

# Gender Regime Change in Decentralized States: The Case of Spain

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This article applies Walby's systemic theory of gender regime to Spain's decentralized state, to capture changes in the gender regime. Locating the "hegemon" at different levels of government for each domain (economy, polity, violence, and civil society) and considering interactions between governmental levels provided a clear understanding of changes in the gender regime. The relationship between governmental level acting as hegemon in specific domains and variations in political majorities across governmental levels explained changes toward a neoliberal-conservative type in the economy domain. Shifts toward a neoliberal gender regime in violence and polity, and toward a conservative type in civil society, were contested.

## Introduction

The economic and political responses to the 2008 crisis have triggered changes in gender equality, institutions, and policies in Europe (Durbin, Page, and Walby 2017; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). Following scholarly debates about gender and politics, further questions have arisen in an attempt to explore the extent of these transformations and their impact on different European gender regimes (Walby 2015). The need to understand the complex coevolution of gender relations in different domains in the postcrisis context has become paramount.

This article aims at contributing to such understanding by applying Walby's systemic theory of gender regime to a decentralized state such as Spain. This required building an analytical framework appropriate for grasping the role of different levels of government (European Union [EU], state-level, regional, and local) in influencing variations in the gender regime.

Spain is an EU Member State that features a complex institutional setting, where regions hold extensive competencies over key fields, including welfare

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and equality (Alonso and Verge 2014). It is, therefore, a case that provides suitable empirical material for exploring struggles over gender regime change that involve a variety of governmental levels. This study investigates policy shifts reshaping gender equality in domains such as the economy (employment and care/welfare), polity (political representation and gender-equality machinery), violence (gender-based violence policies), and civil society (sexual and reproductive rights), during the last two legislative terms (2011–2018).<sup>1</sup>

The analysis of the Spanish case contributes to gender regime theory by supporting systemic theories such as Walby's (2009) when complemented with theories that can explain intricate processes of change in multilevel contexts. Existing literature on Europeanization and federalism shows that the territorial distribution of power might vary across domains. Consequently, the governmental level that plays the role of "hegemon" in each domain might also differ. Capturing the location of the "hegemon" role for each case allows a more accurate understanding of changes in gender regimes. Scholarly works taking into account territorial complexity tend to focus either on upwards or downwards developments, by analyzing, for example, bilateral processes of influence between the EU and Member States. We argue for the importance of addressing interactions between all the different levels of government in each domain, while considering the role of party ideology in explaining resistance to backlashes in the gender regime.

We maintain that a multitiered polity where political majorities varied across levels of government interacted to shape the Spanish gender regime. The postcrisis context of EU and state-level political priorities helps to understand how Spain's gender regime shifted toward a more neoliberal-conservative type through processes of Europeanization (Lombardo 2017) and state recentralization justified in the name of austerity (Colino 2013). However, left-wing regional cabinets and local governments emerging from civil society platforms showing a continued commitment to gender equality and responsiveness to the demands of the feminist movement played a key role in resisting neoliberal-conservative changes.

## Gender-Regime Change: A Framework for Analysis

Understanding gender-regime change requires considering a variety of scholarly debates (Walby 2009, 2015; Walby et al. 2007). In this study, we combine systemic theories of gender regimes (Walby 2009, 2015) and debates that integrate varieties of capitalism and gender regimes (Walby et al. 2007) with analytical insights from Europeanization and federalism studies that we deem necessary for understanding changes in multilevel settings.

We adopt Walby's systemic theory of gender regimes, which has been central for grasping developments in the last decade, and suggest a number of revisions necessary to adapt it to decentralized states. Walby's systemic

conceptualization understands gender regime as “a set of inter-related gendered social relations and gendered institutions that constitutes a system” (Walby 2009, 301). This conceptualization, while maintaining the relation between production (paid work) and reproduction (care and domestic work) that is central in feminist analyses of gender regimes, comprises other components that allow capturing the complex coevolution of gender relations in different domains and in interaction with other social relations.

These other components, which we rely on in our study, include the four institutional domains theorized by Walby (2009, 2015) as complex systems that mutually coevolve as a result of their interaction: economy, polity, violence, and civil society. Gender relations, intersecting with other inequalities, are shaped and transformed in each of these domains and in the whole system. Economy includes both waged labor and domestic labor; polity includes states, the EU, organized religion, and regions with self-governing capacities; violence refers to gender-based violence and its regulation; and civil society refers to contestations that create meanings through collective “projects” that provisionally bring together different actors of civil society around particular social goals. Although, due to their interdependency, changes in one domain transform opportunities for the other domains, the time and direction of their evolution might differ. Therefore, the result of change can be a transformation in the whole form of gender regime or only in some domains.

Walby (2009) integrates the two main forms of class regimes in modernity, that is the neoliberal and social democratic, in the conceptualization of “public” forms of gender regime, as opposed to “domestic forms.” Both are points on a continuum where the domestic regime tends to exclude women from access to employment, political representation, and autonomy. The public regime, while allowing women to be present in the public sphere, tends to segregate them in less powerful positions.

While maintaining the public/domestic forms theorized by Walby, we further specify the form of gender regimes by including a “conservative” form theorized by Shire and Nemoto (2020), typical of countries with authoritarian legacy, such as Spain, that captures state policies that promote traditional gender roles, such as family and reproduction policies that treat women only as mothers. This allows us to specify the ideological nature of regimes that the public/domestic divide had left unaddressed. We, therefore, consider policies that restrict access to sexual and reproductive rights as a sign of conservative gender regimes, in order to capture regimes that might promote women’s employment but not their sexual and reproductive autonomy.

Another important concept in our framework that Walby develops in her theory of gender regimes is that of “hegemon,” which she conceives as a “dominating state” or polity “that is able to deploy a range of forms of power over many other countries in the contemporary era” (2009, 166). Hegemons, as in the Gramscian concept, use a mix of coercion and consent to dominate other polities, employing a combination of political, economic, social, and

military means. The examples Walby gives are those of the United States and the EU. Both play as hegemon because they set the rules and change the landscape for other polities (2009, 166–69).

Walby's macro theory comprises systems, forms, domains, and hegemon, but does not specify the role played by different levels of government. However, we contend that applying this framework to specific contexts requires considering the territorial complexity of each political and institutional setting. This implies amending Walby's theory as follows.

First, the concept of *hegemon* needs to be applied to different *governmental levels*, because the role each of them plays in different domains depends on the territorial distribution of power. Debates on the contribution of different levels of governments to the promotion of gender equality became central in the last decade. Scholarly works shifted from an exclusive focus on the state level to consider the influence of EU policies and the role of regional institutions, along with general analyses of welfare provision. Gender studies of Europeanization and federalism are particularly relevant to capture this complexity, especially when analyzing decentralized states that are EU members such as Spain. They have shown that concurrent processes of uploading and downloading formerly state-level powers have shaped the location of key gender-equality policies and institutions (Alonso 2016; Haussman, Sawer, and Vickers 2010; Liebert 2003; Meier 2016).

Accounting for this territorial complexity is necessary, according to us, in systemic analyses of gender regimes, due to the explanatory function of levels of government for the coevolution of, and mismatch between, different domains and the system as a whole. We consider the role of governmental levels that behave as “hegemon” through structuring consent as well as employing coercion, around particular “hegemonic projects.” Therefore, in this article, we extend our view beyond the state level to ask specifically: at which level of government were significant decisions taken about the four domains? Who influenced (“hegemon”) variations in the gender regime? What were the main changes during the period analyzed?

Second, the *interaction of different levels of government* needs to be considered because it is key for understanding change and capturing the complexity of gender regimes. Studies on Europeanization and federalism show that interactions between levels of government can capture the changes leading to hybrid, patchy, or transitioning regimes (Mahon 2006, 2007). Territorial dynamics trigger both differentiation in the way(s) the EU “hits home” (McRae 2006) and diversity among regional welfare regimes in decentralized countries (Moreno and McEwen 2005). Accordingly, we assume that multitiered polities provide ground for struggles over gender regimes that are crucial for understanding change. Opportunity structures afforded by the women's movement might be available at different levels (Mahon 2007), thanks to the presence of multilevel party systems (Keith and Verge 2016).

The concept of “competitive federalism” is particularly helpful to grasp interactions between levels that explain similarities and differences in regional political developments (Mahon and Collier 2010). It shows how regions, by competing with the central level and among each other, enact emulation dynamics that might mitigate differentiation as gender-equality policies tend to spread across regions. Nevertheless, a myriad of factors can operate to yield complex patterns of gender regime change at a specific time. The color of the party in government is a crucial explanatory variable to understand heterogeneous developments at various levels. Accordingly, our analysis incorporates relevant questions such as: What struggles were articulated in Spain? And what alternative (with respect to central government) gender-equality policies were promoted at the substate levels by left-wing cabinets? For a comprehensive understanding of changes in the gender regime, we suggest addressing interactions between all tiers of government, rather than bilateral interactions such as the EU–Member States or federal–regional.

The combination of theoretical insights from the aforementioned debates offers analytical keys to capture variations in the gender regimes and helps us explain the uneven evolution of the four domains in the Spanish postcrisis gender regime, and the coevolution of different gender regime types at various governmental levels. The postcrisis context is at the background of our study, because austerity politics enacted by the EU and the central Spanish conservative government in response to the 2008 economic crisis promoted a backlash against gender-equality policies, budgets, and institutions (Paleo and Alonso 2014), and shifts toward a more neoliberal gender regime (Lombardo 2017). In the next section, we introduce historic legacies that are crucial to understand changes in Spain’s gender regime.

## The Spanish Gender Regime and Decentralization Legacies

In this section, we analyze, in light of relevant historic legacies, which level of government had especially influenced variations in the Spanish gender regime before the economic crisis. In Spain, the promotion of gender equality and the development of the “State of Autonomies”—that is the degree of regional autonomy with respect to the central government—were extremely intertwined. A federalized institutional setting, deeply entrenched in the EU polity, shaped the evolution of the gender regime. The central government pioneered the creation of the first equality machinery and the adoption of antidiscriminatory legislation after the transition to democracy, pressured by European Community 1986 preaccession conditions (Lombardo 2004).

A key legacy of the authoritarian repression of regional variety and autonomy was the post-1975 development of self-governing competencies. This led to differentiated patterns in welfare and gender institutionalization, matching

regional context specificities. The so-called fast-track regions—the first ones to have access to self-government—included executive and legislative powers over gender-equality policies in their regional constitutions, along with references to key areas of the welfare state. Andalusia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia set up their regional equality bodies in the late 1980s, a model that was replicated statewide (Bustelo and Ortals 2007). The other regions progressively developed too, following the strong emulation patterns that inform Spanish competitive federalism (Alonso 2016). Municipalities used the powers over welfare policies granted by the Law of Local Regime to expand the equality institutional framework to the local level.

Changes in the *polity* domain exemplify the regions' prominent role in relation to the introduction of legislative gender quotas. The regional parliaments of the Balearic Islands and Castile-La Mancha pioneered the introduction of quotas in the electoral laws, while the Basque Country put forward targets for ensuring gender-balanced cabinets (Alonso and Verge 2014). Despite the initial opposition from the Popular Party (PP), compulsory electoral quotas were finally introduced in the 2007 Equality Act under Zapatero's socialist central cabinet. This gave impulse to a significant increase in the numbers of female representatives in the institutions at different levels of government: by 2019, 44 percent of Deputies<sup>2</sup>, 38.8 percent of Senators<sup>3</sup>, 46.3 percent of regional MPs; and 35.6 percent of local councilors were women.<sup>4</sup>

The role of competitive federalism in the introduction of gender quotas was supported by opportunities opened by left-wing party ideology, Europeanization, and the multilevel party system. Feminists within left-wing parties—the Socialist Party (PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español), the Communist Party (PCE, Partido Comunista Español), and United Left (IU, Izquierda Unida)—were critical actors in the introduction of voluntary party quotas. Europeanization provided “cross-loading” resources or policy transfer through learning from other European countries' and parties' experiences. The PSC (Partido Socialista de Cataluña), the Catalan section of the Socialist Party, introduced in 1982 a 12 percent quota for party and elected offices for women thanks to the action of party feminists inspired by a similar measure adopted by the French Parti Socialiste (Verge and Lombardo, 2018).

In the *economy*, the central government holds exclusive powers over the regulation of the labor market, social security, and public pension schemes, always within the framework of economic parameters set at the EU level for Eurozone members. The Spanish welfare regime is considered part of the Mediterranean type, a *via media* between conservative, social democratic, and liberal types. This is because it mixes conservative elements of familism, another key legacy of the authoritarian period, whereby the main weight of care for children, elderly, and dependants is attributed to women within the family, with social democratic universal access to health and education, and liberal means-tested benefits (Del Pino 2013). The Spanish regions showed willingness to play a crucial role in the

development of the welfare state (Moreno and McEwen 2005). The fast-track regions pioneered the introduction of policies on childcare, social inclusion, or minimum income that were replicated in other territories (Subirats 2005). They also initiated the adoption of legislative and executive competencies over healthcare, education, and social services granted by the Constitution. The catching-up attitude of the slow-track regions generalized this model and shaped a deeply decentralized welfare state (Moreno and Trelles 2005).

The domain of *violence* reproduced similar decentralized patterns. The central government issued important legislation to eradicate violence against women which affected the penal code, such as Act 1/2004. However, the implementation of a comprehensive approach required coordination with regional institutions. Their competencies on welfare, and in some cases, the police and the judiciary, made regions critical institutions for ensuring an effective intervention (Alonso and Verge 2014). Moreover, regional governments passed their own laws, plans, and protocols, which surpassed in some respects the statewide legal framework that focused on intrapartnership violence. Competitive federalism encouraged here the development of policies to address other types of violence such as female genital mutilation. The EU promoted women's mobilization in this domain through funding programs on violence such as Daphne (Lombardo 2004).

Territorial dynamics had analogous effects in the *civil society* domain. Civil society's contestations over the meaning of gender equality in Spain touched upon many different issues. Women's access to sexual and reproductive rights is one of the key issues influencing women's autonomy, raising heated debates, and helping to classify a gender regime as conservative in case of limited autonomy (Shire and Nemoto 2020). We, therefore, analyze this domain by focusing on the struggles around this topic. Basic reproductive rights had long been regulated in the penal code, a matter of exclusive competence of the central state. Yet, the role of regional governments in healthcare, education, or family policies allowed decentralized policies in this area to be developed. The result was the adoption of diverging approaches, ranging from those focused on protecting the embryo to those aiming at guaranteeing women's autonomy (Alonso and Paleo 2017).

Pre-crisis developments in the four domains show that the predominance of a model based on concurrent competencies and emulation processes generated a "race to the top" effect. This, along with the influence of the EU *acquis*, benefited the promotion of gender equality and the evolution toward a public gender regime in Spain (Lombardo 2017). Nevertheless, the leading role of left-wing parties, together with other factors, explains relevant variations in regional equality frameworks. In the following section, we analyze how the post-crisis context affected patterns of interaction between governmental levels, promoting changes in the gender regime.

## Struggles over the Gender Regime in Multi-Governed Spain

### Economy

In 2011–2018, there were deep changes in territorial dynamics as compared to the precrisis period, which signaled a recentralization process. The EU, through Spain's central government, played the hegemon's role in the domain of the economy because the main economic competencies belong to those levels. In response to the economic crisis, the EU demanded from Spain a strict control of public expenditure growth and a neoliberal program of policy and labor market deregulation ([Council of the European Union 2012](#)). The central government enforced this EU neoliberal project through a process of recentralization that surpassed political ideology. Neoliberal and recentralization targets were in line with the ideology of the PP central government, ruling from 2011 to 2018, though the former PSOE government had fostered centralization too through a reform of the Constitution in 2011 to meet the EU fiscal targets.

Reforms to limit regional self-governing capacities were not new in Spain ([Máiz, Caamaño, and Azpitarte 2010](#)), but the crisis gave recentralization a neoliberal direction detrimental to gender policies. The 2011–2018 PP cabinet “disciplined” regional institutions ([Colino 2013](#)) through Act 2/2012 on Budgetary Stability and Financial Sustainability, which curtailed their already limited financial autonomy—with the exception of the Basque Country and Navarre that enjoy their own fiscal regime—to enforce EU austerity policies throughout the country. Parallel to this, it legislated in key welfare areas of regional competence, while bringing policies adopted by several substate institutions before the Constitutional Court. This body reflected the conservative predominance and often ruled in favor of limiting decentralized powers. As a result, measures concerning social housing or universal healthcare were suspended and the Spanish welfare state experienced a severe retrenchment ([Del Pino 2013](#)).

The joint action of the EU and central government pushed the country toward a neoliberal gender regime ([Lombardo 2017](#)). The main indicators of this shift were in the areas of employment and care, welfare, and gender-equality policies. These included an increase of women's unemployment (27.2 percent in 2013, while the EU-28 figure was 11 percent, [Statistical Office of the European Communities 2013](#)), a worsening of working conditions for women and rising poverty,<sup>5</sup> and a substantial decrease in the government's budget dedicated to gender-equality policies at all governmental levels ([Paleo and Alonso 2014](#)). The replacement of retired civil servants was severely restricted and norms were issued to prevent the renationalization of formerly privatized services.

Moreover, the conservative government promoted the neoliberalization of the gender regime through budget cuts in the welfare state, privatizations, and

attacks to the universality of the public health system by excluding foreigners without a regular residence permit from the National Health Services, except for urgent cases, and introducing citizens' copayment of medicines and health services. Public care services were dismantled, privatized, or not implemented. Budget cuts in the Dependency Law since 2010 reduced financial state support to people caring for elderly or dependent relatives, thus increasing the strain on (predominantly women) carers. In childcare, budget cuts resulted in "increases in child-to-adult ratios and fees, and the worsening of staff working conditions" (Ibáñez and León 2014, 9).

The Spanish regions had competency in the development of welfare policies. However, severe budget restrictions by the central government heavily limited self-government in this realm. Concerning the local level, Law 27/2013 of "rationalization and sustainability of local administration" restricted the autonomy of local governments and limited their ability to invest in welfare and care provision. To implement a neoliberal approach in municipalities, the conservative central government issued legislation that hindered the capacity to renationalize public services that had been privatized.

While data show that the gender regime at the central level was more neoliberal than before the crisis, the change toward a more domestic gender regime did not occur, as the high women's activity rate shows (53.3 percent, INE March 2018). However, if EU and Spain's government policies continue this path of neoliberalization, this could change the gender regime to neoliberal-domestic.

The struggles of anti-austerity feminist and social movements and alternative policies promoted by local and regional left-wing and coalition governments offered an alternative to both neoliberalism and recentralization. Spanish civil society mobilized more intensively since 2011 against the PP's austerity measures to defend labor rights, public health, housing, public education, and gender-equality policies. Gaining momentum in the *Indignados* social movement, civil society struggles proposed alternative social democratic projects by preventing the privatization of public hospitals and the eviction of families from their homes (Calvo 2013). The feminist movement was active both in the anti-austerity social movement and in its own struggles for gender equality. Groups such as *Las Kellys* domestic workers or *Cuidadoras de Bizkaia* carers exposed the gendered effects of the neoliberal Labour Reform which made feminized work even more precarious. The feminist movement organized massive protests on March 8, 2018 with a women's general strike, inspiring millions of women to go on strike from work, care, study, and consumption, to demand effective gender equality in all spheres.

At the institutional level, 2015 elections gave power to left-wing regional governments and local councils with coalition governments, and also led to the election of female leftist mayors from civil society both in Madrid and Barcelona. These substate governments implemented an anti-austerity social democratic agenda that renationalized local public services and increased

funds to welfare policies, as in Valencia. They introduced social clauses in public procurement in the Barcelona and Madrid local governments, and implemented policy plans on gender justice and against the feminization of poverty in Barcelona.

In sum, in Spain's postcrisis context, the hegemonic role of the EU in the economy domain affected the action of the central government toward deregulation through recentralization processes. This changed the gender regime toward a more neoliberal type. Differences in political ideology between the PP and the PSOE at the central level did not substantially matter for the implementation of the EU neoliberal reforms, though the PP government led the neoliberal recentralization process with particular impetus due to ideological affinity. Civil society and substate institutions resisted neoliberal shifts, promoting a more social democratic gender regime. Such alternative policy projects faced opposition from the PP central government, as the legislation adopted by the latter to hinder the renationalization of public services shows. When the economy domain is considered, the result is thus a patchier and more contested neoliberal gender regime than the EU and central government pushed for in this period.

### Polity

In the domain of polity, in which we consider women's political representation and equality machinery, the central and regional levels played the hegemon role and changes in the gender regime can be ascribed mostly to political ideology. In the crisis period, when the polity domain depended on the economy domain, the gender regime tilted toward neoliberalism. However, political ideology mattered more in *polity* than in the case of the *economy* with the right-wing promoting a neoliberal–domestic and the left-wing a public–social democratic regime.

Indeed, the conservative government's action at the central level pushed toward a more domestic gender regime in Spain, with stagnation and backlash in women's political representation as compared to the precrisis period. This is evident when one considers women's representation within public administration and other politically appointed bodies where the PP central government intervened. For example, in the Central Bank women councilors decreased from 44 percent in 2011 to 25–30 percent in 2018 (Verge and Lombardo 2018). However, left party ideology counterbalanced the central PP government's influence in political representation. The PSOE government had already introduced in Act 3/2007 statutory quotas for candidate lists with a strong sanction for noncompliance such as the withdrawal of lists. For the 2015 general elections, left parties introduced “zipping” candidate lists that alternate a woman and a man, increasing women's descriptive representation in Parliament to 39.4 percent.

In terms of executive power, while the 2018 PSOE government at the central level appointed a women-dominated cabinet, PP governments from 2011 to 2018 decreased women's representation to 31 percent (Verge and Lombardo 2018). Regional dynamics confirmed this pattern, parity cabinets being more common where the PSOE ruled or where the regional equality law mandated parity at the executive level (Alonso and Verge 2014). At the local level, the 2015 elections gave power to women mayors in the biggest cities. Moreover, political coalitions at the local level and the new left-populist party Unidas Podemos promoted debate about the need to feminize politics. These political forces mitigate the trend toward a domestic gender regime in polity that the PP central government promoted.

When it comes to equality institutions, though, the evolution toward a neoliberal gender regime is noticeable. Here the economy domain interacts with the polity one: the hegemonic role of the central government in the economy, by restricting public budgets for all governmental levels, affected the funding of local and regional equality institutions. The central government also intervened through its legislative competency by adopting the Law 27/2013 that withdrew from municipalities the power to organize activities for the promotion of women. Not only were public budgets for gender equality cut, but also equality machinery was restructured in the name of austerity. At the central level, the Ministry of Equality had been abolished by the PSOE government in 2010, showing the hegemony of the economy. The PP government in 2011 eliminated the former State Secretariat for Equality, and created a new one, with broad competencies on social affairs and equality. The Secretariat for Equality was upgraded again in 2018 under PSOE rule, showing that left political ideology made a difference when economic pressures diminished. Finally, the formerly autonomous Woman's Institute was downgraded to being dependent on a Directorate-General. Its budget was cut and its competencies were broadened to equal opportunities beyond gender (Lombardo 2017).

At the substate level responses varied depending on political ideology. Regions governed by the PP, such as Galicia, Murcia, and Madrid, followed the neoliberal trend set at the central level by downgrading or eliminating equality institutions (Paleo and Alonso 2014). Regions with historically consolidated state feminism, such as Andalusia under a PSOE government until 2019 and the Basque Country under an PNV-PSOE government, rather promoted a social democratic gender regime by maintaining intact their equality machineries, supporting them with similar amounts of public funding as before the crisis (Alfama 2017; Puig-Barrachina et al. 2017). Local authorities from left-wing parties and coalitions, such as Barcelona, Madrid, Santiago and Valencia, even expanded their equality machineries.

In sum, in the polity domain, both state and regional levels played the hegemon role and differences in political ideology explained variations in the gender regime. The introduction of "zipping" systems in the left parties shows the

gender regime is still public. At the state level, the severe restructuring of the equality machinery during conservative rule exposed the change to a more neoliberal gender regime coupled with right-wing ideology. At the regional level, competitive federalism and left-wing governments explained the push toward a social democratic gender regime exemplified by the defense of equality institutions and budgets in some regions.

## Violence

Violence is a domain that is influenced by the economy because policies against gender-based violence require extensive human and budgetary resources. Consequently, the central government played the hegemon role, while regions and municipalities articulated alternative policies, but without economic resources to implement them. Political ideology influenced changes in a gender regime oscillating between neoliberal and social democratic.

The main statewide Law 1/2004 foresees services of housing, counseling, and protection that should be available for survivors, and so do regional regulations. The neoliberal response of the PP cabinet to the crisis jeopardized their effective implementation, showing the impact of its role as “hegemon” in the economy domain. The central government’s expenditure to implement Law 1/2004 was cut by more than 25 percent from 2008 to 2014 (Paleo and Alonso 2014). The main statewide action in this area was the parliamentary adoption of the first state-level Agreement on Gender-Based Violence, proposed by left-wing parties and embraced by conservatives in 2017 due to significant public opinion support. The agreement to improve public intervention on gender-based violence was also signed by regional governments.

Yet, under conservative rule, only 40 percent of the foreseen budget was assigned to implement the agreement. Moreover, severe fiscal restrictions imposed on the regional and local institutions to meet the EU budgetary targets limited their capacity to invest in policies addressing violence against women. The aforementioned restriction to hire civil servants led to underfunded and understaffed policies, while services to attend survivors were privatized or eliminated in many municipalities. The Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) responded to these setbacks by warning the government of Spain about the gendered impact of austerity.<sup>6</sup>

Violence is a prominent issue for the feminist movement, which explains its strong activism in this domain. The feminist movement reacted firmly to the austerity context by putting *violence* back at the top of the agenda. The 7N Platform organized massive demonstrations to raise awareness about the problem.<sup>7</sup> This platform issues the annual Spanish Shadow Report which scrutinizes public investment in this area, highlighting the importance of resources for effective intervention. Significant media attention was gathered

through innovative protests such as the hunger strike by women from the NGO Velaluz<sup>8</sup> and highly popular cases such as the battle over the children's custody of a survivor, Juana Rivas, which led to the campaign #WeAreAllJuana.<sup>9</sup> Both called attention to the effects of scattering resources and lack of institutional commitment.

Local councils were an increasingly important ally of the women's movement in this regard. Leftist civic platforms that took office in 2015 opposed the so-called "Montoro law"—named after the minister of the Treasury and Public Administrations—a norm that severely restricted their capacity to expand public intervention. The Barcelona municipality, for instance, circumvented this regulation to renationalize local services to attend survivors of gender-based violence that had formerly been privatized. Regions such as Andalusia—under socialist rule until 2019—adopted a similar approach and preserved public investment in this area and issued new legislation. Nevertheless, the violence domain illustrates the shift toward a neoliberal gender regime influenced by the *economy* domain, in a struggle between the central level and some local and regional governments pushing for social democratic alternatives.

### Civil Society

The *civil society* domain was the subject of intense struggles in Spain in the last decade. Apart from the mobilizations discussed in former sections, we here analyze civil society's struggles over sexual and reproductive rights that clearly exemplify controversies over the gender regime. The central government played the hegemon role due to its competence for reforming the penal code. Yet, the regional management of social and health services allowed this level to propose alternative policies, promoting a more or a less conservative gender regime depending on its political ideology.

The Zapatero socialist government gave a decisive impulse to women's reproductive rights with the adoption of Law 2/2010 using state-level prerogatives to reform the penal code and to issue basic legislation on health-related rights (López, 2015). This norm decriminalized abortions in the first fourteen weeks and guaranteed access to them through the public healthcare system. "Pro-life" organizations opposed it by appealing to conservative majorities in many regional institutions. They presented "Citizens Legislative Initiatives" in all regions, claiming the need for policies to support pregnant women and to provide alternatives to abortion. From 2008 onwards, regions governed by the PP adopted "pro-life" laws and plans stating a public duty to protect the life of the unborn and to establish a network of assistance to pregnant women in vulnerable positions. Here, regional powers over healthcare and social policies were able to counteract the progressive statewide legal framework. In these regions, the diminishing economic resources that were dedicated to gender-equality policies were targeted at measures that treat women as mothers and

to the very same organizations that oppose the feminist project (Alonso and Paleo 2017).

Political ideology matters in civil society's struggles over abortion. Self-governing capacities were used in regions ruled by the PP to promote a shift toward a conservative gender regime. This agenda was transferred to the central institutions when Prime Minister Rajoy took office. His conservative cabinet proposed a "Bill of protection of the life of the embryo and of the rights of the pregnant woman," which aimed at restricting access to abortion. The reaction of feminist activists was remarkable. A fragmented movement rapidly reunited to undertake statewide and European mobilizations with significant media visibility. This inspired the creation of platforms and groups, attracting many young women to the feminist cause. This, along with the lack of popular support and internal divisions in the conservative party, led the prime minister to withdraw the bill.

On their side, the left-wing and coalition governments elected in 2015 at the local and regional levels opposed the conservative shift promoted by the PP's antiabortion policies. The regional parliaments of the Balearic Islands and Valencia—dominated by the Socialist Party, Unidas Podemos, and their allies—suspended in 2016 the PP's regional laws (Alonso and Paleo 2017). Similarly, local governments in Santiago de Compostela and Córdoba withdrew all public subsidies from "pro-life" organizations. They counteracted attempts of antiabortion activists in setting the agenda, seizing public resources, and having access to women in vulnerable positions. Yet, many antiabortion laws were still in place in 2018.

When sexual and reproductive rights are considered, the domain of civil society shows indicators of a conservative gender regime, amidst a struggle where political ideology, at different levels of governments, was the main factor to explain positions in favor and against such conservative shifts. Competitive federalism operated here to restrict or enlarge women's rights depending on the prevalent political majority, as conservative policies were quickly transferred across regions.

## Conclusions

This article analyzed gender regime change in decentralized states, by applying Walby's systemic theory to the case of Spain. This required revising her theory by applying the concept of "hegemon" to different governmental levels—EU, state-level, regional, and local—and considering interactions between them. Any theory that neglects this territorial complexity cannot explain changes in the gender regime. Walby's systemic theory must thus be complemented with frameworks that can account for the variety of levels involved. Works on Europeanization and federalism have allowed us to capture the role of the governmental levels that play as hegemons in each of the

domains of economy, polity, violence, and civil society. Walby's neoliberal-social democratic and public-domestic forms refined with Shire and Nemoto's conservative form help us to classify the changes.

Spain is a multitiered polity where changes in the gender regime could be explained by the relationship between the level of government acting as hegemon in specific domains and variations in political majorities across levels of government. In the 2011–2018 postcrisis context, gender regime change was predominantly influenced by the economy domain, which plays the “hegemon” role. A neoliberal economic project was promoted by the EU and Spain's central government and enforced at the substate level. The result was a shift toward a neoliberal gender regime in the domain of economy, a more contested neoliberal shift in the violence and polity domains, with social democratic alternatives, and a contested change toward a conservative type in the civil society domain. Multilevel analysis showed that, despite the neoliberal economic hegemony, gender regime change toward neoliberalism occurred more clearly in some domains, but not all.

Decentralization, interacting with political ideology, amplified the variety of opportunities and obstacles to gender regime change, by allowing substate levels to improve, challenge, or ally with central government action on gender equality. Political ideology mattered in all domains except in economy, where a shift in gender regime toward neoliberalism prevailed due to the EU-level hegemony. In polity, violence, and civil society, the interaction between level of government and political ideology produced more variations, with right-wing majorities promoting neoliberal and conservative types.

Applying systemic analysis to decentralized states shows a more complex and variegated picture of changes in the gender regime. Further studies to apply this systemic framework to specific cases are needed. Meanwhile, theory about varieties of gender regime ought to take levels of governments more seriously into account to better capture the complexity of its determinants of change.

## Notes

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1. The Spanish political context is undergoing changes that will affect the gender regime. The 2019 general elections show the victory of the socialist party (28.7 percent) and the entry of Vox populist radical right party (10.3 percent) in Parliament. These developments, together with results of political pacts following local and general elections, will be considered in future research.
2. <http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Diputados/Diputadas%20en%20activo>
3. <http://www.senado.es/web/conocersenado/temaslave/presenciamujeres/listasenadoras/index.html>
4. [https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/wmidm/wmidm\\_pol/wmidm\\_pol\\_parl](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/wmidm/wmidm_pol/wmidm_pol_parl)
5. The Labour Reform increased employers' opportunities to fire employees, especially in women-dominated contracts, and limited workers' care rights.
6. <https://cedawsombraesp.wordpress.com/> (accessed 5/3/2020).
7. <https://plataforma7n.wordpress.com> (accessed 5/3/2020).
8. [https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/mujeres-Puerta-Sol-finalizan-hambre\\_0\\_619789259.html](https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/mujeres-Puerta-Sol-finalizan-hambre_0_619789259.html) (accessed 5/3/2020).
9. [https://elpais.com/tag/caso\\_juana\\_rivas/a/](https://elpais.com/tag/caso_juana_rivas/a/) (accessed 5/3/2020).

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