interest of feminist organisations (Masson et al. 2017).

Food sovereignty demands equal power relations through a transformative change in social relations (Patel 2009). Gender is considered a key factor in the identification of power inequalities. Hence, developing alternative models to food production and distribution constitutes a basic challenge (Patel 2012). Women, especially peasant women, have traditionally been the main actors in local, small-scale, and food subsistence systems (Masson et al. 2017; Sachs 2013). However, the relations of power intrinsic to both the capitalist system (class inequalities) and the patriarchal system (gender discrimination) have undervalued their work (Vivas 2012). Many authors have identified the gendered constraints that have systematically made difficult the access of women to resources, means of production, and decision-making (Agarwal 2014; Patel 2012; Pimbert 2009; Sachs 2013). A feminist intersectional approach, addressing the interconnected and conflicting dynamics of gender with race, ethnicity and class, is needed to confront the inequalities in food production, provision and access (Sachs 2013).

The role played by women in subsistence and unpaid labour, including small-scale production, domestic tasks, and care (Cousins et al. 2018; Vivas 2012), intensifies in periods of conflict, when the livelihoods of poor and marginalised populations are especially threatened. During armed conflicts, most civilians in the rearguard are women who, among multiple tasks, must take care of those too young or too old to go to the front lines. Therefore, women and particularly working-class women carry most of the responsibility in satisfying basic needs for households and communities. The necessity to obtain nourishment amplifies and multiplies women's work, reinforcing their traditional role as protectors of family well-being. In sum, during conflicts, women support the subsistence of the community and its struggle for survival (Nash 1995). Their role as food providers is a central dimension of this struggle.

Our article analyses a historical case study where women's everyday practices were key to securing food in a context of crisis and war. In this, we draw insights from social reproduction theory, a critical feminist perspective which articulates both reproductive and productive spheres, through the analysis of women's everyday, unpaid care work for the family or the community (Bhattacharya 2017). Social reproduction theory also unpacks how social and gender inequalities are perpetuated by social practices and institutions (Ferguson 2017). In sum, social reproduction goes beyond the identification of the everyday activities, and "allows for an explanation of the structures, relationships, and dynamics that produce those activities" (Luxton 2006:36–37). In our case, this means rendering visible the different

social reproductive forms surrounding food in which women were involved and the structural limitations that constrained their struggles for freedom.

## **Women's Struggles, Food, and the Spanish Civil War**

Several historical examples in the 20<sup>th</sup> century illustrate the importance of women's struggles to access, produce, and manage food resources. Armed conflicts, in particular, often brought to light women's key role in several dimensions of food provision. During WWI, when the US National War Garden Commission encouraged civilians to contribute to the war effort by growing food, near 15,000 women were mobilised to work on farms as part of the so-called Woman's Land Army of America (Gowdy-Wygant 2013). In WWII, the US, the UK, and the Soviet Union promoted home gardening on a large scale. The Soviet Union, especially, saw the rapid and massive mobilisation of millions of women in urban agriculture (Charon Cardona and Markwick 2019). Through propaganda and educational programmes mainly directed at women as part of the subsistence effort, small-scale urban horticulture became crucial to feed the civil population, while large-scale production was redirected almost completely to the war fronts. Moreover, during wars, the decrease of men in the rearguard also challenged gender roles.

The integration of women into positions which were previously denied to them implied the emergence of new rights and opportunities; however, these achievements usually vanished when the war ended. In order to maintain the new roles and gains achieved by women during the war and to accomplish women's emancipation, drastic social changes in gender roles such as those happening during revolutionary periods are essential. This was the case of the Republican zones in the Spanish Civil War where the war was accompanied by a revolutionary process that offered new opportunities for women challenging class and gender oppression (Lines 2011).

## ***A Revolution in the Making***

In Spain, during the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the integration of women into the labour market was parallel with their organisation and engagement in struggles for working rights (see, for instance, Moral Vargas 2012). In 1917 and 1918, for example, protests ignited in Barcelona after the price of basic staples skyrocketed. Spain remained neutral during WWI and exported food to countries at war, thus increasing shortages in several Spanish cities. In Barcelona, hundreds of working-class women took direct action, confronting the authorities, assaulting shops, food, and coal transports, and organising marches and strikes to claim their right to support and feed their communities (Kaplan 1982). Beyond the immediate need to feed their communities, women disrupted their socially imposed everyday life, occupied the off-limits urban space, and developed an awareness of their subjugated position, contributing to lay the foundations for the social revolution in 1936 (Ackelsberg and Breitbart 1987).

In parallel to these protests, women also strived to access food resources in alternative ways. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, they played an active role in

the Catalan cooperative movement, engaging in autonomously organised activities through the Women's Cooperative Propaganda Group in order to revert their exclusion from the movement's decision-making positions (Alari et al. 2016). The early 1930s was a period of growing pauperisation, with high rates of unemployment and inflation, and increasing strikes endorsed by the anarcho-sindicalist labour union *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour, CNT) (Ealham 2010). In June 1931, after six days of peasants' strike, in the peri-urban area of Barcelona, the CNT claimed that "women will do no other work than the recollection of fruits and vegetables, and their minimum wage will be six pesetas and a working day of eight hours" (Solidaridad Obrera 1931:6). This request shows that women were fully involved in waged agricultural work in the municipality and nearby, but also that the anarcho-sindicalists understood the restriction of their tasks as an improvement in working rights. These mobilisations were examples of the role of women's collective action in anticipation of their mass mobilisation which took place in the Spanish Civil War (Nash 1995).

### ***The 1936 Revolution and the Civil War***

In July 1936, a military insurrection supported by the fascist party Falange, the Catholic church, and landowning interests rose up against the legitimate left-wing Republican government (Preston 2002). The coup d'état started in the Spanish colonies in North Africa, led by military officers who had been trained in the colonial army. One of them, Francisco Franco, soon rose to become their leader (Balfour 2002). The war spread rapidly to the mainland, and military insurgents managed to get hold of almost a third of the Spanish territory, including the largest agricultural areas. However, the coup was defeated in the main Spanish cities and industrial centres such as Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, and Bilbao. This initial defeat of the insurgents, along with the support they received from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, sparked a civil war which would last until April 1939 (Preston 2002).

In the Republican side of Spain, the collapse of the state ignited a social revolution particularly powerful during the first year of the war in anarchist-controlled Catalonia (Ackelsberg and Breitbart 2017; Breitbart 1978b). Several authors have noted that this revolutionary period culminated with the so-called May Events in 1937, when different factions of the Republican side (CNT-FAI anarchists and POUM Marxists on one side, and the communist party PSUC and the socialist trade union UGT, backed by ERC and the Catalan government, on the other)<sup>4</sup> clashed violently, mainly in Barcelona but also in other parts of Catalonia. These clashes, often portrayed as a civil war inside the Republican side, resulted in a significant decrease of the anarchist influence for the rest of the war. Ealham (2010) has argued that the revolution was incomplete due to the lack of a revolutionary institution governing over the war effort and the collectivisations, allowing therefore the emergence and consolidation of a counter revolutionary process that reconstructed the old state and eroded collective work. Other authors have attributed the repression to the Catalan and Spanish governments dismantling most of social revolutionary advances (Ackelsberg and Breitbart 2017; Chomsky 1969).



One of the landmarks of the revolution was the collectivisation of agricultural, industrial, and service sectors sponsored by the unions, mainly the anarcho-sindicalist CNT. Given the predominance of agriculture in 1930s Spain, the collectivisation of the agricultural sector was of special importance. The number of agricultural collectives ranged from 1,280 to 2,213 (in August 1938) (Bernecker 1992) and were found mainly in Aragon (450), Valencia (340), Andalusia and Castile (250), and Catalonia (200) (Fontana 2014). Accordingly, studies of collectivisations developed during the late 1970s mostly focused on the agricultural sector. Recent works have revived and expanded this research, but the focus has remained on rural areas. Thus, the experience of the agricultural collective established in the city of Barcelona, an exceptional case of agrarian urban and peri-urban land collectivisation, has gone largely unnoticed (Camps-Calvet et al. 2021; Gabriel 2009; García et al. 1983; Puig Vallverdú 2020).

### ***Women's Struggles for Freedom***

During the first months of the war, on the Republican side the heroic figure of the *milicianas*, women from leftist political and union organisations fighting in the streets and front lines side by side with men, broke the traditionally subordinated female role. The military coup threatened key legal reforms approved by the Republican Spanish congress during the previous years, among them the legalisation of divorce and women's right to vote. During the war, an abortion law was approved first in Catalonia<sup>5</sup> and later in the rest of Republican Spain, when the Catalan anarchist Federica Montseny was the Minister for Health (Rodrigo 2014). The images of *milicianas* fighting in the streets and the battlefronts became a symbol of the mobilisation of women against fascism, having endured as one of the main icons of the revolution (Herrmann 2003; Martin Moruno 2010). Several thousand women fought in the battlefronts during these months, but as the war progressed, they were increasingly relegated to care work and rearguard needs (Berger 2018; Berger and Balló 2021; Herrmann 2003; Nash 1989; Tailor 2011).<sup>6</sup> Women were also called to provide health and welfare services both at home and on the front lines, and directly to workshops and factories. As in North America and Europe during the two World Wars, there was a massive mobilisation of the female workforce, occupying jobs traditionally held by men and developing new skills and aptitudes previously inaccessible to women. Moreover, women took more active roles in the public sphere, for example, occupying positions of responsibility in the unions or seeking out vocational training (Herrmann 2003; Lines 2011).

Women also made a strong appearance in the intellectual and political arenas. The main associations they established were the *Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas*, with about 60,000 members, under the influence of the Communist Party; the *Secretariado Femenino del POUM* (the Women's Secretariat of the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), with only a few hundred participants; and *Mujeres Libres* (founded by women participating in the anarcho-sindicalist movement), with around 20,000 women (Nash 1995). Only *Mujeres Libres* was exclusively

formed and controlled by women, advocating for their emancipation as an end in itself, beyond the contribution to the war effort (Ackelsberg 2005). *Mujeres Libres* fought against women's illiteracy, offering educational and professional training programmes to prevent gender segregation at work and expand consciousness on women's subjugated position. One of their demands was to earn the same salary as men: "In the field, in the factory, in the shop, in the office: equal work, equal pay" (Mujeres Libres 1937b:25).

Despite the initial presence of women in the battlefronts and the new roles adopted in the public sphere, the power struggles between the different factions of the Republican side, the reconstitution of the old state, and the progression of the war curtailed the possibilities of women's emancipation (Casanova 1997). Furthermore, predominant ideas about women's roles as mothers and caretakers remained, and so did differences in salaries. After one of her visits to Spain, anarchist political activist Emma Goldman pointed out that the majority of Spanish men, including her political comrades, considered women as inferiors, ignoring that "there can be no true emancipation as long as the dominance of one individual over another or of one class over another subsists" (Goldman 1936:8). According to statements published in *Mujeres Libres*, women fought against two main injustices: "class privilege based on the parasitical civilisation which gave birth to the monster of war; and male privilege, which turned half of mankind into autonomous beings and the other half into slaves" (Mujeres Libres 1937b:25). The patriarchal system was defined as the male domination exerted throughout history by state and class. In sum, their main intersectional struggles were against fascism, class privileges, and patriarchy.

In 1939, with the victory of Francoist forces supported by Hitler and Mussolini, the war came to an end. All collectives were dissolved and many of their members prosecuted. Several members of the CADB received prison and even death sentences. The Francoist regime suppressed women's rights such as abortion or divorce, enshrined their subjugation to men legally, and forced them to return to the domestic sphere (Mangini 1991; Martin Moruno 2010; Nash 1995). Thousands of Republican, anarchist, socialist, and communist women were imprisoned or took the path of exile to avoid repression. Many were physically eliminated, either after a judicial process or extrajudicially. Public psychological and physical humiliation, together with economic punishment, was the norm for many of those that stayed in Spain (Muñoz-Encinar 2019; Preston 2002; Richards 1998; Rodrigo 2008).

## Barcelona: Women Feeding the City

This section details women's struggle for food sovereignty in Barcelona during the Civil War. It is organised into four subsections, each discussing one significant aspect of such a struggle, namely: (1) food provision, that is, accessing and preparing food; (2) food production through individual, subsistence urban agriculture; (3) involvement in the urban agrarian collective (CADB); and (4) educational activities aimed at promoting women's collective autonomy in food production.



## Food Provision

The food security and social crisis created by the war both reinforced women's subordinate role, through intensifying their social reproductive tasks, and created opportunities for collective organisation and mobilisations challenging this subordination.

During the war, most women became more involved than before in the logistics of food provision or cooking (Ackelsberg 2005). One of our interviewees, Rosa Rosés, remembered how her mother worked "as a cook for an *ateneo*, cooking for the soldiers ... and she also brought home food from what was cooked".<sup>7</sup> Besides the traditional care work of the private sphere, women occupied public spaces managing food provision. It was mostly women and children who queued for long hours to obtain food at the shops that sold rationed provisions (Nash 1995). All our interviewees remembered queuing with their mothers. For instance, Concepció Cortés said: "I remember my mother putting us in a queue, in the queue for bread, in the queue for potatoes, in queues ... and when our turn arrived food was over, and we were left with nothing".<sup>8</sup> In their magazine, *Mujeres Libres* called to organise collectively the queues with 20 of 100 women remaining in the queue and distributing the food to each home later; hence the amounts of time lost would be reduced for more active and useful tasks (*Mujeres Libres* 1936b).

As in WWI, when the US government launched cookbooks and manuals to encourage a sense of patriotic duty in daily food preparation in the rearguard (Hayden-Smith 2014), the Catalan government published several cookbooks and magazines, such as *Menage*, *Menús de Guerra*, and *El menjar en temps de guerra*, addressed mainly to housewives, thus reinforcing a gendered division of labour. These cookbooks collected recipes that used few ingredients, since the main concern was to not waste anything. Meals contained more vegetables, and traditional recipes were adapted to the lack of the main ingredients they required. These publications implicitly incorporated an ideological discourse, presenting food deprivation as a necessary sacrifice to win the war (Moreno 2016).

Far from resigning to worsening conditions in food supply, many women occupied the public sphere and pursued collective action in women-only marches to protest against food shortages and rising prices. In Barcelona, as the war progressed, women protested against the lack of bread. When the first march occurred in December 1936, the government appeased the demonstration explaining that large quantities of wheat had just been purchased (*La Vanguardia* 1936). Similar marches took place again in February 1937 in the *barris* (neighbourhoods) of Sants and Barceloneta (*La Vanguardia* 1937a). In April 1937, groups of women protested against the rise of food prices at the city food markets, and required vendors to close their stalls (*La Vanguardia* 1937b). A few days later, in order to prevent rising prices of groceries, the government's supply commission announced a reduction in the price of basic foodstuffs such as potatoes (*La Vanguardia* 1937c). Supply issues in the rearguard were a source of tension among the anti-fascist organisations, and the political motivations connected to these demonstrations have been discussed by several authors (Guillamón 2014; Martín Ramos 2018). In the context of severe restrictions to food provision,

women also became actively involved in food production, both via subsistence agriculture practices and collective urban agriculture.

### ***Subsistence Agriculture***

Subsistence home gardens flourished in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. Franco's army progressively controlled more Spanish territory, blockading and compromising food supplies for Catalonia (Martín Ramos 2018). One of our interviewees, Antoni Verdú, explained that "in the first days ... people had few things at home because every day they went to the market, and ... [the war] caught us with nothing".<sup>9</sup> In 1938, the largest group of family gardens in Barcelona, the *Agrupació d'Hortolans de la Muntanya de Montjuïc*, included about 3,000 plots out of the estimated 10,000 plots in the city.<sup>10</sup> Rosa Rosés explained that access to gardening spaces during the war became very valuable: "I lived in Poble-Sec, a working-class neighbourhood near the [Montjuïc] mountain, and I remember very modest houses with gardens that acquired a lot of importance".

In accounts of everyday life in the Civil War, the importance and expansion of urban gardens was predominantly brought up by women. For instance, Encarnació Martorell, a young girl during the war explained in her diary: "The lack of food increases, and where there is a piece of vacant land, some take it and plant it. This is spreading, and in two plots next to the house neighbours are already planting" (Martorell i Gil 2011:30). Eulàlia Berenguer remembered how, "as things got worse, many people exploited small plots, flower beds, or even private gardens of well-to-do people to plant food" (in Serra and Serra 2003:230). Plots of marginal land that had never been cultivated were transformed into small gardens producing cabbages or tomatoes (Serra and Serra 2003). Moreover, many schools also started their own gardens. For example, in the school established by the workers of the collectivised water company, children cultivated the land and raised farm animals, and each class took care of a part of the garden (Wendenburg 2010).

Women interviewees tell a story of a city where the population attempted to increase autonomy in food provision by cultivating home gardens. Rosa Rosés explained that "people, even on the balconies, had chickens or rabbits or a tomato plant, unbelievable things!" In addition, Concepció Cortés said: "We had rabbits, we had chickens, and pigeons, during the war, before the bombings started", and pointed out that these practices were very common in almost every balcony in the Eixample neighbourhood. Our interviewees also mentioned that women were in charge of multiple tasks, and one noted how women had to assume also men's tasks.<sup>11</sup> This suggests a reconfiguration of gendered relations, however that only increased the production and reproduction undertakings carried on by women in the rearguard, and it was not translated in terms of gender equity. For instance, Barcelona women's daily care of home gardens and animals represented a significant and unrecognised additional workload, similar to what Ackelsberg (2005) noted for the cultivation of home gardens by rural women.

Finally, our interviewees also pointed out how part of the population resorted to the black market (*estraperlo*) and to robberies in order to obtain food. For

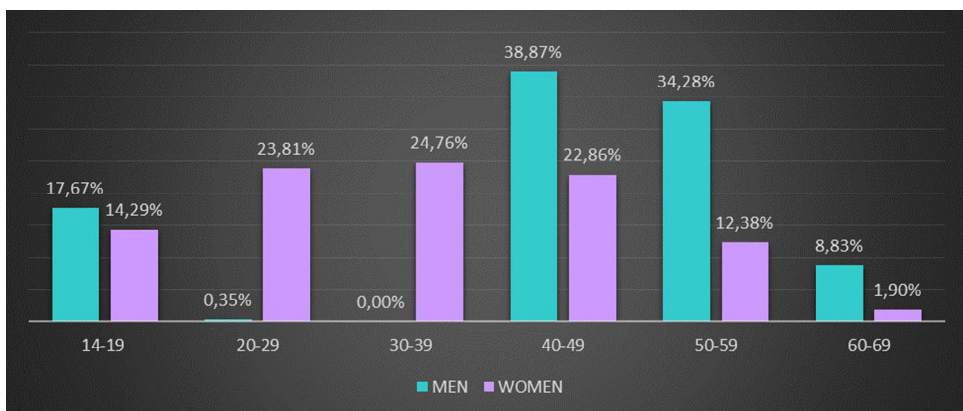
example, Concepció Cortés remembered: “We were on the roof playing, but also watching the rabbits so that they would not be stolen”. The robberies of fresh vegetables became a severe problem both in home gardens and in the fields managed collectively.<sup>12</sup> More significantly, home gardens were not the only form of urban agriculture involving women.

### **Collective Agriculture**

At the end of 1936, an agricultural collective was formed in Barcelona, supported by the CNT. The *Colectividad Agrícola de Barcelona y su Radio* (CAdB) cultivated about 1,000 hectares of urban and peri-urban land, including vacant lots, yards in monasteries, and land from former private owners. It was organised in five neighbourhoods: Horta, Sarrià, Pla Martí (Sant Martí), Armonia del Palomar (Sant Andreu), and Sants. The Central Committee decided the produce for each section according to the land conditions and the main needs of Barcelona’s population. The CAdB claimed to provide 90% of the vegetables sold in the city, distributing food directly to consumers without intermediaries, through the 105 market stalls they managed, plus 15 additional stalls for CAdB workers. The direct sale from the producer (CAdB) to the consumer (Barcelona’s citizens), and the savings derived from the shared use of seeds, fertilisers, and tools, aimed at lowering the prices of vegetables.<sup>13</sup> The CAdB also exchanged their products with neighbouring agrarian collectives, communicating their needs and spare materials through advertisements in the agrarian magazine of the CNT, *¡¡Campo!!*. The functioning of CAdB, however, was also affected, after the events of May 1937, by the clashes within the Republican side. In October 1937, the police confiscated all the objects, documents, and money at their central headquarters.<sup>14</sup>

The CAdB attained a maximum of 3,500 members in June 1937, being the largest agrarian collective of Catalonia in number of workers (see Bernecker 1982; Puig Vallverdú 2020). About 500 women were employed daily, representing 14.3% of the total workforce (*¡¡Campo!!* 1937a). The importance and number of women in the CAdB increased as the war progressed. By the end of 1938, 27% of the company work certificates belonged to women. In addition, we also found a women-only list that included 250 workers.<sup>15</sup> Workers in the CAdB were between 14 and 64 years old, with the highest percentage of women workers found in the 20–49 age group (among men, the dominant group was that of 40 – 59 years). Figure 1 shows that women had become an essential labour force, as most men between 20 and 40 were at the war fronts. An interview with one of the members of the CAdB, Àngel Sacristán, who worked in the peri-urban lands of Barcelona confirms the high presence of women working equal hours as men in the fields.<sup>16</sup> He also points out that women mainly engaged in harvesting and weeding (less physically demanding tasks), which is consistent with what workers demanded during a strike before the war (*Solidaridad Obrera* 1931).

The main jobs in the CAdB were related to direct food production, but women also worked selling the vegetables produced in several city markets (12% of the



**Figure 1:** Proportion of men and women for each age group according to *Colectividad Agrícola de Barcelona y su Radio* work certificates (end of 1938) (source: own elaboration)

women's jobs in the CAdB). Men worked in the agricultural fields but also as planners, accountants, shepherds, and well and irrigation keepers. Likewise, the main management positions of the collective were occupied by men, while women were generally absent in decision-making processes. We only found two women holding representative positions, elected by the commissions of each neighbourhood as delegates in two local markets, La Boqueria and La Concepció. From the analysis of more than a hundred letters of the CAdB, we found only one letter signed by a woman. She occupied the position of market delegate and organised a meeting inviting women's greengrocers of La Llibertat market and the top management of the CAdB.<sup>17</sup>

Although women's salaries almost tripled in comparison to 1931 (*Solidaridad Obrera* 1931), they were still behind men's. The most common salary for men was 180 pesetas per week, while women and underage workers (14–20 years old) received 115 pesetas per week, except women's greengrocers, most of them earning 100 pesetas per week. The analysis of women's civil status showed that most were married (64.76%), followed by single women (24.76%) and widowed (10.48%). As all members, women joined the CAdB on an individual basis, unlike other agrarian collectives where the registration was carried out in the name of a family. According to an article published in *¡¡Campo!!*, the main reasons to adopt individual registration in Barcelona were the absence of a family tradition of agrarian work, as well as the respect of different political opinions within the same family (*¡¡Campo!!* 1937b). Significantly, individual registration allowed women to earn and manage their own salary, in contrast with most of the rural collectives where husbands and fathers controlled the administration of household incomes. The CAdB welcomed near 600 refugees from Spanish regions occupied by the Francoist troops (*Solidaridad Obrera* 1938). An online search of the members of CAdB confirmed the presence of women war refugees among them.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore we found films showing men and women's war refugees working collectively in Barcelona urban gardens, where the division of the agrarian tasks

between them could be observed (the title of the documentary sequence is precisely “Men in gardening; Women weeding”).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, by examining signatures on work certificates, we determined the illiteracy index considering the fingerprint as illiterate and the written signature as literate. Regarding the whole labour force, proportions were almost identical: 51.81% signed, and 48.19% fingerprinted the certificate. However, in the case of women, barely a third (31.14%) signed while two-thirds (63.86%) fingerprinted, showing, therefore, much higher illiteracy compared to men. As differential access to education reinforced gender inequalities, groups like *Mujeres Libres* saw the importance of creating training programmes for women.

### ***Educational Activities: Learning about Collective Autonomy in Food Production***

One of the main challenges faced in agriculture was the loss of the men with farming skills (Gavalda 2016). The social composition of Barcelona was changing, with war refugees increasing from 198,000 in 1937 to 318,000 in July 1938 (Serrallonga i Urquidí 2004). As more and more workers were called up to the battlefronts, reports from the CAdB pointed out the problem of replacing male labour, specialised in local agriculture, with inexperienced war refugees.<sup>20</sup> Women took the jobs left by men, but as Mary Nash (1995) points out, they lacked professional training. Bringing together the need to train women and refugees to work in the gardens, in April 1938, *Mujeres Libres* in Barcelona called women war refugees to attend agriculture classes (La Vanguardia 1938). Suceso Portales, one of the main members of *Mujeres Libres*, remembered the importance of this organisation in each neighbourhood of Barcelona for the formation and education of women.<sup>21</sup>

In May 1937, *Mujeres Libres* inaugurated the *Instituto Mujeres Libres* in Barcelona, located in the *Casal de la Dona Treballadora* (Mujeres Libres 1937a). The institute offered free education and professional training to some 800 women<sup>22</sup> with the economic support of CNT Union of Construction, Food, Distribution, and the collectivised beer companies Damm and Moritz (Tierra y Libertad 1938). The offered courses ranged from elemental literacy classes to professional training in agriculture and aviculture (see Figure 2). Agricultural courses included notions of agronomy, plant breeding, economy, and organisational skills to create teams, mainly of physically strong women, directed by agricultural managers. Through the successful application of fertilisers and improved irrigation systems, knowledge of regional climates and the handling of agricultural machinery, these courses aimed at increasing production and productivity (Mujeres Libres 1938). The agricultural and avicultural courses also incorporated practical work (Mujeres Libres 1937c) (see Figure 3). The first experimental station was a farm-school located in the district of Sant Gervasi, Barcelona (Berenguer 2004; Mujeres Libres 1937a). In other cities, such as Madrid, *Mujeres Libres* also organised similar training programmes with agrarian practical work (Mujeres Libres 1937b). Moreover, in rural areas, agrarian experimental stations were developed promoting women's collective self-organisation in agriculture and aviculture, such as the





**Figure 2:** *Mujeres Libres* professional training for women at the *Casal de la Dona Treballadora* (Barcelona), including agricultural classes (source: CRAI Biblioteca del Pavelló de la República, Universitat de Barcelona; reproduced here with permission)



**Figure 3:** Members of *Mujeres Libres* doing agricultural work, November 1938; photograph by Pérez de Rozas (source: Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona, AFB3-134, ref. no. C1\_006\_019\_23; reproduced here with permission)



collectivised poultry farm in Amposta, directed by a woman (Mujeres Libres 1937c).

A key feature of these courses is that they acknowledged as labour women's work that was not recognised as such. For instance, the first courses organised by *Mujeres Libres* in Barcelona were directed to domestic workers (Tierra y Libertad 1938). With the aim of creating a school of professional domestic workers, this course aimed at empowering women by recognising their work, reclaiming for them working rights such as having a salary and a limit to working hours, as well as fighting against abuse and frequent near slavery conditions (Mujeres Libres 1936a). The Catalan government also helped to develop two main professional schools for women. In October 1937, the *Escola Professional de la Dona* (Women's Professional School), saw a fivefold increase in enrolment compared to the previous year. The *Institut d'Adaptació Professional de la Dona als Oficis Masculins* (Institute for Women's Adaptation to Men's Jobs), created in July 1937, targeted women aged between 16 and 35 who wanted to learn a job. About 15,000 women applied but only one-third were finally accepted, due to lack of space and resources (Nash 1995). The general aim of these institutions was to continue production, replace men called to the front lines, and adapt professionally women to men's jobs, including agricultural work. While the governmental regulations established that women replacing men in their jobs should be paid the same salary,<sup>23</sup> only in a few cases the elimination of gender pay gaps was achieved (Castells Durán 1993).

## Discussion and Conclusions

Through the analysis of women's involvement in the development and maintenance of the overall food system in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, our study has attempted to provide a better understanding of the historical realities of food struggles and their contribution to transformative social processes. Key components of food sovereignty, such as the right to food, the value of urban gardeners, local-oriented production, or control over the production system (Sachs 2013) were present in the urban collectivisation experience developed in Barcelona between 1936 and 1939. The transformations in food provision were many and interconnected, including planning of local food production and distribution, attempts to control food prices through the suppression of intermediaries, confronting speculation, and the procurement of a source of income, employment, and nourishment for the urban population.

Our findings inform current debates on food sovereignty, gender, and social reproduction in the following ways. First, our focus on a collectivist experience speaks to how food sovereignty practices may challenge the capitalist model (Edelman et al. 2014). The practices developed by the CAdB aimed to overcome capitalist exploitation through self-organised, bottom-up processes that improved conditions for agricultural workers and land access for the community. The change in the scope and scale of moving from small individual agriculture to a fully organised system may also inspire food sovereignty practices. Furthermore, the results of this research could be relevant for advancing transformative food

sovereignty practices and contributing to the re-peasantisation debate (Calvário 2017), most notably concerning new forms and actors little present in the food sovereignty debates such as the urban working-class and gendered peasants. In sum, the CAdB, a self-organised agrarian collective formed by the anarcho-syndicalist movement in the city of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, offers an important precedent for progressive urban social coalitions linking alternative forms of property (land collectivisation) with food sovereignty, adding a substantial participation of women in the process.

Second, and regarding emerging debates on gendered dimensions of food sovereignty practices, our results show how women engaged in different forms of urban food provision and production in Barcelona, moved beyond their traditional, unrecognised, and unpaid labour in home gardens, and achieved a significant participation as paid food producers in the CAdB, which could be seen as a step forward in the visibility and relevance of their productive work. While it is true that there was a salary gap between men and women performing the same tasks and working the same number of hours, comparing our results to those of other studies, in Barcelona women could earn their own salary, instead of a household income predominant in the rural areas and managed by fathers or husbands. Hence an important component of patriarchy was certainly broken.

The role of male dominated trade unions and the internal organisation of the collectivisation, under the direction of a few male members, contributed to silencing women and the illiterate which formed a large part of the population (Monjo and Vega 1986). Patriarchal inequalities were undoubtedly present, since the high percentage of women working in the CAdB would justify a much wider participation in public debates and a more active role in decision making. Widespread illiteracy among women may also explain this absence. Despite all these hurdles, women were elected by the commissions of the collective to hold positions in the food markets, increasing their visibility and role in certain areas. On the negative side, women's participation in the revolutionary and war efforts did not translate into gender equity, at least in terms of wages. Some rights were gained but the gender inequalities were not overcome. The present study confirms previous findings (Ackelsberg 1993, 2005; Nash 1995) about the difficulties to achieve gender equity even under a revolutionary context. We conclude that, in line with previous research, revolutionary and transformative actions, including current food sovereignty practices, need to make gender justice a central goal.

Finally, and importantly, our work has also attempted to provide full recognition of women's social reproductive work during the exceptional moment of the Spanish Civil War. Our results show the deep involvement of women in the struggle to supply food for their communities. Women responded to the food crisis through individual actions but also with collective mobilisation, occupying the public sphere beyond their traditional private spaces and roles, becoming involved in production, collective organisation, emancipatory educational programmes, and in revolutionary activities. After 1939, Franco's dictatorship monopolised political and public memory, and the stories of the defeated women were silenced for almost 40 years (Richards 1998), enforcing a collective amnesia about their mass mobilisation during the war (Ackelsberg 1993; Nash 1995).

Through our analysis of the everyday lives of women in Republican Spain during the Civil War, we hope to have contributed to unearth collective memory of their unique role as providers of life in times of crisis and death, as well as key actors in the struggle against fascism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These documents were part of the collections originally kept in the Centro Documental de Memoria Histórica, in Salamanca (Spain), which included documents confiscated by the Francoist army with repressive ends (Romero and López 2015).

<sup>2</sup> With these interviews, Lisa Berger and Carol Mazer produced the documentary “...All Our Lives” (1986). The original recordings of the interviews are available at the Filmoteca de Catalunya. References: 3149, 3151, 3153, 3155, 3157, 3159.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Risler films in the Swiss Social Archive. See “Spanien 1936/1937 Flüchtlinge”, minute 3:03 ([https://www.bild-video-ton.ch/bestand/objekt/Sozarch\\_F\\_9007-009](https://www.bild-video-ton.ch/bestand/objekt/Sozarch_F_9007-009)) and “Spanien 1936/37 ‘Flüchtlinge’ 2. Teil”, minute 5:56 ([https://www.bild-video-ton.ch/bestand/objekt/Sozarch\\_DVD-007](https://www.bild-video-ton.ch/bestand/objekt/Sozarch_DVD-007)) (last accessed 19 August 2021).

<sup>4</sup> CNT: Confederación Nacional del Trabajo / National Confederation of Labour. FAI: Federación Anarquista Ibérica / Iberian Anarchist Federation. POUM: Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista / Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification. PSUC: Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya / Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. UGT: Unión General de Trabajadores / General Union of Workers. ERC: Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya / Republican Left of Catalonia.

<sup>5</sup> Diari Oficial Generalitat de Catalunya (DOGC), 1937, “Decret pel qual és Regulada la Interrupció Artificial de l'embaràs”.

<sup>6</sup> See also Museo Virtual de la Mujer Combatiente; <https://www.mujeresenguerra.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Roser Rosés Senabre, Museu Història de Catalunya (MHC), Barcelona, 21 January 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Concepció Cortés Lara, MHC, Barcelona, 21 January 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Antoni Verdú Navarro, MHC, Barcelona, 4 February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> “Petició de l'Agrupació de Montjuïc Referent al Decret de la Generalitat de 10 d'Agost de 1938 i el Tribut Sobre la Terra dels Horts Familiars”, file number GM-895, classification code A183 Comissió de Governació, Arxiu Municipal Contemporani de Barcelona.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with Roser Rosés Senabre and Concepció Cortés Lara, MHC, Barcelona, 21 January 2019.

<sup>12</sup> “Informe sobre la Colectividad Agrícola de Barcelona y su Radio”, 15 August 1938, ANC1-886-T-13814, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya.

<sup>13</sup> “Memoria de la Colectividad de septiembre de 1938”, ANC1-886-T-13819, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya.

<sup>14</sup> 73B.2. “Documentos del Fiscal de la Audiencia Territorial de Barcelona y del Juzgado de Instrucción número 3, 1937; documentos para el Consejero de Economía de la Generalidad de Cataluña y el Ministro de la Gobernación, 1937; relación del moviliario [sic] etc. del Sindicato de las Industrias Alimenticias, 1937; cantidades que tenía en caja el Sindicato de

las Industrias Alimenticias y de las diferentes industrias que este sindicato controla, 1937", CNT (España) Archives, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

<sup>15</sup> "Relación de trabajadores de la Colectividad Agrícola de Barcelona y su Radio", ANC1-886-T-13819, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Àngel Sacristán, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona, 11 February 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Correspondència del Consell d'Empresa amb sindicats i empreses", ANC1-886-T-4028, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance two women war refugees from Mazaleón (Teruel) who worked in the CADB: Cándida París Ramos, <http://mazaleonrepresaliada.com/personas/paris-ramos-candida/> and Manuela Margelí Pellicer, <http://mazaleonrepresaliada.com/personas/margeli-pellicer-manuela-marcelina/> (last accessed 19 August 2021).

<sup>19</sup> See Endnote 3.

<sup>20</sup> "Memoria de la Colectividad Agrícola de Barcelona y su Radio", septiembre de 1938, ANC1-886-T-13819, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya.

<sup>21</sup> Interview carried out by Lisa Berger and Carol Mazer, Filmoteca de Catalunya (reference: 3151).

<sup>22</sup> 92B.8. "Informe sobre la cesión de la casa de la dona treballadora al banco de España. Barcelona 20 de diciembre 1938", CNT (España) Archives, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

<sup>23</sup> Diari Oficial Generalitat de Catalunya (DOGC), 11 de novembre del 1937, pp 619-623; "Aplicació del Decret del 10 de juliol de 1937 que creà l'Institut d'Adaptació Professional de la Dona" <https://dogc.gencat.cat/.content/continguts/serveis/republica/1937/19370315.pdf> (last accessed 26 January 2022).

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