

**First steps toward equality:  
Spanish women in Higher Education (1910-1936)**

**Abstract**

The current academic year 2010-2011 marks a century of the presence of Spanish women in university classrooms. The objective of this article is to outline the extent of women's presence in higher education until 1936, and the initiatives that emerged in Spanish society that advocated said presence. The paper is based on an in-depth study of the scientific literature on the topic (84 works, of which 50 are quoted). They concern books that vary greatly in genre, written from widely different perspectives. The paper's originality lies in the endeavor to compare these studies (something which has not been done thus far) and to compile a summary that organically presents the extent of Spanish women's admission into universities. It is centered on the two most significant initiatives that upheld this movement: the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (ILE, Free Institute for Education) and the Institución Teresiana (Teresian Institute). The social milieu depicted is that of the bourgeois and erudite middle class, which was not very extensive, and in many cases, had little wealth. Up until the Spanish Civil War, this was the environment from which the majority of female university students emerged.

Keywords:

women

university

Spain 1910-1936

**Introduction**

The chronological coordinates of this paper are 1910, the year in which Spanish women were granted access to the higher education system, and 1936, the year in which the Spanish Civil War broke out.

When women first accessed the university system in 1910, they found themselves – unwillingly – in the eye of the debate on education that involved many of the country’s public figures (politicians, professors and intellectuals). They shared the conviction that a comprehensive renewal of the education system was required so as to achieve political and social regeneration. The university system was subject to the same profound decadence that affected the country as a whole. Women’s access to the system came at the worst possible moment, the same moment in which a process of gradual recovery began. This recovery was the result of the dynamic contribution of a number of newly established bodies under the auspices of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (ILE): the Council for Further Studies (1907), the Student Residence (1910), the Female Student Residence (1915), the Center for Historical Studies, and the National Institute of Physics and Chemistry. The objective was to renew the university system in every area: research, student education and training, and academic exchange at an international level.

The Teresian Institute came into being in 1911, founded by the priest Pedro Poveda, with the objective of fostering the education of women taking their first steps in the realm of knowledge.

### **Description of the ILE and the Teresian Institute**

As an institution, the ILE posed a fundamental problem to a large number of Spanish people: the ILE’s religious neutrality and, moreover, the conviction prevalent among many of its personnel that the backwardness of Spain might well be attributable largely to the cultural influence of the Catholic Church. The ILE was founded in 1876, when the Spanish Revolution of 1868 had already failed, by a number of renowned

university professors (Francisco Giner de los Ríos, Nicolás Salmerón, Gumersindo de Azcárate) who profoundly disagreed with the government of the time in relation to the political and religious dogmas the latter wished to impose on the university system. These figures had been the main characters of the 1866 university crisis that provoked a civic revival that would eventually lead to the 1868 revolution. The professors, having been deprived of their academic posts, first thought of establishing a free university. However, that ambition lay beyond their reach and means, and the professors resigned themselves to the establishment of a college. The ILE center was a revolutionary development in the Spanish education system, drawing on pedagogical trends then current in other European and American countries and deferring to relatively unconventional methods. The ILE approach soon had a significant impact on Spanish intellectual life. At the turn of the 20th century, for example, the University of Oviedo was a hotbed of ILE thinking, through the University Extension program, the objective of which was to spread the high culture of university education to a wider public. The influence of the ILE was amplified in a decisive way by the contribution of Francisco Giner, who regained his professorial position at the Central University in Madrid in 1881. The sphere of influence of the ILE expanded rapidly at the start of the 20th century, shaping to a significant extent the political design of the Spanish education system at all levels. The ILE's contribution to university life has already been noted; but the ILE also became involved in the education of teachers through the foundation of the School of Higher Studies in Teaching (1909); the General Council of Primary Education (1911), which oversaw the education of young children; and, finally, the establishment of the Institute-School (1918) in the area of secondary education.

In turn, Pedro Poveda and his new foundation inaugurated one of the most significant developments in the field of Catholic education. Poveda deferred to the prevailing current of thought in his time: increased state control of education. While the state may have favored secular or religiously neutral initiatives, the provision of Christian education depended on its delivery through the same established structures. Poveda observed and studied the ILE, and made contact with a number of the most important figures involved; he recognized the impetus for renewal the ILE embodied. He felt that, with the exception of a few particular points, the ILE's pedagogical approach was not incompatible with Christianity. He did not regard the relationship between the modern world and the Church as one of inevitable conflict. In his writings, he proposed the establishment of a counterpart to the ILE: the Catholic Education Institute (1911). Given the climate in Catholic circles at the time, this initiative was doomed to failure, but the inspiration behind the initiative gave rise to the foundation of the Teresian Institute, composed of only women who committed themselves to intellectual development in a determined way.

Therefore, when women gained admission to university, they encountered, at least, two bodies willing to lend them their assistance: on the one hand, liberal Spain, which drew on the philosophical legacy of Krausse<sup>1</sup> and the 1868 Revolution, open to the pedagogical influence and life experience reflected in different trends then current throughout the world, and led by the leading lights of the ILE; and on the other hand, traditional, avowedly Catholic, Spain, which initiated interesting pedagogical developments of its own, not the least of which was the Teresian Institute itself. The women that could finally freely enroll in university were to come upon more support

than their predecessors. The fact is that women had been in higher education since 1872, though their presence was often hindered and generally poorly tolerated.

### **The appeal of female potential**

Between 1872 and 1910, young Spanish women had waged a difficult war with the political authorities over access to the higher education system: forty years of uncertain progress, marked by prohibitions, official warnings, bureaucracy, lengthy paperwork, and arbitrary administrative decisions taken in the main by both conservative and progressive governments (Gómez García 1993: 259-260). Nonetheless, 77 women in all achieved the impossible during that time: university registration. Fifty-three completed their studies and were awarded either degrees or doctorates. The women's success belonged to them alone (Flecha 1996). When women were excluded from the centers of power, including the university, they could rely only on their own strength. However, as women began to enter the public sphere, there were intellectuals and professors determined to draw them towards their approaches.

Nevertheless, this commitment cannot be attributed to the significance of the phenomenon in itself. On the contrary, in fact: Spain was one of the last countries in the Western world to grant women access to higher education, even later than both the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1897) and the German Empire (1908). The rate of illiteracy among women was 65.8 per cent in 1910 (Freidenreich 2002, 7-9, 16-17; Capel 1982: 363). Motivated more likely than not by the nobility of the end in itself, both Catholics and secularists sought to support the new phenomenon of female university students; at the same time, the outstanding opportunity this phenomenon implied for the groups' own objectives was also borne closely in mind. Higher education for women would facilitate – or, at least, would not impede – the renewal of Spanish society.

It should be noted that the reasons that prompted Fernando de Castro to promote the first such educational initiatives for women in the 19th century were shaped by the desire to prevent them from exercising inappropriate influence on their husbands, given the Church-centered traditional frame of mind attributed reflexively to all women at that time. Underlying this development, then, were clear political motives, as a number of scholars have pointed out (Cacho 1962: 206-210; Scanlon 1976: 32; Vázquez Ramil 2001: 303). Indeed, those involved in the ILE – Giner, in particular – regarded men as too deformed by the pernicious legacy of traditional education to be able to lead Spain out of its centuries-long apathy. The role of women, Giner thought, was to fill this niche: virgin territory, fertile soil for new ideas, clear ground that did not need to be weeded of prior planting (Vázquez Ramil 2001: 48-50).

Likewise, Poveda clearly saw the role of women in a similar light. His initiative was wholly new in the field of Catholic social thought: to educate and train lay teachers to work in an official capacity in state-run structures, and, moreover, to organize them to help one another, to engage in ongoing training in new pedagogical methods, to provide them with the kind of thoroughgoing professional and Christian formation that would enable them, using both science and doctrine, to change the face of Spain. Such a new approach called for equally new ground, virgin territory. In their personal, often lonely, struggles, women were well placed to progress in knowledge. Poveda worked first and principally with female teachers, but his overriding objective was higher education (González 2006: 138; Pego 2006: 241, 249-255; Velázquez 1987: 13-16; Velázquez 1996: 88-89)<sup>2</sup>. Also pertinent in this regard was the Council's establishment of the School of Higher Studies in Teaching in Madrid in 1909, the most modern and best equipped educational center in Spain at that time, generally described as a

university-level institution. Indeed, given that it was more difficult to register in the school than in any other university faculty, the school's real standing may well have been higher still.

### **The role of women**

Nevertheless, there were certain difficulties in dealing with the education of the new women then accessing higher education. In the Catholic world, for example, Poveda's intention to 'educate ladies' was regarded as, at best, eccentric and, at worst, a serious risk. That science would destroy feminine piety and lead young girls away from God was a very widely held opinion at that time (Velázquez 2002: 20, 22, 43-45, 47; Velázquez, 1997: 88-89). With regard to the institutions established by the ILE, the initiatives designed for the growing number of female university students, such as the Female Student Residence, were always less well equipped than the corresponding facilities for men and, in the main, relegated to a rank of secondary importance in the general organizational structure (Mangini 2001: 54).

These facts should come as no real surprise. During the opening third of the 20th century, Spanish women were effectively worthless in social terms. Such an attitude may be surprising, annoying, or even repulsive to the contemporary mind. However, at that time, the prevalent social thinking, shared by almost all, including those who regarded themselves as free-thinkers and the vast majority of women themselves, consisted of the belief that the essential role of women comprised marriage, motherhood, and the education of their children. That marriage, fatherhood, and the education of their children might serve as an equal definition of the essential role of men was an idea that had not yet occurred to anyone. These private occupations of women were regarded as so all-consuming as to negate any other social function that a

woman might perform. Further study was open only to unmarried women and widows, enabling those in such situations to support their families financially. That promising academic careers for women in Spain – for example, that of Dorotea Barnés (Magallón 1999: 278-290),<sup>3</sup> who was educated entirely in line with ILE principles – came to a sudden dead end after marriage is undeniable, a situation that was regarded as absolutely normal. The outstanding university women of that time were unmarried (Victoria Kent, Clara Campoamor, and María de Maeztu) or married but childless, such as María Zambrano, or perhaps, rarely, married with children, such as Maria Goyri, wife of Menéndez Pidal. The latter case is more confusing than enlightening. Goyri was a doctor of philosophy, arts and letters, a teacher at the Institute-School, who carried out joint research with her husband throughout her career. However, their articles and books were not publicly coauthored; only her husband's name, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, was appended to the texts.

That the Church and Catholics in general had a traditional view of the role of women is a commonplace observation. To discover that this view was shared by liberal, progressive, and free-thinking men is shocking. José Ortega y Gasset, according to his own daughter, felt a certain unease with regard to the idea of work by women (Mangini 2001: 77-78). Moreover, no women ever attended the gatherings organized by the *Revista de Occidente* – not even María Zambrano, for whom Ortega had special intellectual respect.

Ortega y Gasset saw women as confused in mind, inferior in their humanity to men. This view may be inferred from the essay 'El hombre y la gente', written relatively late in his career:



In the presence of Woman, we men immediately see a creature who, on the level pertaining to humanity, is on a somewhat lower rung of life than our own. No other being with this dual condition exists: human being, and being human in a way inferior to men. (Ortega y Gasset 1957: 179-180)<sup>4</sup>

In the same book, Ortega y Gasset himself recounted an anecdote from his youth, set in the 1910s, before the Great War:

When I was young, I traveled back on a huge transatlantic ship from Buenos Aires to Spain. Among the passengers on board were a number of North American women, young and very beautiful. Although my dealings with them were never very close, it was clear from the way that I spoke to each of them that I addressed her as a woman in full possession of her feminine attributes. One of them felt a little offended, as a North American. It would appear that Lincoln had not striven to win the war of Secession so that I, a young Spanish man, could feel free to treat her as a woman. At that time, North American women were so modest that they felt there was something greater than ‘being a woman’. I know only men and women. Since I have the good fortune to be addressing, not a man, but a woman – and a beautiful woman at that – I behave as is befitting. That girl had suffered the rationalist education of her time in some College [...]. (Ortega y Gasset 1957: 176-177)

Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, who worked closely with Francisco Giner, exhibited a similar anxiety with regard to the possibility of a female higher education teacher giving classes in a male institution, given the fact that ‘the relative inferiority of woman

prevents her from playing a part in the education of (male) teachers' (Scanlon 1976: 65).

Emilia Pardo Bazán was appointed professor of contemporary literature in neo-Latin languages by royal decree on May 11, 1916. The express will of Alfonso XIII was articulated in this development, given the unquestionable literary merits of the countess. However, the decision was effected against the opinion and unanimous (negative) vote of all the professors at the Central University. Moreover, the students boycotted her classes, refusing to attend lectures given by 'Ms. Emilia.' Professors belonging to the ILE were also involved in this public repudiation campaign. A letter from Cossío to the author clearly reflects this enlightened and liberal male attitude to Pardo Bazán's presence at the university:

My congratulations, then, since you like – I think *to you* in bad taste – to go to the University [...].

But, my dear Emilia, allow me, under the protection of our long friendship and in a humble echo of what I am sure that noble spirit [Giner] who is gone from us forever would say, ask you: given that it is not for all the fuss, which cannot nor should not interest you, do you not think that your glory, the true glory, your own, the glory that you yourself have created, which no one can either grant or take away, which the world will remember at all times and in all places, would be a much greater glory without Councils or Academies or Universities [...]? (Jiménez Fraud 1989: 47-48)

It should also be noted that, in general, there was little or no contact between the young women at the Female Student Residence and the young men at the Student

Residence. The fathers of the female residents, many of them liberal and agnostic, insisted on the protection of their daughters' reputations and good manners and customs, in the most traditional sense of those terms. This has led a number of commentators to conclude that life at the Female Student Residence was wholly governed by what they refer to as 'the principle of morality' (Cuesta 2003: 453; Mangini, 2001: 82; Pérez-Villanueva 1990: 92, 333; Ribagorda 2005: 49). Ribagorda (in Fernández Urtasun & Arizcun 2006) provided an illuminating example of the different mentalities at the ILE with regard to the education of men and women, respectively:

Unlike in the Student Residence, where guest speakers included international figures of such standing as Einstein, Tagore, H. G. Wells, Bergson and Keynes, the lectures given at the Female Student Residence were always led by Spanish intellectuals [...]. Many of the lectures organized there were on general culture, but many others were on literary topics or were poetry recitals, whereas there were relatively few lectures on scientific, anthropological, philosophical, political, etc. themes, especially in the early years. The prevalence of literary occasions was congruent with the mentality of the time, which regarded music and literature as important elements in the education of a 'young lady', while other types of knowledge such as those mentioned above were not considered so important for their education. There was a remarkable difference, then, between the cultural programs organized at the two residences, with a reduced range of opportunities available to women. (Fernández Urtasun & Arizcun 2006: 298)

Madame Curie, the outstanding woman – and scientist – of her generation, stayed at the Female Student Residence when she visited Spain in 1931, but she shared her knowledge with others at the Student Residence, not at its female equivalent (Ribagorda 2005: 52).

### **Men's fear of the social influence of women**

Additional factors helped to shape the mentality outlined above. There was a collective male fear of the social influence of women. This nascent fear may be traced in three articles published by Ramón Ezquerra in *Renovación Social* (1926): it was feared that, given the focus on cultural life, the faculty of philosophy, arts, and letters would fall into the hands of women in just a few short years; and some held that female university students, while willing and committed, in general lacked the intellectual talents that were the natural gifts of men. Women devoted themselves to what was accessible and memorable, avoiding anything that might involve greater speculative effort, perhaps because they were not fully capable of independent thought. In this context, the following question arose: how was the entire cultural life of a nation to be guided without the aid of a speculative mind? Another argument, moreover, was that women's participation in professional life reduced the number of positions available to men. Surprisingly, the author of these articles was not opposed to university education for women. He simply sought to articulate ideas commonly and unquestioningly held in the society of his time (Ezquerra 1926a: 490-494; 1926b: 532-536; 1926c: 629-632). What is most significant in this regard is that this anxiety was expressed when the presence of female students in university life had only just begun. The information contained in the tables below makes that fact abundantly clear.

Table 1

**Changes in the total number of female student registration figures, by university, in the 1920s**

University	1919-1920	1927-1928
Barcelona	54	229
Granada	24	124
La Laguna	–	14
Madrid	174	799
Murcia	11	20
Oviedo	4	31
Salamanca	10	70
Santiago de C.	10	116
Seville	13	46
Valencia	18	53
Valladolid	14	56
Zaragoza	13	123

From *El trabajo y la educación de la mujer en España (1900-1936)*, by R. M. Capel, 1982, Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, Instituto de la Mujer, p. 469.

As can be observed, the presence of women is much higher in Madrid than in the other Spanish universities. This is due to the fact that the capital was the most populated city wherein a higher percentage of educated middle class resided. In addition, it was only Madrid that offered all the degree courses whereas some of them did not exist in other centers of higher education. Finally, it was the only Spanish university that could

award the title of doctor, and quite a few women obtained a doctorate following their degree.

Table 2

**Percentages of men and women in the Spanish university system, in the 1920s**

Academic year	No. of men	No. of women	Total	per cent men	per cent women
1919-1920	21,813	345	22,158	98.5	1.5
1929-1930	31,813	1,744	33,557	94.8	5.2

*Source:* Original to this article, based on *El trabajo y la educación de la mujer en España (1900-1936)*, by R. M. Capel, 1982, Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, Instituto de la Mujer, p. 473, and *Sociología de la Mujer en la Universidad: Análisis histórico-comparativo. Galicia-España 1900-1982*, by M. L. Barrera Peña & A. López Peña, 1983, Santiago de Compostela, Spain: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, p. 108.

The percentages of women at university are very low, particularly in comparison to other Western countries in the same period. In 1930, women constituted 25.8% of university students in France, 16% in Germany and 27% in Great Britain. In the United States, the percentage stood at 43% in 1920. The average in Italy in the 1920s was 14%.

Table 3

**Total number of women in different university degree programs in the 1920s**

Academic year	Law	Medicine	Humanities and social sciences	Sciences	Pharmacy
1919-1920	9	58	80	114	81
1920-1921	10	75	111	150	112
1921-1922	13	96	154	200	149
1922-1923	14	106	164	245	207
1924-1925	18	131	261	274	350
1927-1928	71	166	441	395	596
1929-1930	86	199	460	222	777

Source: Original to this article, based on *La Institución Libre de Enseñanza y la Educación de la Mujer en España: La Residencia de Señoritas (1915-1936)*, by R. Vázquez Ramil, 2001, Betanzos, Spain: LUGAMI Artes Gráficas, p. 121, *El trabajo y la educación de la mujer en España (1900-1936)*, by R. M. Capel, 1982, Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, Instituto de la Mujer, p. 473, and ‘La penetración de la mujer española en la Universidad’, by R. Ezquerro, 1926, *Renovación Social / Social Renovation*, 44, p. 493.

Similar to all its neighboring Western countries, Medicine was the degree studied initially by women, given the existence of an entire field of women’s and children’s health in which women could cope better than men. The same can be said of Pharmacy, since it was considered that the composition of medication prescribed by the

doctor was related to duties such as cooking. Least in demand was Law given that they constituted studies in preparation for public life and these professions were off limits to women. In fact, a law prohibited women from sitting official examinations for the State's public administration bodies. As from 1910, they could take the official state examinations for Archives and Libraries and those for middle-school teachers in State establishments. For this reason, among others, registration in Arts and Philosophy increased considerably, until it became the main course pursued by women.

At the end of his work, Ezquerro refers to the heart of the problem, what he calls 'the effort neutralization factor': marriage. The women married and did not practice their professions. The women paid no attention to their university qualification, he added, and 'marriage is the path that most will follow, since all are inclined [to marry], showing that intention more or less openly [...] undoing any results that might be expected from this new movement [women's access to university].'

His final conclusion was based on no evidence, but reflected precisely the sharply defined social attitude toward women, which stood in no need of proof and was widely shared:

Woman cannot escape the biological destiny set out for her, and which will overcome any temptation to rise above or devalue it. Her place in the home will continue to be indispensable, even for erudite women, and she will not be able nor should she refuse the responsibilities that fall to her in the perpetuation of the race and in the raising and education of children, the importance of which need not be emphasized here and which remain incompatible with an assiduous



and constant commitment to the development of a professional career. (Ezquerro 1926c: 632)

To return to the figures presented above: they cannot be read in objective terms as causes for concern regarding the advancement of women. At 5'2 per cent, the proportion of female university students was almost negligible. Besides, many such students were registered externally: that is, they did not attend lectures, and visited the university only to take examinations. Moreover, fields of study such as law, which led to key posts in public life, were hardly ever chosen by female students. The reason for this is that women were prohibited from taking the civil service examinations that regulated access to work in the administrative organs of the state; private practice alone was open to women. As women, they could not expect to attract too many private clients. In fact, the two female lawyers who opened an office in Madrid in 1925 (Victoria Kent and Clara Campoamor)<sup>5</sup> made their new profession compatible with the jobs they had carried out before: the former was a manager at the Institute-School; the latter had qualified for a civil service post in the Ministry for Public Instruction some time previously, working on classes for adults. She also contributed to a number of newspapers.

This distrust of women did not change with the advent of the Second Republic. Indeed, to a certain extent, it might be said that the bitter debate regarding women's suffrage disclosed the fear and anxiety provoked by the real and specific influence of the so-called weaker sex on national, public life. There was a firm conviction that the educational deficit among women, and the consequent conservative mindset, would put the life of the new regime at risk. The left feared women's influence; the right celebrated it. For reasons of political prudence, many left-wing men thought that

women should be denied the vote at that time, although as a matter of principle such a position was simply untenable. Clara Campoamor argued the case for women's suffrage in the House of Parliament and won that right. As a result, given the victory of the right-wing in the following elections, she was made a scapegoat by all those on the left, treatment that she would never forgive or forget. And although the Popular Front came to power soon afterwards, Campoamor was already dead to political life. Her mortal sin, as she herself recalled on many occasions, was to have ensured a woman's right to vote. The other two female representatives in during that parliamentary session – Victoria Kent and Margarita Nelken – were opposed to women's suffrage (Campoamor 2006; Capel 1975: 47-63; Fagoaga & Saavedra 2007: 39; Gutierrez Vega 2001: 28, 73, 90).

### **The educational curricula at the University Residence of the Teresian Institute and the ILE's Female Student Residence**

Given such a deep-rooted attitude regarding the unsuitability of women for participation in certain areas of social life, that the educational approaches adopted in the two main initiatives designed to support the position of women in higher education – Poveda's Teresian Residence and the ILE's Female Student Residence – were so similar is unsurprising.

The former was founded in Madrid in March 1914; the latter, also in Madrid, in September 1915. The Teresian establishment had not gone unnoticed at the School of Higher Studies in Teaching. During the summer of 1915, while the opening of the Female Student Residence was being finalized, José de Castillejo (secretary to the Council for Further Studies) and María de Maeztu led an attempt to unify the two endeavors. The attempt was unsuccessful because Poveda understood that such a joint venture would spell the end of his independent commitment to educating women in the

Christian spirit. This initial failure did not undermine the mutual respect in which Maeztu and Carmen Cuesta (the director of the Teresian Residence from 1918 onwards) held one another, although each also strove to convince the other of her own position (Gómez del Manzano 1991: 167; González 2006: 122-125; Sáiz 1929: 121-122; Velázquez 1996: 145-148, 152-160, 182, 185; Velázquez 1997: 15-17, 31-35; Velázquez 2002: 25). Both Residences sought to generate a climate of culture and mutual support, facilitating contact with older, educated women who might help the younger. Books, languages, cultural activities, conferences, and the intellectual life in Madrid at the time were prioritized. While prestigious figures from Spanish intellectual circles were welcomed to the Female Student Residence, the young women at the Teresian Residence visited all the cultural crossroads of the capital – the Atheneum and the National Library (Pedro Poveda 1988; Velázquez 2003; Zulueta & Moreno 1993).

The fees charged at the Residences were very similar from the 1920s onwards, which reflects the fact that both were drawing on the same social target market. Moreover, certain phrases regarding the spirit of life in the Residence were repeated almost word for word in both places: a family atmosphere, for example – a Christian family, at the Teresian Residence; a well-organized (in moral terms) Spanish family, María de Maeztu would say of the Female Student Residence on numerous occasions (Pérez-Villanueva 1990: 88).

There were also similarities between those who supported the two Residences. A striking example in this regard is provided by Rafaela Ortega y Gasset, the noted philosopher's sister, whose house adjoined a number of the apartments first used by the Teresian Residence, to which she provided generous support. Rafaela also worked with María de Maeztu, not in any official capacity but in a regular way and without any sense

of contradiction. In addition, the Ortega Munilla family (including Rafaela's parents) gave its entire library on loan to the students at the Teresian Residence and was on very friendly terms with the residents and teachers there, as well as with Pedro Poveda himself. Rosario Menéndez Pidal, the sister of the renowned writer Ramón Menéndez Pidal, likewise played an active part in the life of both the Teresian Residence and the institutions established by the ILE. At the government level, liberal authorities supported the ILE, while conservative authorities provided similar support to the Teresian Institute (Velázquez 2002: 92, 109, 11-112, 136, 145; Velázquez 2003: 54).

A number of commentators have criticized the strict discipline exercised at the Teresian Residence, which they interpret in light of the Catholic nature of the educational project. However, discipline at the ILE's Female Student Residence was no less strict. The documentary evidence for the strict regime of life at the latter, the careful regulation of each activity, and the general sobriety of tone is abundant. (Indeed, such features have been read by some critics as exemplifying the Puritanism at the heart of the ILE project.) If total freedom was the only norm at the Student Residence (for men), such male license was in stark contrast to the sheer number and severity of the rules in force at the Female Student Residence. Thus, even in the absence of religion, in a scrupulously neutral environment, strict discipline constituting a regime governing daily life might be unquestioningly imposed: this was what the fathers demanded for their daughters (Pérez-Villanueva 1990: 328-337, 355-358; Ribagorda 2005: 49-50; Vázquez Ramil 2001: 241-242).

That the public influence of the Female Student Residence was more far-reaching than that of the Teresian Residence is undeniable. Given the contribution of the International Institute and the fact that it was a member organization of the School

of Higher Studies in Teaching, with the intellectual and political prestige such participation implied, the Female Student Residence was a focal point for feminine culture throughout the Residence's years of existence. The reverberations of all the avant-garde movements of the 1920s echoed within its walls. The (female) intellectuals, poets, and writers of the time were involved in the Residence in one way or another: Ernestina de Champourcin, Concha Méndez, María Zambrano, Gabriela Mistral (later a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature), Carmen Conde, María Goyri, María Moliner, and, it goes without saying, Victoria Kent, the woman who for many years held the highest post ever achieved by a woman at that time in Spanish political life (director general of the Prison Service) (Fernández Urtásun & Ascunce 2006: 41, 271, 274, 303; Franco 2007: 66-71; Mangini 2001: 91-92; Marset 2004: 348; Pérez-Villanueva 1989: 112, 180).

Life at the Residence was enriched by the contribution of the International Institute through the presence of teachers and students from abroad, access to its extraordinary library, the installation of the Foster Laboratory, and, above all, the provision of scholarships enabling study at universities in North America. The Residence was also a focal point for the Spanish female university movement, linked through María de Maeztu to the wider world (Magallón 1999: 163-202; Maillard 1990: 11-13; Zulueta 1984).

Despite the public significance of the Female Student Residence, the fact that female Spanish university students remained in a tiny minority should be borne in mind. At the beginning of the 1930s, only 6 per cent of university students were women, which would suggest that the female university movement was almost entirely invisible. The most shocking figures in this context are those relating to illiteracy. As late as 1930,

almost half of all Spanish women (47.4 per cent) still did not know how to read or write; this was the real crux in the relationship between women and education. Perhaps for this very reason the Second Republic set raising the literacy rate as a high priority. The school groups set up by the newly installed authorities prioritized the education of women, who suffered the consequences of the lack of education most severely. While the number of women in secondary education increased considerably, from 17.1 per cent in 1931 to 46.2 per cent in 1936, the proportion of female university students grew more slowly, from 6 per cent in 1930 to 8.8 per cent in 1936, and the Republic paid relatively little attention to this area. On the other hand, the Republican authorities were much more committed to reaching a wider female public, to provide them with a level of general education that would enable them to make a living (Barrera Peña & López Peña 1983: 108-109; Cuesta 2003: 419, 439, 447, 456-457). The mission of the Female Student Residence was altered slightly from 1934 onwards, offering accommodation – in a modern facility built by cooperative effort – to a large number of girls interested in such general education (Pérez-Villanueva 1990: 67-68, 132-135, 319-320; Vázquez Ramil 2001: 171, 181, 199-227, 235-238, 308-309).

### **The touchstone: Religion**

Far from being atheists, the men who established and promoted the Institución Libre de Enseñanza were men of religious spirit. Nevertheless, they did not practice or support any particular religion, and certainly not Catholicism. They described themselves as neutral. The defining feature of their initiatives, including the Female Student Residence, was ‘secularity.’

One might wonder, however, if that secular objective was achieved at the Residence. María de Maeztu herself was Catholic, and most of the residents attended

Sunday Mass. The testimony in this regard is provided by Matilde Landa Vaz, a resident at Fortuny during the first half of the 1920s. Landa Vaz came from a well-off, cultured family – free-thinkers, university graduates with ties to the Free Education Institution. Her parents' marriage (1888) was a civil marriage only, which was very rare for the time; and their daughter, born in 1904, was not baptized. Landa Vaz's father openly declared his membership in the Masons and was the highest-ranking public representative of Ruiz Zorrilla and Salmerón's Progressive Republican Party in Badajoz. Landa Vaz and her siblings were educated in line with the principles articulated by Krause and reflected in the ILE. As a young girl, she began to correspond with Manuel Bartolomé Cossío's daughter, Natalia, and the two became close friends. Landa Vaz moved to the Female Student Residence in 1923 and was scandalized by the religiosity of María de Maeztu and the other girls who lived there, all of whom, Landa Vaz said, except for a small group, attended Mass. In a letter to one of her sisters, dated October 31, 1931, Landa Vaz wrote:

The worst thing about the Res is this false clericalism they've set up here; except for five girls, all the others go to mass, communion, etc. . . . with the director leading the charge. Mr. Cossío was astonished when I told him that María de Maeztu goes to mass! (Ginard 2005: 25-26)

There is evidence that other women involved in the ILE were practicing Catholics. Antonina Rodrigo said of Maria Goyri, who gave lectures and worked regularly at the Residence, that she used to go to Mass at six o'clock in the morning, and nobody in the house made anything of it because she was absolutely private where spiritual matters were concerned (Rodrigo 1979: 32-53).

Although the women may not have practiced their religion regularly, a number of the most politically active women in left-wing parties, such as Victoria Kent, acknowledged their Catholic background. According to Zenaida Gutierrez Vega, Kent was a believer, although she practiced no religion. Kent once said: 'I am Catholic, I was born Catholic. I don't practice but I definitely believe in God.'<sup>6</sup> In 1939, Gabriela Mistral wrote to Kent: 'You believe without knowing it, like all intuitive people.' Ten years later, Mistral wrote: 'there are many ways to believe, and one way is to doubt.' Gutierrez Vega concluded that Kent's religion consisted of the practice of charity; her ideal was to serve her neighbor (Gutierrez Vega 2001: 17) – an authentic, and radically Christian, ideal.

María Zambrano, a philosopher and disciple of Ortega, was another prominent woman who had been educated in accordance with the principles of the ILE. Nevertheless, she also received a religious education and at some point during her adolescence reflected on the possibility that she might have a religious vocation. For health reasons, she could not live as a resident at Fortuny and was forced to remain in Segovia, taking her degree as an external student. However, she was a teacher at the Institute-School and led classes at the Female Student Residence at the end of the 1920s. She was a member of the University Federation of Students, a largely secular association, and was politically active during the Republic, participating in a number of educational initiatives organized for the people. Although she was close to the Communist Party at one time, she never belonged to it. Following the Civil War, she left Spain, to return only in 1985. For many years, she described herself as a committed Catholic (Marset 2004: 341; Martínez, Pastor, Pascua, & Tavera 2008: 718-721; Zambrano 1998: 42-55).



The range of texts on offer in the library at the Female Student Residence was limited: what books were to be read had already been decided in advance. The inclusion of the works of St. Teresa of Avila is relevant in this regard. According to Eulalia Lapresta, who was responsible for the library between 1922 and 1928, the ascetic and mystical literature of the saint, along with works by other classic Spanish authors such as Tirso, Calderón, Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Concepción Arenal, Rosalía de Castro, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, were the most popular among residents (Fernández Urtásun & Ascunce 2006: 296-297). Irrespective of whether such reading was obligatory or optional, the books cited above are clear examples of Christian literature – or, at least, contain nothing contrary to the basic principles of that religion.

## **Conclusion**

The principle conclusion to be drawn from the documentary evidence discussed thus far may be read from the underlying argument in the article as a whole. The movement to facilitate women's access to higher education was supported by intellectuals and professors of very different persuasions because they all saw this development as a valuable opportunity to advance their own objectives: the transformation of the nation. However, to convert prime matter into an instrument capable of carrying out that task required taking the human material as it was, including perhaps the particular gift of women for religion, and adapting this gift to the nature of what was to come. In real terms, the practical means used to drive both initiatives were very similar and, at the same time, markedly different to the equivalent means used in the education of men at that time. Given the existing social climate, and the attitudes of most women (with a small number of remarkable exceptions), no other approach would have been possible.

Nonetheless, women managed to significantly enhance their participation in public life during the first thirty years of the 20th century – even without open access to the university system. A number of notable female figures in social life had not benefited from any form of higher education. A wide-ranging list of examples might be given: Carmen de Burgos, a distinguished journalist; Margarita Nelken, who held a seat in parliament; Federica Montseny, who was minister for health during the Second Republic; renowned writers and poets (Concha Espina, María Lejárrerga de Martínez Sierra, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Concha Méndez, and Ernestina de Champourcin); painters, such as María Mallo; educationalists, such as Concepción Sainz Otero; and other cultured women, including Zenobia Camprubí, wife of Juan Ramón Jiménez. All these women made outstanding contributions to their society, although none of them had ever attended university.

That the proportion of female university students in the United States in 1920 (43 per cent) was not matched in Spain until the academic year 1977-1978 should be noted (Salomon 1985: 141). The movement toward further access for women to the university system only really took off during the 1970s; and, as a result, the corresponding social phenomena likewise developed: women's access to professional life, the development of specific careers for women, and the difficulties involved in combining work and family life and the relevant legislation to enable both women and men make that possible.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> That is, the work of the German philosopher, Krausse, a relatively minor figure in the idealist tradition; his thought was discovered by Julián Sanz del Río (Spain) during a study period carried out in 1843, the first time cultural trends prevalent in Europe entered Spanish intellectual life.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando de Castro was President of the Central University of Madrid, a former Catholic priest, and follower of Krausse; he organized a weekly series of lectures on the education of women (1868). He addressed female education, founding the Association for Women's Education in 1872, though he never thought of their admission to university. Instead, he looked upon their education as ethical-sentimental training. Thus, when he opened the aforementioned series of lectures, he affirmed that the fundamental characteristics would be morality, religiosity and beauty. And in 1868, in another speech in the presence of women, he affirmed: "Education [...] It is therefore confined to a moral rather than an intellectual objective, to inspiring more than teaching, given that it is oriented towards arousing the intimate sense or the conscience, but mainly in its emotional dimension" (De Castro 1869).

Pedro Poveda penned numerous texts on women's education. We have chosen an extract from an article entitled *A las universitarias: nuestro programa*, probably written in 1930: "As I told you [...] may you be women of great faith [...] that is how I tell you today: yearn for science, seek science out, acquire science, work towards achieving it and never tire, do not ever say: no more science. Much science leads to God and little science separates us from Him (Poveda 1965: 349).

<sup>3</sup> Dorotea Barnés was one of four daughters of Domingo Barnés, who would later become the minister for education in the Second Republic. Dorotea was a



university student during the 1920s. She spent 1929 at Smith College, on an exchange scholarship, with further financial aid from the Council for Further Studies. The following year, she was awarded the Marion Le Roy Burton scholarship to work in the Department of Chemistry at Yale University. She received her doctorate in 1931, with a thesis on cysteine. She began work in the spectroscopy department at the National Institute of Physics and Chemistry in 1931-1932, specifically on Raman spectroscopy, and traveled to Graz to work with the leading European scientist in that field. She published five articles on the topic, and introduced the use of Raman spectroscopy in Spain. In addition to continuing her research during 1933-1934, she was appointed to the chair of the physics and chemistry department at the Instituto Lope de Vega in Madrid. She was forced to give up her work when she married, just before the outbreak of the Civil War, and had to leave Spain with her husband and young daughter.

<sup>4</sup> The book is a collection of lectures given by Ortega from 1934 onwards. The text cited here is that edited by the author himself for a series of lectures to be given at the Instituto de Humanidades in 1949-1950.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria Kent Siano was the first female graduate in law, the first woman to join the official register of lawyers, and the first woman to open a law firm in Madrid. She took her first case in May 1925. Clara Campoamor Rodríguez graduated in December 1924 when she was 36 years old; she joined the official register of lawyers and began to practice as a lawyer at around the same time as Victoria Kent. She played an active role in public life in the 1920s, working on the management committees of a number of associations for female university students, intellectuals, jurists, etc. She also participated in a number of international conferences for female university students. Matilde Huici Navaz was the third female graduate in law in Spain, following Kent and

Campoamor. Huici Navaz (San Martín 2009) played an active part in promoting the rights of women, attending many conferences and cultural and political events organized by left-wing groups, including Socialist Women. She also worked in the Preparatory Section at the Institute-School during the 1920s, which may have enabled her to practice as a lawyer (similar to Kent and Campoamor) and work was recognized with the awarding of the title academic professor.

<sup>6</sup> 'El aborto me parece inmoral,' *El País Semanal*, October 23, 1977, p. 10. An interview with Victoria Kent carried out by Rosa Montero, during one of the former's visits to Spain after Franco's death.