



# MARÍA

Telo

## María Telo Núñez

*The lawyer of equality who was determined to change the Civil Code, and did*

**Cáceres, 1915 - Madrid, 2014**

The daughter of a military officer and later notary, she also wanted to become a notary; however, this profession was solely for men. She started studying law in Salamanca, but the Civil War broke out when she was only two classes away from finishing, and exams were suspended. She finished her degree in Zaragoza in 1940. She was unable to become a notary, as the Franco regime still only allowed men to exercise this profession.

In 1944, she secured a civil service post at the Technical Corps of the Civil Administration in the Ministry of Agriculture. She married the lawyer José Manuel Fernández-Baldor and had a daughter. Four years later, in 1949, she was widowed. In 1952, she joined the Bar Association in Madrid and opened her own law office.

She was indignant by the way the Civil Code treated married women, just like one of her touchstones, Clara Campoamor, whom she later met at the International Federation of Women in Legal Careers. There she condemned the legal status of women in Spain, with major repercussions. In 1969 she organised the organisation's annual board meeting in Madrid, where she discussed the topic 'Women in Civil Law'. This was the seed of the reform of the Civil Code and Commercial Code in 1975.

The 1975 law on the legal status of married women and husbands' rights and duties gave women back the capacity to exercise their rights. Achieving this during the Franco regime was a true feat. Until then, married woman had no rights. They were on par with minors, the mentally ill and the deaf and blind who were unable to write. Their husbands represented them in everything, and they needed a 'marital license', their husband's permission, to work or open a bank account.

In 1976 she joined the General Codification Commission –the top consultative body of the Ministry of Justice created in 1843 and in charge of revising and improving the legal system– along with three other women, Concha Sierra, Carmen Salinas and Belén Landáburu. Only one woman, Concepción Arenal, had participated in this commission earlier in the twentieth century. On that Commission, and in her 40 years of legal work, María Telo devoted her life to legally fighting discrimination against women in the legal field, as recounted in her book *Mi lucha por la igualdad jurídica de la mujer* (2009).

In her speech when she was awarded a Doctora Honoris Causa at the University of Salamanca, she recalled that legal equality does not mean actual equality. Men and women have to internalise equality: ‘The challenge of the twenty-first century lies in mindsets, and women have to be involved to achieve it’.

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