CHAPTER 10


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In the first term of Socialist prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2008), legislation such as the 2004 gender violence law and the 2007 gender equality law put Spain at the vanguard of gender equality policymaking in the European Union (EU) (Calvo & Martín 2011; León 2011b; Lombardo 2009; Valiente 2008). In contrast, a first glance at his second term (2008–11) would lead us to conclude that there was a more modest, but not negligible, level of innovation in gender equality policy. While the executive continued to appoint a large number of women to positions of political decision-making and parliament passed important legislation, in particular abortion decriminalization and new regulations for domestic workers, in general these measures have not been considered pathbreaking.

However, this chapter argues that if we consider both policy formulation and implementation, the contrast between the Socialist Party’s (PSOE) record on gender equality policymaking in Prime Minister Zapatero’s first and second terms is less pronounced than a superficial observation would lead us to conclude. Some societal and political factors conducive to proactive women’s rights policymaking were present in both terms, including secularization and an (imperfect) separation of church and state, the high presence of women in civil society, the (relative) vitality of the women’s movement, interparty consensus on many (but not all) gender equality issues, and consolidated gender equality institutions (Valiente 2008). Nonetheless, in the second term, there was less room for legislative reforms to improve women’s status precisely
because major legal changes had already passed between 2004 and 2008. These needed to be implemented in the subsequent years. Therefore, policymakers were busy not so much adopting innovative legislation but rather implementing policies passed during the first term. This was a task of monumental proportions because of the ambitious goals to be reached, and would be extremely hard to achieve in any economic context. The economic crisis that marked the second, but not the first, term made their full implementation nearly impossible. When the conservative Popular Party (PP) won an absolute majority of the seats in the November 20, 2011, general elections, the Spanish economy was in deep trouble. It was therefore relatively easy for PP politicians to declare that the implementation of costly policies would simply be paralyzed.

This chapter is organized in four parts. The first part succinctly describes gender equality policymaking during the Zapatero governments, contrasting developments in the first and second terms, and places these developments in historical perspective. The second part explains why the PSOE’s record on gender equality policy was more modest in the second term than in the first. The third part addresses what remains to be done in the policy area of women’s rights according to different strands of the women’s movement. In the fourth part, I evaluate the prospects for gender equality policy under the PP administration that won office in 2011. The research is based on secondary sources, legislation, and newspaper reports, as well as face-to-face semistructured interviews with the general secretary on equality policies between 2004 and 2008, Soledad Murillo, and six leaders of the women’s movement.

Central State Gender Equality Policies

The Historical Context

To better understand the policies adopted during Zapatero’s two terms in office, it is important to provide some historical perspective on gender policy and women’s status. First, there is a sharp contrast between the Socialist policies toward women covered here and the policies of predemocratic Spain. From the mid-1930s until 1975, Spain was governed by a right-wing authoritarian regime, headed by General Francisco Franco, which actively opposed the advancement of women’s rights and status. The ideal family was a hierarchical unit, and it was assumed that authority rested with the father, who was supposed to be its sole (or, at least, its main) supporter. Motherhood was defined not only as a woman’s main family duty, but also as a women’s primary national and societal