

CHAPTER 4

Contemporary Women Bertsolari

The Tale of a Possible Empowerment Process¹

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“Feminism has nourished us, it has opened doors, windows, for us; we have seen things that we did not used to see, but what we want is to sing and have a good time, basically.”

Ainhoa Agirreazaldegi Rekondo²

It was not so long ago that the term “woman bertsolari” was an oxymoron. Nowadays, however, any Basque will tell you that Ane Labaka, Aroa Arrizubieta, Eli Pagola, Jone Uria, Nahia Sasco,

1 Without going into any deeper definitions, here the word “women” is understood in terms of “socialized as women” and “interpreted as women.” This work was supported by the Department of Education, Linguistic Policy, and Culture of the Basque government (IT-881-16).

2 *Contenedor de feminismos: Docu-acción para el contenedor de feminismos. Mujeres bertsolaris* (2014), documentary film, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRhd4wi8T5E>.

Nerea Ibarzabal, and countless others are bertsolaris, without any conceptual problem.

Undeniably, though, the hegemonic bertsolari is still a man and to a great extent the bertsolaritza system has made and continues to make that hegemonic bertsolari (Larrañaga 1994; Hernández 2006). Indeed, bertsolaritza is not a social and cultural practice that develops in an isolated way outside of society, and therefore the gender system that traverses society from top to bottom also traverses bertsolaritza.

Yet on the way to opening up a concept from the oxymoron of bodies, bertsolaritza itself has embraced many changes from a gender perspective. And women in the bertso world have developed these changes, in both calculated as well as intuitive ways, individually and collectively.

In this chapter, I propose interpreting some of the milestones in the transformation process of women bertsolaris, mostly since about the turn of the millennium. I do not just want to explain what changes have taken place and where we are right now; I would also like to examine several key events, moments, and places in getting here. Clearly, wider social changes have also influenced the development of bertsolaritza in recent years, and in this regard my focus of inquiry will be several moments and places of change through initiatives promoted by people in the bertso world. And if personal trajectories have also had an influence in the bertso world itself, in both bertsogintza and in the structure of the bertsolaritza system, then in this chapter I will pay attention—to some extent at least—to initiatives that have been developed collectively.³

3 For example, in this chapter I will not examine the influence that Maialen Lujanbio's personal trajectory (in winning the Basque national championship in 2009 and 2017) has had directly in bertsogintza and the bertsolaritza system as well as throughout the individual and collective trajectories of women bertsolaris, even though it has been crucial in this process. The truth is that focusing on collective elements responds to a pragmatic incentive: because I myself am a member of the bertso movement and a feminist, I would like this text to represent the reflections of women bertsolaris, in its own humble way, looking toward the future in order to consider the steps we may take collectively to achieve (more) equality in bertsolaritza.

In order to do so, as regards my approach, I will adopt an autoethnographic perspective;⁴ and I have based my methodology on direct observation, the analysis of performances, surveys sent out to women bertsolaris,⁵ and document analysis.

The Iceberg:

The Tip, Underwater, and the Current

The iceberg metaphor is a useful lens on a specific and obvious situation of everything beneath the surface. As noted, bertsolaritza has changed a lot—above all when looking from a gender perspective—in recent years. As a result of the bertso schools, the public appearance of women bertsolaris has not just been legitimized but has become normal, possessing a woman's voice has not de facto rendered us incapable of creating bertsos, in general the themes have been adapted to the potential presence of women, and one sees more and more women in bertso sessions—public as well as in contests—beyond just March 8, international women's day. Certain changes could be viewed as anecdotal if taken in isolated fashion, but one could say that together they reveal structural changes. Of course it is not the same thing, when talking about equality of opportunity, to be a woman or a man in bertsolaritza, insofar as both society and the bertsolaritza system itself impose boundaries. Yet there is an idea that I would place on the tip of the iceberg, that is, what I identify as the latest summit in all the changes that have taken place: namely, as well as women adapting to bertsolaritza, there is also a clear political demand for the bertsolaritza system itself to be more inclusive for women.

4 As Jone Miren Hernández (1999) and Mari Luz Esteban (2004b) have contended, the research process cannot be completely separated from one's own experience. Nor should we want it to be: I believe that starting with a critical take on my own experience can enrich other's understanding.

5 I posed four questions to several women bertsolaris, to be answered in written and open form. Fundamentally, I asked them to give a specific definition of empowerment, in order to identify the moments and places that served them as regards being empowered as bertsolaris and women, and to reflect on what was missing in those processes. Twenty-three colleagues answered those questions. My thanks to you all.

I would contend that there is, within the contemporary bertso movement itself, at least an awareness of the need to take the gender perspective into consideration, and from the basis of that awareness we are witnessing several restructuring attempts in the bertso world – not without great effort, nor without some resistance either. But, above all at the discursive level, the politically correct idea is developing—even if not among all the people involved in this world and at different levels among those people—that bertsolaritza itself is responsible, specifically, for adapting its system to women bertsolaris.

In order to bring that idea to ocean level, however, a route has been constructed, as mentioned. Besides the changes that have taken place in society thanks to academia and the feminist movement as well as at the discursive level and in practice, this change has been due specifically to the many initiatives on the part of women bertsolaris in order to meet their needs in formal and informal ways, both consciously and unconsciously, and individually as well as collectively. And I would like to highlight several defining moments in this trajectory: the contribution of the first reference points, the creation of a women bertsolari network, and bringing feminist theory and practice to bertsolaritza. Ultimately, I will argue that this trajectory has been at root an empowering process⁶ and, looking toward the future, I will conclude with several reflections on the possibility of continuing with this empowerment.

The First Contemporary Reference Points⁷

6 I am aware of the fact that using the concept of empowerment can bring with it a certain ambiguity and the risks involved with such ambiguity (Esteban 2017). I will discuss this in more detail below. I would say, however, that I have decided to employ this concept because it has been used a lot in the bertso world since first appearing in the Basque Country in 2003, and because I understand that the polysemy of the concept in these models is being neutralized, thereby limiting the associated risks.

7 Women bertsolaris have appeared throughout the history of bertsolaritza. For instance, the first reference we have is that of a ban on women bertsolaris taking part in bertsolaritza. Women were singing in the early nineteenth-century challenges at the birth of modern bertsolaritza. Yet in the transformation from bertsolaritza being part of the landscape to being part of culture (Laborde 2005) and, at the same time, as the definition of bertsolaritza became strictly connected to improvised rather than written activity (Larrañaga 1997), so the names of women bertsolaris began to disappear from contemporary

Although I want to concentrate on the period since the turn of the millennium and especially on collective initiatives, one cannot do so without mentioning the first women points of reference in contemporary bertsolaritza.

Amaia Otsoa, Kristina Mardaras, and Arantzazu Loidi were the first women to appear during the age of contemporary bertsolaritza singing in public in the 1980s. The bertso schools were already functioning at this time, and the new generations appearing on the public stage were made up of young girls and boys. That is how, for example, Estitxu Arozena, Iratxe Ibarra, Ainhoa Agirreazaldegui, and Maialen Lujanbio (among many others) also came to public prominence in the 1990s.

One could say that women's voices and bodies were still battlefields at this time, with one of the main problems being that women bertsolaris' bodies themselves were non-hegemonic,⁸ as were their voices as well. One could speculate, then, that women bertsolaris at that time were obliged, publically through their bodies and voices, to confront many prejudices and taboos, with bertsolaritza inevitably shaping their presence according to the moment and the place, even if they were not fully accepted.

That said, the subversion of those women did not just derive from those bodies appearing on stages. They also brought the conflict to a discursive level. They put words to that tension, for the first time, and in the first person. Indeed, thanks to those bodies, women could speak for the first time from the position of women's roles (as that was what most of themes associated with them demanded, because they were only allowed to speak about such roles), although not just about women; for example, they also addressed bertsolaritza.⁹

chronicles as well as history books. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that people began to hear women singing once more in improvised and public spaces.

8 Basically, "because female bodies were not the site of bertosos" (Hernández 2016, 17). For more on this topic, see, moreover, Esteban (2004a) and Alberdi (2014).

9 The following, taken from the 1993 Bertsolari Day in a session involving Lujanbio, Ibarra eta Arozena, demonstrates this, especially in a bertso by Arozena: (Donostia, January 24, 1993) "Emakumeok mikrofonoan

This discursive level tension also brought about changes, adapting male bertsolaris to the women's discourse; although, obviously, not straight away or completely. But without a doubt the boundaries of political correctness shifted. Clearly at the social level the times were changing; and as Karine Etxeberri (2015, 47) clearly explains, "the problem of gender equality in the bertsolaritza movement was equally one of contextualization within the women's movement."¹⁰ And those women were front and center in forcing the generational change within bertsolaritza itself.¹¹

I would underscore just how influential it could have been being a reference point during a time of progress in a practice; or perhaps put more explicitly, not being a point of reference. Estitxu Eizagirre (2005) recounts the influence of Maialen Lujanbio as just such a reference point:

When we began doing bertsos we began by writing, and we were very hooked on writing. And we went to one school championship, and there I saw a girl singing for the first time. And I remember that, at the age of eight, I thought to myself: "Ah, of course, it's possible for a girl to sing." And my next thought was: "Well, just like in soccer, while they're kids it's ok, sure, but there aren't any professionals." A few years later I saw Maialen on television, and that's when my problems started, because I saw that it was possible for a girl to appear alongside Lizaso,

/ jaso izan dugu burla. / Gaur ere batzuk haserre daude, / ezin dute disimula. / Ni ziur nago egunen baten / erakutsiko dugula / bertsolaritzak barrabilekin / zerikusirik ez dula" (Stepping up to the microphone, / we women have been taunted. / Even today some people are mad, / they can't hide it. / I'm sure that one day / we'll show that / bertsolaritza has nothing / to do with balls).

10 Above all, by that time there had been three Feminist Encounters of the Basque Country meetings (in 1977, 1984, and 1994) and the Basque feminist movement was gaining strength (Zabala 2008; Epelde, Aranguren, and Retolaza 2015).

11 One sign of that generational change, for example, was Andoni Egaña's parting bertso (the *agurra*) at the 1997 National Championship: (Donostia, December 14, 1997) "Ez da bakarrik Belodromoko / jendetza honen disdira / bertsolaritza aurrera doa / emakumeen harira / 82ko Txapelketari / jarri gaitzen begira / orduan gaitzat hartzen genitun / ta orain eurak gai dira" (This glow isn't just / down to the crowds here in the velodrome, / bertsolaritza is forging ahead / following the direction of women. / Just take a look at / the 82 championship. / Then we looked at them badly, / and now they're more than capable).

and from then on it was more difficult to carry on writing bertsos alone in my favorite notebook; I had to take the next step and sing and improvise in front of people, and that was a problem for me.

It is not enough, however, just to be a point of reference in a system in which male bertsolaris are hegemonic if women bertsolaris do not overcome the obstacles in successive generations. One may think it somewhat naïve to say that if there is someone to blaze a trail in the first place, for those that come later there are less hurdles. Carmen Larrañaga expresses this idea very well, in fact, in a work published the same year Egaña sang the aforementioned bertso. For her, the existence of several reference points in itself does not necessarily make it easier for those that come later to carry on in the same direction:

And it is argued that after her [Kristina Mardaras], navigating the trail of bertsolaritza was much easier for the few women improvisers that followed. This is only partially true. History teaches us that before Mardaras there were other bertsolaris with sufficient skill to win even public contests, without their participation encouraging any gender balance (men and women) in the exercise of bertsolaritza (Larrañaga 1997, 60).

In order to call into question the very system of bertsolaritza itself, and to take into account a gendered perspective of the people that socialized bertsolaritza, it is not enough for some women to carve out a new direction, even though without that it is impossible to progress either. There are several other key factors when it comes to changing course.

The First Thread in the Network

Nowadays, unlike fifty years ago, the first step for a young person wanting to get into bertsolaritza, if they do not do so at home in the family, is, typically and most often, in bertso school. There one meets weekly—for a couple of hours or so—with one's classmates

in order to study how to create improvised bertsos.¹² Later, they may or may not end up performing in public. Yet bertso school is essentially a place in which, whatever the age, to do group work on improvisation. The group is the foundation of the bertso school. The relationships among group members will define the atmosphere of the bertso school, and bertso school students will be fellow travelers when it comes to socializing in the wider bertso world; to go and listen to others' or their fellow bertso school students' sessions; to get to know people from other bertso schools; to speak about bertsoaritza or the bertso world; in other words, to socialize with people that share the same fondness for bertsoaritza.

The truth is that in children's bertso schools it is customary for there to be as many girls as boys in the group, but as they get older, there are still more boys than girls. The imbalance most often takes place in the jump from writing to improvisation and from closed groups to the public space: many girls leave bertso school (Latasa 2010). Many factors may influence this phenomenon—those at the social level, and almost certainly in interaction those that consciously correspond to bertsoaritza and the bertso world—and they deserve more profound examination, but the issue is that many girls end up being the only girl in bertso school from a certain age onward.

Consequently, girl bertsoaritza have had limited options when it comes to singing, talking, or just being with other girl bertsoaritza. When that used to happen, moreover, it was often in the context of a competition, whether a school championship or a young persons' contest. When I was younger, there was no municipal space or any special option for bertsoaritza-related free-time activity for young people of our age. It was not at all typical to see more than one girl signing in a bertso session—with the exception of those on March 8—and there were still many sessions without any girls at all.

That is why the women bertsoaritza's meetings held in 2003 marked such a watershed moment. Fifteen of us, ranging in age from twenty to thirty, met together. And in many cases, we did not know each

12 It is customary, at the outset, in children's bertso schools to first develop their written skills, and later take the step toward improvised activities. In young adult's bertso schools, improvised skills mostly form the chief activity.

other. In one participant's word: "We followed our intuition in spending the weekend in Askizu; we knew there was something in that topic, but we were not sure what . . . Of course, drawing up a list of girls in the bertso world, and getting to know one another as well because speaking by email with people we did not know was "artificial," or "organized" rather than organic. Yes, spending that weekend there was all about bertsos and women" (Eizagirre 2004, 2). That weekend, we shared our experiences as women bertsolaris; without any organized topics; where we felt the boundaries lay; whether we were settled or unsettled.

Estitxu Eizagirre lists some of the concerns that were raised in a chronicle of that encounter:

Why do they call us, in order to fulfill a gender quota or because we are who we are? Is it bad to call us because we are girls? Who does the theme prompter think about when setting the themes? Why do I always play the woman's role? Why is it so difficult for bertso school girls to perform in public? The embarrassment, fear, stage fright they feel . . . what influences this? Do I have my own bertso style or do I imitate [the male bertsolari]? Why must I listen to the idea circling around me that the women's issue has been resolved? If society is sexist, is it possible for bertsolaritza to be immune to this? Do we appear in public as we would like to? Some of us have given up along the way . . . why? (Eizagirre 2004, 1–2).

I also recall two things that impacted me a lot: first, realizing, surprisingly (for me at the time), that the experiences, questions, and concerns of the other women resembled my own experiences, questions, and concerns. I remember how each problem and struggle resonated with me.

That confirmation brought with it a second realization: there was a structure that created similar experiences for me and the other women. I recall a feeling of liberation—to some extent—taking part on an uneven playing field. It was not me. It was the structure. And we did not occupy the best place in that structure – acknowledging that is easier than someone feeling an intrinsic inability or incapacity.

My analysis was, then, as clumsy as it was clear: in our understanding, what men did was what was done to be a bertsolari; yet we could not do everything that men did. Not because we were incapable, but because it was not legitimate for us to do so. It did not work. The boundaries of humor and speech hemmed us in too much.¹³ The gaze of other bertsolaris and the public did not seek out our talent. We did very well, *for girls*.¹⁴ The rules of the game were not the same for everyone and any achievement was more difficult for us; indeed, any achievement at all was a pleasure.

It may seem surprising, when it had been ten years since the session by Arozena, Ibarra, and Lujanbio at that Bertsolari Day, and at a time when bertsolaritza was a practice almost entirely still run by men, that for many of us in 2003 the gendered structure of bertsolaritza was not evident. Yet this paradox is applicable, unfortunately, to all other kinds of social and cultural practices, and ours was no exception. Moreover, at that time, those of us who met in Alkizu were not pioneering women bertsolaris, and that made our experiences seem milder. We were not starting from scratch. We did not have to adapt so much, never in fact, to being the first women to sing in a specific public setting or to any rules necessarily being changed to allow us to enter. Since we had begun to sing, it had not been politically correct to say that a woman could not be a bertsolari. By that time, it was a time of more clearly defined boundaries.¹⁵

13 Iratxe Ibarra highlighted the asymmetrical rules of the game when she sang in that well-known Bertsolari Day with Arozena and Lujanbio: “Erabiltzen den hizkerak ere / badu nahiko zerikusi / guk neskok kontu horretan behintzat / ez baitugu hola bizi / nahiz ta gizonak kristonak esan / beren grazi eta guzi / *de puta madre* geratzen zaie / ta guri berriz itsusi” (The form of speech used too / has a lot do with it / because in that regard we girls at least / have not experienced that / even though men are great at expressing / their humor and everything / it looks *fucking great* on them / yet ugly on us).

14 “For people to recognize that a girl is good at doing bertsos, she has to be good on three occasions. It is not enough to be good once. The first year, quite good, ‘you’re pretty good for a girl’. Later, after a few more years, ‘well, the best out of all the girls’. And then, perhaps, you may be told that you’re a good bertsolari. Thus, you have to be good three times, for people to say ‘she creates bertsos’, now it’s not good or bad, but the fact that she creates bertsos” (Lujanbio 2007).

15 In 1999, when Arozena herself asked her father (and also a bertsolari) Manolo Arozena about the bertsos she sang at the 1993 session, at a session in Goizueta, Navarre, she mentioned the invisible structures: (Goizueta, August 17, 1999) “Oinarri txarrak baldin baditu / aldatzen dira ohiturak; /

Jone Miren Hernández, meanwhile, highlights the fact that, in what was at that point an influential book about contemporary bertsolaritza, Joxerra Garzia, Jon Sarasua, and Andoni Egaña (2001, 28) assert that, “the presence of women bertsolaris has long ceased to be a significant anecdote.” The hegemonic discourse of the bertso world did not explicitly marginalize us. However, the belief that we had reached a supposedly normal situation made it more difficult, specifically, to see, identify, and designate the obstacles.

Feminist Theories in Bertsolaritza, and Bertsolaritza in Feminism

Any analysis of the (re)incorporation of women into new spaces requires going beyond the importance of the number of women that participate currently, to analyzing the mechanisms of segregation, of inequality, that are more much more subtle and for that reason more difficult to detect. They originate in universes in which inequality has impregnated forms of being, of dressing, of behaving, of gesticulating, of competing, of dialectic resolution, of getting emotional. On this basis, the feminist anthropological gaze can expose the deep structures that function in the expressions, language, symbols, [and] imaginary, and only from that analysis is it possible to discover the substrates of differences that are turned into inequalities, in this case, into the access to equality for spaces of power and privilege (Del Valle 2012, 12).

bidetxiorrik ez izan arren / bidea egin du urak. / Haseran garbi izan genitun / eredu eta helmugak, / arriskutsuen bihurtu dira / ikusten ez diren mugak” (If one has bad foundations / the customs change; / even though there is no way / water carves out a way. / We had a clear idea at first / about the model and the objectives, / the unseen boundaries / became dangerous). Likewise, Arantzazu Loidi herself, in a 1995 interview for a monograph on women bertsolaris titled “Emakumeak Plazara” by the journal *Bertsolari*, was asked “Between the time you were singing and now does the state of bertsolaritza have the same characteristics?” She replied: “I think it is getting better, I think some obstacles have been overcome. Those of us who initially emerged had to wear a kind of veil. Now things are done in a clearer way. There is no kind of wall that needs breaking down in order to sing in public. In that sense it is more advanced. But some things, which are very subtle, and because of that, still persist” (Loidi 1995, 40).

Since the Askizu meeting, the topic of gender has been front and center in bertsolaritza as well. Examples of that, for instance, include the monographic episode about women on the bertsolaritza television show *Hitzetik Hortzera* in 2005, the articles published by several women bertsolaris on different blogs, the *Emetik Bertso Kabareta* (Female bertso cabaret) show created by Onintza Enbeita, Iratxe Ibarra, and Oihane Perea in 2006, Maialen Lujanbio's 2007 lecture "Bertsolaritza emakumearen ikuspuntutik: bertsolaritza eta emakumea" (Bertsolaritza from a woman's perspective: Bertsolaritza and women) (Lujanbio 2007), the roundtable discussion titled "And Gender" organized by the journal *Argia* in 2008 (Eizagirre 2008), and the creation of the Gender Group.¹⁶ As well as all these developments, by that time feminist anthropology had already started to address what was happening in bertsolaritza¹⁷ and the feminist movements continued to go from strength to strength in the Basque Country (Zabala 2008; Epelde, Aranguren, and Retolaza 2015).

However, still at that time within the bertso world the terms "bertsolari(tza)" and "feminist" were not syntagmatic, at least not outside the academic world. In this regard, Uxue Alberdi and Ainhoa Agirreazaldegi were pioneers. Using the tools of feminism and more specifically feminist anthropology, incorporating an interpretation of the influence that the gender system has typically had in society, interpreting from feminist discourse topics that had at that time emerged once more, and looking at bertsolaritza from a feminist perspective, these two bertsolaris argued for new explanations in the analysis. They gave a talk, "Bertsolaritza: A Feminist Gaze," over forty times between 2010 and 2015. One could say they took an academic argument and popularized it.

16 In 2008, following a process of reflection, the first working structure purposely in favor of equality was created within the most important reference point association in the bertso world: the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza Gender Group (Erkiaga 2008).

17 Above all we are indebted to Jone Miren Hernández for this. She was the first person to examine how the gender system runs through bertsolaritza (Hernández 2006). Likewise, Mari Luz Esteban's focus on women bertsolaris' bodies was also influential (Esteban 2004a). Thereafter, among other examples, came Leire Ibaruren's master's thesis on how women use humor on stage (Ibaruren 2009).

In that talk, meanwhile, they underscored the strategic nature of a feminist consciousness in order to construct a non-marginalizing bertsolaritza. Furthermore, they understood the changes that a feminist consciousness would bring to bertsolaritza as a contribution to making it richer because it would bring about a non-marginalizing idea. And finally, looking ahead, they argued for a closer relationship between the feminist movement and people in the bertso world, in both directions. Feminism offered the tools for bertsolaritza to become more equal, and bertsolaritza also had something to offer on the way to a more equal society. For the first time, we were women, bertsolaris, and feminists. Or at least we could be.

That formulated discourse created a truly possible hypothetical scenario to build a relationship between the feminist movements and bertsolaritza. Thus, for example, it led those of us who did not have a direct relationship with the feminist movement to look toward feminism.¹⁸ And as well as that, comparing the experience of women in bertsolaritza with that of women in other fields, the experience gained from other fields facilitated that bridge-building work among people in academia, the feminist movement, and the bertso world.

Feminist Practices in Bertsolaritza:

It is No Coincidence

and the *Empowering Bertso School*

That is how, since then, several practices have emerged within bertsolaritza that would be difficult to justify without feminist discourse. For example, creating non-mixed fields, outside of those meetings, in public activities and stage skills.

The context was no longer the same as in 2003. Yet the topic of gender was more important than ever in the bertso world, thanks to

18 “For me, personally, if feminism is something new, it has been thanks to women bertsolaris. That has always been a nearby source,” according to the bertsolari Nerea Ibarzabal in an interview at the 2017 National Bertsolaritza Championship (Ibargutxi 2017).

that talk.¹⁹ And as regards the public space, a number of transformative initiatives were created: non-mixed sessions—or at least those clearly made up mostly of women—such as, chiefly, the performance titled *Ez Da Kasualitatea* (It is no coincidence).²⁰ That same title had been given to a 2009 musical show, made up entirely of women, in Mutriku, Gipuzkoa; and from that time on the format was repeated on several other occasions, and especially from 2013 onward, going from strength to strength. In those sessions, women sing alongside women, and joining together in song we have realized the extent of the influence that women bertsolaris have when they sing together. One could cite several examples of this influence, but here I will take the following into consideration: a confident atmosphere and an awareness of the strength and value of one's voice.

On the one hand, usually there has been an especially empathetic atmosphere among the bertso colleagues in these performances. We have typically demonstrated such mutual understanding through both gestures and words, both on and off stage. And that accumulation of performing experience builds up a network of complicity (Labaka 2017; Alberdi 2015). On the other hand, there are two important elements: first, in this kind of session women bertsolaris are not concerned about feeling like or potentially feeling like a token when they are the only woman, breaking several boundaries that are placed on them when they feel like that. And second, because these performances attract a largely female audience, a more shared self-referential world—to some extent—with the public is usually created. Thus, we bertsolaris feel freer to say and do what we would not do in other sessions (Labaka 2017).

19 The Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza Gender Group began to organize meetings among women bertsolaris, and in 2013 we met again in Alkizu, transforming those encounters into annual meeting points. The 2014 Bertso Day was organized around gender, and in 2015 the show *Bertsolaritzaren Sekretuak. Isilduriko emakumeen historia* (The secrets of bertsolaritza: The silent history of women) premiered; that is, the subject was now public, and very topical.

20 The title itself demonstrates, to some extent, the nature of the performance: namely, that it was no coincidence that most—indeed, almost all—of the bertsolaris on stage were women.

Ultimately, in such sessions what we feel is an atmosphere of confidence. And that brings with it an increased confidence for anyone involved. Asked about how she feels in such performances, Alberdi answers in the following way (2015): “Especially comfortable. In normal sessions I feel like it’s a competition, the need to demonstrate something . . . And in these ones I don’t feel that so much. I feel like my voice has something to say, and that in itself gives me strength. Moreover, very motivated, and that motivation also encourages me to take risks.”

And that issue of confidence is not insignificant. At the 2014 women bertsolaris’ meeting, when we asked ourselves, by means of collective reflection, “What do I need to be good at creating bertsos?” the almost unanimous response was *confidence* (whether confidence in someone, or spaces of confidence). We realized that we were aware, naturally, that we were capable of creating bertsos; moreover, that we wanted to do so. And what we need to do that well—and what, to a large extent, we lacked—was a belief in ourselves.²¹ For that, more spaces would lead us to that much needed belief in ourselves. From that deduction, specifically, another strategic space that we may define as a means of feminist practice in the bertso world emerged: the *empowering bertso school*.

In 2015 the Gender Group proposed the setting up of a bertso school especially for women bertsolaris, with the goal of *empowering* those bertsolaris who wanted to perform in public. This model is also influential when it comes to indicating the value and strength of an individual and group, and also when women bertsolaris become more aware and create networks.²² As stated above, women bertsolaris do not have a lot of specific spaces for themselves in which to meet, and even less regular times to get together. When we do

21 In a study about the reasons that women bertsolaris give up bertsolaritza, Izarne Zelaia (2015) concludes that one of the main reasons they do so, at least, a “lack of confidence” (hand in hand with being too self-demanding), is clearly structural, and that the root of this is the reproduction of the gender system in education.

22 The bertsolari Oihana Iguaran (Piedra 2017) observes the following of the empowering bertso school: “A big group of women have come together, strengthened by listening to one another, we believed each one of could contribute something, without any inhibitions.”

meet, it is most often at an around public performances. And the empowering bertso school—as well as a place in which to become familiar with bertso improvisation—is a space in which to share experiences and reflections. Unlike the public spaces, free of the pressure of an audience, it allows for us to reflect on our activity; to get a perspective at the end of the day: In the words of woman bertsolari Amaia Agirre, “we make our concerns known; when we are comfortable and uncomfortable in bertso sessions; sometimes it could be because of the theme, because we don’t know enough about it, or when we don’t know how to respond to something formulated by a bertso colleague . . . we have detected a lot of situations” (Goenaga Lizaso 2017).

There are several ideas that resonate in the statements about what I have defined as feminist practices. In each case, we reflect on the issues that emerge as regards the public space, the themes, the audience, the organizers, our bertso colleagues, and ourselves, and share those reflections. And in each case, we experiment with new environments, tones, and styles of humor in bertsos, consciously sometimes and unconsciously other times. In the words of Teresa del Valle (2012, 18), this is “a complete challenge that requires and demonstrates empowerment and creativity.”

Facilitating a Move toward Equality in Bertsolaritza: Final Reflections

If bertsolaritza has been transformed in recent years as regards the gender perspective, it has to a large extent been thanks to several initiatives carried out by women bertsolaris. It has not been enough just for some women to blaze a trail when it comes to calling the bertsolaritza system into question, even though without that no progress would have been possible. There are several other key factors that have come into play on the road to change. On the one hand, creating a network led us to be aware of structure, to be able to share experiences, and to study each other’s experiences. The feminist theorization that came to bertsolaritza carried out bridge-building

work between the feminist movement and bertsolaritza, making the experience of women in bertsolaritza comparable to women's experience in other fields, and thereby facilitating the bringing of feminist practices outside bertsolaritza to the bertso world. We are, therefore, giving shape to new ways of understanding bertsolaritza, in public and not in public, in women's bertso sessions, and in bertso schools: "In the twentieth century, the male public model dominated. And in the twenty-first century? A prediction: bertsolaritza is heading toward a new definition, and, in this, the contribution of women will be indispensable. Bertsos are full of women's experiences, emotions, melodies, wishes, and demands, in order to be able to portray a bertsolaritza for everyone" (Hernández 2011b, 3).

This is only the beginning and there is still a long wide road ahead in order to reach equality in bertsolaritza, as Hernández explains quite clearly (2016). The gender system permeates bertsolaritza and discrimination rooted in the gender dichotomy is found at all levels of bertsolaritza (Hernández 2016). In this situation, if we want an area in which each person can benefit from bertsogintza and the bertso world, and so that if we want, our contemporary and future bertso colleagues as well, we must keep on signing (as much as we can, as well as we can, and, above all, as enjoyably as we can), keep on examining critically how the gender system pervades bertsolaritza, and breaking the balance of that system; in other words, keep on empowering.

In that sense, if, following Kate Young (2006, 4–5), we understand empowerment as a radical change in the process and structure that reproduces the subordinate position of women—and if we take it as given that we would prefer those major changes to take place in a shorter rather than longer time-frame—we could more easily understand that collective actions are essential as well as individual empowerment (*ibid.* 5): "women become empowered through collective reflection and decision-making. Its parameters are building a positive self image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically, building up group cohesion and fostering decision-making and action" (Government of India 1986, in *ibid.*, 123).

Empowerment as a concept has become as ambiguous as it is invoked, however, in recent years (Esteban 2017), and in bertsolaritza as well. And just as we define empowerment, so we will also carry out an analysis and evaluation of the women's empowerment process. It is striking to me how, nor in the discourses of women bertsolaris that take part in collective structures do we still give much space to the collective dimension of empowerment either. It seems to me strategic, then, looking to the future, to add the collective dimension to the concept of empowerment as well as to continue to reflect on how we can and how we want to be women bertsolaris collectively.

Nowadays, numerous feminist discourses and practices create and recreate spaces in bertsolaritza and they enjoy more and more centrality in the bertso world. More and more of us define ourselves as active participants in that process. We appear in public, we are theme prompters, educators, judges, organizers, and many of us are in one way or another also involved in bertsolaritza in an academic way, studying it from a gender perspective; we write newspaper and magazine columns, we are on Twitter, and we are members of Basque, provincial, and local bertso aficionado associations. And if we understand that empowerment influences the bertsolaritza system collectively from the feminist space, we should also reflect on the relationship between feminist spaces in the bertso world and the bertso system as a whole as well as the dynamics within the collective of women bertsolaris. In that sense, I would like to ask the questions posed by Mari Luz Esteban (2014, 72) in relation to Women's Houses, because they would also be of use as regards the bertso world, looking ahead:

As regards the knowledge that emerges in any feminist space [let us imagine feminist spaces in the bertso world], how does it reach, how does it transform, how does it influence, how is it projected in society [let us imagine the bertso world] or other spaces? How are translations of concepts, ideas, theories, practices being carried out? How are power relations among the different feminists, groups, and spaces being administered? Are their connecting spaces, connecting women, connecting positions?

To what point is this knowledge being translated into concrete political actions?

I will leave the questions in the air in the hope that we may answer them collectively.

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