

50 years after Franco's death, giving a voice to Spanish dictator's imprisoned mothers

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A protester holds a banner with pictures of people who went missing during the Spanish dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

John Milner/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

In the run-up to the 50th anniversary of Francisco Franco's death on Nov. 20, 2025, the left-leaning Spanish government led a vigil honoring the many victims of the dictator's regime.

While the exact numbers remain impossible to determine, historians estimate that Franco's men killed up to 100,000 people during the brutal Spanish Civil War, and tens of thousands were executed during his dictatorial rule from 1939 until his death in 1975. Hundreds of thousands more were imprisoned, sent to labor camps or subjected to political persecution. To these figures, we must add the roughly half a million people who fled or were forced into exile.

Among the multitudes of Francoism's victims were women and children who endured psychological and physical abuse in prisons, orphanages and asylums. Yet for decades their experiences have remained marginal in the public narrative – highlighting the uneven acknowledgment of different groups of victims amid Spain's broader struggle to confront its past.

Still, their stories remain alive in the testimonies of the women who were imprisoned by the regime. In the summer of 2024, I conducted research at the Documentation Center of Historical Memory in Salamanca, collecting documented written accounts of traumatic experiences suffered by Spain's female population under Franco. They reveal the extent to which Francoist repression was structured through gender, framing women as inherently subordinate and subjecting those who resisted the regime's patriarchal order to especially severe punishment.

Franco's gendered violence

My study explores the testimonies of women imprisoned during the civil war or subsequent decades, all of whom endured suffering related to their motherhood. While some were detained for their ideological allegiance to the republic that preceded Franco's ascent, others had no formal partisan affiliations or were merely related to men who did.

These women suffered what many survivors and historians have described as a “double punishment” – targeted not only for their beliefs or associations but just for being women and mothers.

The earliest testimony I came across was from a woman detained in 1939, just three years after Franco, a military general, led an uprising against the democratically elected government of the Second Republic that precipitated the civil war and his subsequent reign.



Franco gives a fascist salute as he and his Nationalist forces enter Barcelona in March 1939.

AP Photo

Under Franco's dictatorial regime, women's roles were rigidly controlled by the ideology of National Catholicism, which linked femininity, motherhood and loyalty to the state. The church reinforced this vision, "dictating that women served the fatherland through self-sacrifice and dedication to the common good."

Those who defied the patriarchy were criminalized and subjected to "re-education" focused on religious values.

Women's so-called "redemption" under this reeducation was no less violent than their confinement. As one witness described, in May of 1939 the auditorium of Las Ventas prison was prepared to celebrate "two girls and a boy (... recently) born in prison." During the ceremony, a choir "composed of forty inmates, including opera singers, music teachers, violinists, and amateurs," had to perform the national anthems with the fascist arm-raised salute.

Yet confinement itself was particularly brutal.

According to Josefina García, a woman imprisoned during the 1940s, guards regularly insulted and beat inmates. "If you were at home behaving like decent women, you wouldn't be here," she recalled one saying. García continued: "Of course, they used a crude, sexist language. The police 'used words' in a way that sometimes leave a mark deeper than a bruise."

Gender also played a role in the type of punishment prisoners received. Following their arrest, women were subjected to head shaving, forced ingestion of castor oil and the subsequent public humiliation of being made to walk in circles while defecating. In addition, they were often subjected to sexual violence by prison guards or interrogating officers.

Recounting her experience, another witness reported the case of an 18-year-old sister of a guerrilla fighter in Valencia who “was subjected to terrible torture, stripped naked in a room with several Civil Guards who pricked her breasts, genitals, and stomach with ... needles.”



A protester holds a banner with an image of an unknown woman – a victim of the Franco regime.

AP Photo/Paul White

Motherhood as battleground

One of the most painful aspects of Franco's repression was the forced separation of mothers and their children.

Upon incarceration, women frequently lost custody of their sons and daughters, who were placed in orphanages or adopted by families loyal to Franco and his regime. Such violent ruptures of the maternal bond were more than an act of personal cruelty – they were a calculated political strategy rooted in the broader Francoist ideology.

Since Francoism promoted an image of women as obedient wives and self-sacrificing mothers devoted to the Catholic family model, Republican women were demonized as immoral, dangerous and unworthy of motherhood.

By stripping women of their children, the regime both punished them and reinforced its narrative that only “loyal” women could be true mothers.

Meanwhile, child-rearing or birth during incarceration was marked by fear and uncertainty. In certain cases, newborns were allowed to stay with their mothers for a short time. However, a lack of proper nourishment and mental exhaustion made breastfeeding an impossible task.

At times, women who began to lactate were denied the possibility of nursing their infants, leading to physical pain and emotional torment.

More often, babies were permanently taken away altogether, deemed at risk of being “contaminated” by their mothers’ ideological values.

“When I was arrested, my son was five days old,” one victim, Carmen Caamaño, reported. “About a year later, they said I no longer needed to breastfeed him and took the child out of the prison. Some friends had to take him in because I had no family there.”



Women pay tribute to victims of the Franco regime in front of a flag of the Spanish Republic.

P Photo/Alvaro Barrientos

There were also countless cases in which children were imprisoned alongside their mothers. With no other relatives to care for them, these children suffered from hunger, disease and a lack of basic hygiene in their overcrowded cells. For mothers, the psychological burden was immense as they were forced to watch their children suffer, yet they had no power to protect them.

In the summer of 1941, about six or seven children died daily in these prisons from starvation and diseases, according to accounts of survivors.

Trauma and resistance

Alongside trauma, there were also moments of resistance.

Mothers in prison looked for ways to nurture their children despite scarcity and fear. Testimonies I reviewed relate cases of inmates sharing food, telling stories and protecting children as best they could. These small acts of care were a quiet but powerful form of defiance.

Yet for many women, the trauma of these losses never healed. Survivors often speak of the pain of separation as an open wound that lasted a lifetime. Children raised in prisons or separated from their families carried the scars into adulthood.

Even decades after the regime ended, many descendants still struggle with the weight of this silenced past. Yet because of Spain's Amnesty Act of 1977, which was granted for past political crimes, those responsible for atrocities committed under Franco have seldom been held accountable.

Histories of the Franco years often leave the grief of the intergenerational trauma in the shadows. And for the victims themselves, the traumatic motherhood experiences under his dictatorship reveal more than just personal suffering – they expose how authoritarian power can reach into the most intimate parts of life.

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