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WOMEN *BERTSOLARIS**: RECLAIMING THE PAST AND SINGING THE PRESENT

MUJERES *BERTSOLARIS*,
RECLAMANDO EL PASADO
Y CANTANDO EL PRESENTE

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* THROUGHOUT THE ARTICLE REFERENCE IS MADE TO THE SUB-CATEGORY OF ORAL LITERATURE KNOWN AS *BERTSOLARITZA*, NAMELY BASQUE ORAL IMPROVISATION OR VERSE-SINGING, AS OUTLINED IN THE CONCEPTS SECTION.



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RESUMEN

En la última década, el *bertsolarismo* se ha convertido en una de las manifestaciones culturales más significativas en el País Vasco, las mujeres *bertsolaris* se han convertido en un modelo de empoderamiento. Los registros oficiales de *bertsolaritza* se conocen desde el siglo XV. En este trabajo pretendemos explorar la imagen que se ha creado de las mujeres a lo largo de los siglos. Antes, las mujeres eran objeto de versos cantados por hombres, pero ahora son cantados tanto por hombres como por mujeres. Actualmente hay 200 mujeres *bertsolaris* y se han seleccionado 25 de ellas para formar grupos de discusión. Representan la élite de las mujeres que actualmente trabajan en el campo de *bertsolaritza*. Se transcribieron, categorizaron e interpretaron los datos utilizando el programa Nvivo 11. La conclusión principal es que las mujeres *bertsolaris* fueron las que construyeron el camino para cambiar la imagen de las mujeres como objetos pasivos a sujetos activos. Las mujeres han pasado de ser un tema abstracto, extraño y completamente estereotipado del discurso masculino a convertirse en un sujeto activo en el campo del *bertsolarismo*.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Bertsolarismo; género; mujeres; rol sujeto-objeto. .

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, in which *bertsolaritza* has become one of the most significant cultural manifestations in the Basque Country, women *bertsolaris* have themselves become a model of empowerment. Official records of *bertsolaritza* date back to the 15th century and women *bertsolaris* have been singing since that era. However, up until the 20th century they were systematically consigned to oblivion. This paper aims to explore the image that has been created of women over the centuries. Before, women were the object of *bertsos* (verses) sung by men, but now these are sung by both men and women. There are currently 200 women *bertsolaris* and 25 of them have been selected to form discussion groups focusing on the image portrayed of women in *bertsolaritza*. These 25 viewpoints represent the elite of those women currently working in the field of *bertsolaritza*. Their accounts were collected, transcribed and cross-referenced by nine researchers. Subsequently, they were classified and interpreted using the Nvivo 11 analysis system. The main conclusion is that it was women *bertsolaris* who paved the way into changing the image of women from being passive objects to active subjects. Women have gone from being an abstract, foreign and completely stereotypical theme of a masculine discourse to becoming a visible, flesh-and-blood, multi-faceted entity with these female *bertsolaris*.

KEYWORDS

Bertsolaritza; gender; women; subject-object roles.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research has been carried out throughout four years and it has been constructed in three stages. The phase shown in this article corresponds to the diagnosis of *bertsolaritza* and gender. To do so, 25 experts have been interviewed to learn how gender has been addressed in *bertsolaritza*. This article examines the treatment of women in *bertsolaritza*. To accomplish this task, qualitative research has been done through discussion groups. The article begins with a theoretical framework, specifically with the contextualization and conceptualization of *bertsolaritza*. Afterwards, it will be introduced the silenced history of women *bertsolaris*. Once the objectives have been explained, the methodology will be determined. This framework focuses mainly on discussion groups where the experts interviewed discuss the image of women in the field. Finally, the article will expose the conclusions.

It is necessary to understand that with the processes of modernization *bertsolaritza* has become a way of understanding popular culture. On the one hand it is linked with tradition in terms of identity. On the other hand, and in terms of culture, it is aligned with modernity (Aierdi, 2007). It has become an artistic brand. It has shifted from being rural culture to being urban culture. It has entered academia, schools and the media. There are currently 20,650 students of *bertsolaritza* in 385 schools (Larrañaga, 2013). Every year, hundreds of events are held, and the national championship takes place once every four years at BEC¹, which is attended by thousands of spectators. The final competition draws a crowd of 15,000 people. For this reason, *bertsolaritza* has not only become an urban phenomenon, but has also gained a mass audience.

A recital of *bertsolaris* lasts about two hours and can involve from two to eight *bertsolaris*. They are always accompanied by an audience and a facilitator who proposes the topics, types of melodies, and rhymes with which they will improvise. They can sing alone, in duo and even all-at once when they sing by rhyming to points (which are made of different syllables). The themes and forms required are usually diverse.

1.1. WHAT IS BERTSOLARITZA AND IMPROVISATION?

Bertsolaritza means improvised verse singing in Basque and it is a manifestation of popular oral culture whose appeal lies in this very improvisation, which is in turn the basis for the rules. There are improvised verse singers all over the world (Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, Catalonia and Wales, among others) and oral improvisation is, to a large extent, closely tied to minority languages and cultures. The Mintzola Foundation, in collaboration with the EHU/UPV (University of the Basque Country), published its «Oral Improvisation Map» in Donostia-San Sebastián in 2016 as part of the event Europa Bapatean: <http://www.mintzola.eus/en/kulturartea/mapa>. Some improvised verse singers work with musical instruments. *Bertsolaris* do not use musical instruments in their improvised rendition; rather, their verses are sung a capella, always to a well-known melody. The melody defines the meter: in fact, *bertsolaris* do not count syllables, they only ensure that the text matches the selected melody. As far as the rhyme is concerned, this might be a consonant or a whole word (Garzia, 2001, 2012).

¹ Bilbao Exhibition Center.

Bertsolaritza is based on improvisation. The first documented reference to improvised *bertsolaritza* dates back to the year 1802 (Garzia, 2012). Initially, two *bertsolaris* would challenge each other and the ensuing contest would take place in the local tavern or cider house. Prior to the 20th century, *bertso* challenges, and the respective *bertso* contests, would take place in what were known as *Lore Jokoak* (floral games), but during the nineteenth-century *bertsolaris* began to become more professional and started singing in town squares, pelota courts, churches and theatres. This is also when the championships first began to take place. Lekuona (1974) argues that *bertsolaritza* should be classified as a sub-section of oral literature, a type of unwritten literature. It has also been called popular literature or popular poetry. Lekuona describes the main characteristics of *bertsolaritza* as follows: rapid imagination, dialectal in nature and strong improvisation. *Bertsolaris* have very little time to organize their verses and, to successfully do so, they create them inversely, since the most important line is the final one (Larrañaga, 2013). Up until the late 20th century, *bertsolaritza* was almost always considered a sub-category of Basque literature and most researchers agreed with this position. Mitxelena (1988) claimed that this literature was predominantly oral (Larrañaga, 2013). However, from a more theoretical perspective, Joxerra Garzia developed a new concept, proposing a new theoretical framework for improvisation. In Garzia's opinion (2001, 2012), *bertsolaritza* needs a new theoretical framework, since «the goal of the improvisational *bertsolaris* is not to create a text of great literary value, but rather to stir up the emotions of the audience.» (Garzia, 2012: 40). Thus, he aims to distance oral improvisation from written poetry, «in fact, from the perspective of written poetry, most improvised verses are poor in terms of poetic quality» (Garzia, 2001). Furthermore, improvisation is not just about the texts, as the verses are not limited to text but they also involve singing (the melody, the voice, the style), and their rendition takes place in front of spectators: «the improvised *bertso* means nothing outside its context.» (Garzia, 2001: 140). Hence, *bertsolaritza* is not only poetry and text, but also context, where the *bertsolari* involves the audience in his or her words. As it occurs with advertising, the text is aimed directly at the target audience.

The audience has to immediately understand what is being said or represented to them, otherwise the *bertso* runs the risk of failing or being misunderstood. This is the reason for which the gender perspective is so problematic for *bertsolaris*. There are only a few minutes in which to understand the *bertso*, whereas decoding can take centuries. It is necessary to reflect the heterogeneous nature of women (Lasarte, 2012); yet given that stereotypes are so entrenched in the discourse, changing them is a long and difficult task. Anthropologist Teresa del Valle (2012) provides the following exercise on the empowerment of women *bertsolaris* demonstrating, through feminist anthropology, its difficult nature. Jone Miren Hernandez (2011) narrated an incident which took place during a championship. Arkaitz Estiballes (the man) and Uxue Alberdi (the woman) are competing for the *txapela* (winner's beret):

Uxue Alberdi was one of the favourites. The prompt provided by the theme setter was as follows: «You are in a sauna and suddenly you realise that the door will not open, you are both trapped inside». The situation created was obviously uncomfortable for the woman bertsolari and at that very moment I had an intuition that this was not going to end well. Uxue, looking ill-at-ease, was scheduled to sing first and started with a remark about how hot it was in the room, ending with «if this does not change we are going to melt». In his turn, Estiballes turned Uxue Alberdi's argument around and made it quite

clear which direction he was going to take: he opted for the sexual theme. He mentioned his moving towel and began a series of sexual innuendoes. In the next turns Uxue chose not to respond directly to Arkaitz's proposals and limited her bertsos to insisting on the scorching heat in the room they were supposed to be locked in. Arkaitz was able to take advantage of Uxue's feigned indifference and closed his turn with a categorical: «OK Uxue, you can say what you like but I know you are crazy about me and that you are a horny girl».

... It seemed to me that Uxue Alberdi was quite upset... The bertsolari ended her round of bertsos both nervous and uncomfortable. In fact, in her last bertso, she even sang how she did not find that bertso at all amusing and that she wanted to get out of there.

Uxue was penalised in that exercise. She did not score the points she needed to get into the all-important final. The following day a journalist specialising in bertsolaritza and a frequent columnist in the newspaper *Gara* wrote that when he saw which way the bertso was going he knew that Uxue would not get into the final. The journalist assured us that she had basically been penalised for having said «no» to the «sexual advances» made by her opponent. This text surprised me in that it shattered one of the myths of bertsolaritza: when they are on stage, bertsolaris are supposed to adopt those characters «required» by the storyline, yet in this case something made the journalist - and myself - suspect that what had transpired on stage had nothing to do with fiction (del Valle, 2012: 16).

1.2. THE HISTORY OF WOMEN BERTSOLARIS

Women *bertsolaris* have become a model of empowerment (Lasarte, Alvarez-Uria, Ugalde, Leque & Martinez, 2016). There are many sides to this paradigm of empowerment. Firstly, there is the historical omission and dismissal of women *bertsolaris*. Few researchers have ever made any reference to women *bertsolaris*. It is known that, by the 18th century, *bertsolaritza* had become deeply rooted in both the Northern and Southern Basque Countries, both in terms of its formal structure and its popularity, and both men and women sang verses (Ugalde, 2019). Despite this, however, *bertsolaritza* is not often mentioned in documented sources. In fact, until recently, *bertsogileak* (*bertso* creators) were seen as vagrants, drunks and uneducated ignoramuses (Barandiaran, 2011), and were not therefore considered as being worthy of fulfilling a cultural role in society. The authorities and church leaders looked down on *bertsolaritza* as a popular art, since it did not pertain to religious ceremonies or official acts. Hence, women were silenced in two ways from the very beginning. On the one hand because they were women and on the other because they chose to express themselves through lowbrow culture. Larrañaga (1995, 1997) has criticised the fact that until now, *bertsolaritza* has only been associated with improvisation, the town square, and males, and that much has been simplified to the detriment of diversity.

In any case, this article does not intend to give a synchronic approach to the history of women *bertsolaris*, but rather to mention the few narratives that exist around these silenced histories².

² To obtain a synchronic approach in the history of women improvisers it is recommended the reading of Ugalde *et al.* (2019), *Mujeres vascas improvisadoras: las bertsolaris del mundo tradicional (siglo XV-XIX)* in press, Arenal journal. This is a segment of the project carried out by the IKHEZI research team which lasted four years and was divided in three segments.

If charting the history of male *bertsolaritza* is somewhat difficult for the reasons outlined above, that of female *bertsolaritza* is even more so. Despite this, Esteban de Garibay (1854) wrote about women lamenters as dating as far back as the 15th century. These women sang to the dead and have been represented in numerous artworks, always in connection with funeral rites. One example is the tomb of the abbess Urraca Díaz de Haro in the Medieval Abbey of Cañas, La Rioja (late 13th century). Women lamenters appear on the right-hand side, the top and at the side of the tomb.

These women were to be found worldwide, as it was a common practice. Both political and church authorities made a great effort to put a stop to the practice, which was mainly conducted by women. Women lamenters expressed sorrow by singing romances in memory of the life of the deceased person. According to Caro Baroja (1972), they disappeared in the 16th century, but in another work (2000) the same author states that the custom survived in some towns and villages in Bizkaia (Biscay) until the mid-19th century. Some lamenters merely cried and wailed, whereas others sang *hiletak* (songs of mourning) (Ugalde, 2019). The practice of women lamenters was once widespread throughout the world and still exists today, for instance, in the Karelia region of Finland. Elizabeth Tolbert (1990) carried out feminist research which included the *itkuvirsi* from Karelia, Finland, and Cecilia Astorga (2016) states that in Chile, women *decimistas* (poet-singers) still sing to the souls of the dead all night long. Tolbert (2016) explains how, in Karelian culture, women are closely linked to birth and death rites, as it is mothers who bring the deceased into the world and hence are the most suited to saying the final farewell. Through these rites, with songs and music, the souls of the dead are helped on their necessary journey. Similarly, here, not only in the Middle Ages but also much later in the Basque culture, mothers were considered to have close links with funeral rituals (Aretxaga, 1988; Del Valle, 1985).

Women *bertsolaris* of the Medieval, Modern and Contemporary eras have one thing in common: they were silenced, even though they had been singing *bertsos* since the early days of *bertsolaritza* (Hernández, 2014). There are very few *bertsos* available which enable us to determine how the image of women was constructed. When the history of female is analyzed *bertsolaris* only a few women emerge from the silence within male-dominated spaces or literature to leave their mark: Plazida Otaño (1867); Joxepa Antoni Aranberri (1865) and Joxepa Matea Zubeldia (1867), among others. The visibility of women *bertsolaris* increased during the 1980s and 1990s, and in 1985, for the first time, a woman (Kristina Mardaras) took part in a *txapelketa* (championship final). It was also during this period that the first woman *bertsolari*, Arantzazu Loidi, appeared in the *bertso eskolas* (schools where the art of *bertsolaritza* is taught), and those who came after her are the subjects of the research. Arantzazu Loidi was asked the following question as a theme in 1988: How do you feel about being a woman *bertsolari*? She responded as follows (Izagirre, 2014):

It has taken me a little bit to forget this sentence / a woman / and also young, / I prefer these things / be cast aside / it's not about gender / it's about how good you are.

1.3. THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF MEN AND WOMEN *BERTSOLARIS*

When the literature written by men is analyzed, it is normally observed that it is them who have written the history of women, creating a space for women in their discourse. According to

Carolyn Helbrun (1988), real power is not about winning a battle of strength, but rather about being able to occupy an important place in the discourse. We, as women, have been silenced and sidelined as subjects in the history of the arts (Caballé, 1998), and made into objects by male discourse (Gilbert & Gubar, 1998). Given this situation, feminist critics propose the rewriting, rereading and rethinking of stereotypical characters. This means that, when analysing the characters and images of women created within *bertsolaritza*, the references will necessarily be the sexist, stereotypical and archetypal male representations of women which feminist criticism has explored in such depth (Ellmann, 1968; Millett, 1995; Showalter, 2009; Gilbert & Gubar, 1998). These depictions commonly omit women as subjects or turn them into objects.

This article has begun with a reference to the empowerment paradigm generated by the history of women *bertsolaris*. The term omission has been mentioned because it is difficult to determine how *bertsolaris* portrayed women in those distant times because, as stated earlier, there is little documentary evidence. Moving forward some centuries from this situation of oblivion, it can be said that in the 20th century the invisibility of women gradually started to decrease. In relation to this, it shall be explored some of the factors which enabled women *bertsolaris* to enter this predominantly male world, since said factors have a direct influence on the research topic explored here.

The first factor is the modernization of *bertsolaritza*. The modernization of *bertsolaritza* (Aierdi, 2007; Garzia, 2001) has reinforced the presence of women. The subject becomes visible as a singer; there is an increased presence of women in the audience (rising from 39% to 47.5%) and the themes set are also more contemporary. This shift reflects both a change in the presence of men and women among the audience and the evolution of the profile of the *bertsolaris* themselves. Previously, the typical profile of a *bertsolari* was a middle-aged uneducated *baserritarra* (small-holder or rural farmer). Today, the profile of a *bertsolari* is a young university graduate. Modernization has led not only to bringing *bertsolaritza* into mainstream schools, but also to the creation of the *bertso eskolas*. For this reason, the increased visibility of women in *bertsolaritza* has developed hand in hand with modernization.

The second major factor in the empowerment of women has been the creation of the *bertso eskolas* (Lasarte *et al.*, 2016). *Bertso eskolas* were first established in the 1970s and there are currently 90 of them in the Basque Country. A study conducted in 2007 found that at that time they had 796 students (Aierdi, 2007), of whom 45% were women and 55% men (Zinkunegi, 2015). Hence, women *bertsolaris* have started studying and training in *bertso eskolas*. They feel at ease there; the schools constitute a safe, non-threatening space in which to sing and experiment. However, this is, at the end of the day, mere preparation, and women students state that they need to be emotionally strong to continue feeling that safety and strength when performing on stage or competing in championships (Lasarte *et al.*, 2016). They call for spaces to experiment and new methods. This means that although the *bertso eskolas* appeal to women, only 20% make the leap to live venues, to the stage, to perform in front of an audience. But how does this 20% represent women? And how do the male *bertsolaris* who sing alongside them portray women? This paper aims to provide answers to these questions.

There have been significant changes in *bertso eskolas* since women started attending, although there has also been an important delay between those changes taking place and women ma-

king the leap to live performances. Nevertheless, in that leap they have encountered complicity in terms of the issues they have in common and women *bertsolaris* have turned to each other, leading to the realization that they all encounter similar problems on their road to singing live *bertsos* and that they have become role models for the next generation of women (Lasarte *et al.*, 2016). The main reference here is Maialen Lujanbio, who won the 2009 *txapela* (winner's beret) in front of 15,000 people, becoming the first woman to win the championship. Between 1935 and 2018 there were 17 national championships and only two of those were won by a woman.

However, women have won seven of the championships organized by the *Bertsozale Elkarte*a (Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza*), and they have always been well-represented in the final farewell verses (Zinkunegi, 2015:13):

«For the women who have cast off / social impositions» (1995, Leitzia, Arozena), «Yet once and for all, homage should be paid / to all women today» (2003, Irun, Lujanbio), «For all the women / working hard, unseen, at the *bertso eskolas*» (2007, Gasteiz, Perea), «I remember, yesterday's grandmas / today's mums and daughters» (2009, BEC, Lujanbio).

Women *bertsolaris* have had to make a conscious decision on whether to sing live or not, and this decision often leads to a crisis. And it is this crisis which has shaped the awareness and gender identity of women *bertsolaris* (Lasarte *et al.*, 2016). In order to build a feminist identity, it is essential to break down the prejudice and discrimination which surround awareness and gender (Downing & Roush, 1985). For this reason, and to transition from being a passive, silenced object to becoming an active subject, women must use these crises to develop gender awareness (Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2015).

What *bertso* style can bring this mindfulness? Which themes are sung and how is gender approached? It is already known that in written literature, during the early 20th century, women mostly adopted an autobiographical approach. This has been documented by several writers who believe that the most significant reason for this was women's desire to express their feelings and to re-imagine and rewrite themselves (Ciplijauskaité, 1994; Ballesteros, 1994; Smith and Watson, 2010). These first-hand accounts were written by brave women who showed great strength of character and wrote intellectual works. Once they had found a voice, they went from being objects to being subjects, and began to reconstruct gender identity and self-awareness.

«So that, in the midst of mirrors and masks, woman should cease to be an object and become a subject; they should tear off the masks imposed on them to reveal their true faces in the mirror...» (Segarra & Carabi, 2000: 16).

Autobiographies, first-hand accounts, letters... these texts have been interpreted in literature in order to reveal women's voices, as historically these have always been subaltern voices. With these interpretations, women's identity has gradually been reconstructed over the years. From silence, from invisibility, they have emerged to start casting their own shadows. They have gone from being subaltern voices (Spivak, 1993) to being active agents (Eberhardt, 2016). So far, it has been mentioned how, in *bertsolaritza*, certain factors helped change these subaltern voices into active agents - factors such as modernization, the *bertso eskolas*, role models and raised awareness. However, and in addition to the aforementioned ones, there are others which should

be acknowledged: Firstly, the incredible way women *bertsolaris* have worked together to make themselves visible. Secondly, the initiatives they have undertaken to inject gender into all spheres of *bertsogintza* (*bertso* creation). In other words, the alliances women have forged with each other (Lasarte *et al.*, 2016).

Today, it is widely accepted that women have the right to be cultural subjects. Women have started to examine their gender, to write and sing about women. Until recently, women in *bertsolaritza* were a male construct and, it is obvious that without memories and words it is impossible to have an identity (Ramos in Lasarte, 2016). Today, women *bertsolaris* accomplish two tasks simultaneously: they reclaim memory whilst they produce words. Consequently, both the past and present representations of women are being recreated today by women *bertsolaris*. They are active subjects in a process of change and a paradigm of a revolution within a cultural model. They have constructed a new awareness and are now producing a discourse based on this consciousness, and within this new discourse, they have reshaped women. However, there are no traces of the image of women created up until now in *bertsolaritza*. Consequently, and within this theoretical framework, it has been repeatedly asked what this image was in times of silence and how women are being represented in contemporary *bertsos*.

1.4. BACKGROUND

It has been made previous reference to several factors involved in the recent boom of women *bertsolaris*. However, it is important to value the work done within the association, especially because it has always striven to protect and cultivate personal relationships and a sense of togetherness among those working in the world of *bertsolaritza*. To explain how this phenomenon has developed on a global scale, mention should be made of similar cultural activities. For instance, Treva Lindsey (2013, 2015) analyzes gender in **hip hop, rap, poetry slams** and **beat-boxing** on her research on popular culture. She examines how these genres have been renovated with the introduction of women (as in *bertsolaritza*), as well as through their visibility and participation. Women are occupying the public space, a space predominantly and traditionally belonging to men, with songs, music, oral improvisation, performances and experimentation.

Gender and women in *bertsolaritza*. Bearing in mind that the paper is an extended analysis of the work carried out by Zinkunegi (2015), it is necessary to reiterate what was outlined in her research study. She observed that in the 2013 Basque Country National *Bertsolari* Championship, the roles adopted and the characters generated by the *bertsolaris* in general recreated the models present in society. Zinkunegi (2015:34) gives the example of what Lujanbio said in the 2012 conference, held in Azpeitia. *Bertsolaris* are not opinion-makers, nor avant-garde thinkers. Their most important function is observation. She considers that the key to *bertsolaritza* is to reflect on both the themes and current affairs in order to cultivate this observation and to take a stance. Several factors influence *bertsolaris* when they select a viewpoint and construct a character: prevailing popular opinions, their personal mindset, their relationship with the theme-setter, the themes themselves, the context, their personal situation, the paths chosen, amid others. Many of these factors are not within the *bertsolaris*' control and even when they are, it is often difficult to make conscious decisions. However, the line between fiction and reality is often blurred within modern-day *bertsolaritza*, and the two worlds constantly overlap.

Having provided this theoretical framework, the questions posed in this research paper are as follows. Firstly, in this trajectory whereby women are moving from being objects to becoming subjects, how has the issue of women been approached in *bertsolaritza*? How has the image of women been represented in these songs? And secondly, how do *bertsolaris* approach gender when they sing? To explore these questions, the following specific aims were established.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To find out how *bertsolaris* have traditionally represented women and women's issues, and how they do so today.
- To analyze from a gender perspective the themes dealt within *bertsolaritza* and to identify the roles within these themes and theme-related issues.
- To determine whether any specific singing styles are conditioned by gender, and if so, to analyze these.

3. METHOD

Having established the focus of our research and specified the aims, discussion groups were identified as the most suitable methodological approach, since they enable participants to speak freely. Based on the discussions held within the groups, the technique was engineered to enable us to gather first-hand accounts from those involved. In fact, during the conversations, interviewees encouraged each other by mutually interacting with their diverse input. In this sense, this is a narrative-based piece of research. For this reason, almost complete freedom was given to participants to answer the questions as they wished. To a certain extent, the aim was to harvest, using these communication processes, the ways in which women *bertsolaris* think and feel about these issues (at the end of the day, their life experiences).

Thus, and to underline one aspect of the research, the aim was to establish a horizontal relationship between the participants and the researchers. In other words, at all times, and for the well-being of the research work as an example of authentic communication, the aim was to diminish the power of the researcher (Barbour, 2013; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Colás & Buendía, 1992; Flick, 2014; Goetz & Lecompte, 1988; Vázquez 2003). In line with that stated by Limon and Crespo (2002), in all debates the person chairing the session explained that the aim was to use discussion to achieve mutual respect and improvement.

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

This research project was conducted within the context of *bertsolaritza* and within this context, several stakeholders were consulted (including *bertsolaris*, *bertsolaritza* researchers, *bertsolaritza* experts, *bertsolaritza* followers, *bertso* eskola students, theme setters and members of the Gender Committee).

Five discussion groups were formed. The first comprised of 3 women *bertsolaris* with extensive knowledge and experience of *bertsolaritza*. The second and third groups were made up of young followers of *bertsolaritza*, with 5 women in the first group and 3 women and 3 men in the

second. These two groups were formed by young people from *bertso eskolas*, or more specifically by *bertsolaritza* summer camp leaders. The fourth discussion group was made up of three women *bertsolaris* and a theme-setter woman and the fifth and last group comprised 3 members of the Gender Committee, 2 women and 1 man.

In addition to these, some women *bertsolaris* and experts on *bertsolaritza* and gender (five in total) were unable to take part in the discussions and offered to provide a written account. There were 25 participants in total, 21 women and 4 men, along with 9 researchers who also took part in the groups (8 women and 1 man). Different information sources were used. The field notes taken by the working groups were named LO1 and LO2; the discussion groups ET1, ET2, ET3, ET4 and ET5; and the written accounts were named Er1, Er2, Er3, Er4 and Er5. Female voices were referred to with an E after their comments and male voices were identified with the letter M.

Table 1. Participants

<i>Participants description</i>	<i>Total participants</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Not determined</i>
<i>Bertsolaris</i>	7	7	0	0
<i>Bertsolaritza</i> followers	1	1	0	0
<i>Bertsolaritza</i> experts	1	1	0	0
<i>Bertsolaritza</i> researchers	2	2	0	0
<i>Bertso eskola</i> students	11	8	3	0
Gender committee	3	2	1	0

Source: own elaboration

Table 2. Information sources and participants

<i>Tools</i>	<i>Total participants</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Not determined</i>
ET1	3	3	0	0
ET2	5	5	0	0
ET3	6	3	3	0
ET4	4	4	0	0
ET5	3	2	1	0
Written sources	5	5	0	0

Source: own elaboration

3.2. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

The data collection tools used were discussion groups, their transcriptions, the field notes taken by the researchers, and the accounts or written narrations.

The discussion groups were essentially group debates involving in-depth conversations. Thus, the opinions of different people were compared and identified, and thoughts, feelings, and contradictions were noted. It is evident that in our case, the conversation topics involved both issues related to women in *bertsolaritza* and different issues seen from a gender perspective. The research was guided and implemented with an approach based on communication and dialogue (Habermas, 1994; Aubert, García & Racionero, 2009).

According to Rapley (2014), in a discussion group whose aim is to collect data there are no definitive answers, responses are given in accordance with the context and the explanations of other speakers. To a certain extent, for there to be a broader observation and understanding of reality, the participation of more than one researcher provides an opportunity to share a more multi-faceted perspective of past experiences (Rekalde, Vizcarra & Macazaga, 2011; Rekalde, Vizcarra & Macazaga, 2014).

3.3. WORKING PROCEDURE

In the discussion groups, one researcher acted as a facilitator of the conversation, two researchers took down the field notes and a fourth member of the research team took photos and ensured that the whole session was recorded so that it could later be transcribed.

Alongside field work, data analysis is also of great importance (Goetz & Lecompte, 1988). In this case, a dynamic and systematic process was used to analyze the collected information. The speakers' comments were recognized, selected, classified, compared and interpreted. Thanks to this process, the main ideas were extracted from the information represented through concepts embodied by the phenomena (dimensions, categories), alongside the concepts pertaining to these phenomena (sub-categories) (Coffey & Atkinson, 2003; Rodríguez, Gil & García, 1996). This procedure was not used as interpretation technology, but rather as a hermeneutic approach, in an attempt to understand the meaning encapsulated in inter-personal communication. The transcriptions were sorted into categories. The category system has two functions, it is useful for text analysis and it is also a convenient way of organizing the description of the results.

As previously mentioned, the documents were classified into categories which were reviewed by several researchers from the team before the report was drafted. Then, the category system shown in the table below was used to conduct the analysis. Different dimensions were used to classify the gathered data and after having processed the data using NVivo11 software, the procedure led to interpret the results. Once all the findings had been analyzed, the report was written up and the contributions or main conclusions were drawn.

3.4. Analysis tools: Category system

The category system outlined below was used as the analysis tool. As the transcribed comments came from participants' first-hand accounts, it is both inductive and deductive in nature. On the one hand, the expected responses were foreseen (deductive) and on the other hand, unexpected responses were also put into categories (inductive).

Table 3. Analytical tools

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Category</i>
1. <i>Bertso</i> types: themes for <i>bertsos</i> , styles and roles	1.1. Women as a theme (traditionally and currently)
The communicative processes and situations that arise when <i>bertsos</i> are examined from a gender perspective, and when it is reflected in the <i>bertsos</i> sung what has occurred.	1.2. Theme types
	1.3. Roles proposed in the themes
	1.4. Style categories

Source: own elaboration

One dimension has been examined through the analysis tools: *Bertso* types. Within this dimension there are four categories: women as a theme for the *bertso*, different themes, roles and styles. The following is a more detailed description of each category:

1.1.1. This category reflects how women have been portrayed in *bertsolaritza*.

In other words, it explores how participants see women in *bertsos*, both traditionally and currently.

1.1.2. The second category focuses on the themes used in *bertsolaritza* and explores whether there are different specific themes for men and women.

1.1.3. This category analyses how roles are proposed in themes from a gender perspective.

1.1.4. The fourth and final category explores whether gender influences *bertso* style, i.e. if men's and women's *bertso* styles are different.

4. INTERPRETATION

The results will be interpreted in four sections. Each section will cover one category. The first topic analyzed as a category is women. Even though this has been traditionally a male dominated space, the change in time and ideology has led to a mixed presence of men and women. Furthermore, in recent years, the addition of women to this field has made this area more diversified. For this reason, our interpretation of the findings will begin by looking at how women have gone from being themes in *bertsolaritza* to being *bertsolaris*, in a transition from object to subject. The second category will be later looked at, at the themes set for the verses and determine whether it is possible to classify these according to gender. The third section examines the situations, relationships and roles created by the themes, and finally it will be examined the *bertsolaris*' way of singing, to their chanting style, in order to determine whether or not it is gender-specific.

4.1. WOMEN AS A THEME

There has traditionally been a subject/object hierarchical relationship between men and women in society and this has been reflected in both culture in general, and in *bertsolaritza*. Men have been portrayed and viewed as central and neutral, whereas women have been peripheral and

branded as different. However, this has gradually been changing and as women have started to actively engage in singing *bertsos*, they have ceased to be only complete or partial themes, objects, discourses or images, and have instead become equal to men, a circumstance which has led to certain consequences.

Traditionally women have been the theme of bertsos. They were often an object to be sung about rather than a subject-singer (in live events). As Virginia Woolf said, women have been a wonderful mirror to make men's heads look bigger than they really are. The mythical mother, the emasculating wife, the sexy lover, the daughter in need of protection... Women have been sung about with admiration, or ridicule, or paternalism... yet never as equals. Ultimately, the female roles performed by men were not women's voices but rather the male image of a female discourse. This changed when women started singing alongside men, as having real flesh-and-blood women at their sides and having to engage with real women led to a radical shift in the male discourse. They had the voice of an intelligent woman beside them, not the representation of an abstract female entity. (150306_Er3_E)

What has this change brought? How do men and women *bertsolaris* sing about women when they are standing next to each other on stage? Young women *bertsolaris* are beginning to think about this and are starting to gain agency. They are becoming aware of the need to move away from the traditional situation, in which they were observed and sung about, to a new situation in which they are real-life subjects, demanding equality.

It seems to me that it's all about women all the time, and with this, things should be done with women; less about and more with. (150131_ET3_E)

It seems that when there were only male *bertsolaris* on stage, women were represented in a very stereotypical fashion, but now, with the presence of women *bertsolaris*, singing about women is seen as a woman's responsibility.

We have all sung about women but if you are a woman and the others are all men it may be the case that you will have to sing more about women because that's what people expect. And how did they sing? First it was only men singing bertsos, so they had to sing the female roles. Women were portrayed very stereotypically, as if we were all bossy housewives... (150131_ET3_E)

Traditionally, themes about women have been violence, children, the house, whatever. And they were pretty, always pretty, right? (150131_ET2_E)

One more tendency should be added to those mentioned so far regarding women *bertsolaris* singing about women: victimization. The stance adopted when taking on a female role has often been that of the victim which is related to passivity and oppression.

The role of victim has often come directly from women, [singing] alone you have been mistreated or hurt... and it is often women who have assumed the role of victim in their singing. I think we do it too often. I don't mean it is something that shouldn't be said. It is worth mentioning. (150131_ET3_E)

By looking at the early days of the learning process, in the transition from being an object to becoming a subject, women often appear as a theme in the lyrics of the melodies learnt in the

bertso eskolas. Sexism makes its presence visible and it is unintentionally reiterated when students start to improvise verses and learn classic melodies.

When you are learning the melodies, you notice the lyrics: "Oh my God, how can we be singing this?" There's one by Amuriza which goes, «a fine woman at home and I don't know how or why», but okay you learn the melody and that's cool but then you kind of go and read the words and you say what the hell?! And there are many verses like those which I sing with little children, and sure, I don't know when they were written, but it goes «good wine and a fine woman at home, we should've been born 500 years ago». (150131_ET2_G)

It can be observed how hard it is to overcome stereotypes and roles, for both genders, and time and effort is required to change the predominant mindset. It is necessary to deconstruct a number of different practices in order to move towards a different imaginary. Furthermore, participants state quite clearly that this work should not be done only by *bertsolaris*. The first step is to speak about women and great progress has been made in this respect. However, the next step is to highlight androcentrism, according to which men are the neutral point of reference, the standard, and women are the ones with a gender, the marked ones, the others, the different ones.

*It is simple to talk about mothers, daughters, grandmas, wives, all those women, and this is the first step and we welcome it, but we want to go a further beyond that (...) If you tell a man «you're a businessman», this role is neutral. You're a businessman, a well-known figure that coincides with the audience's image of what a businessman is; whereas when a woman *bertsolari* is told to be a businesswoman she has two roles, businesswoman and woman, and it seems to me that theme-setters have a difficult job, because depending on which theme they set gender comes into play, and they may not always want that to happen. When I sketched out the intention of the theme, there was no gender, for instance the theme was the economy, or social issues, and then boom, it suddenly goes off in that direction. (150212_ET4_E)*

4.2. THEME TYPES

It had been raised and educated according to gender. As a result, there is a difference between the themes created for women and men *bertsolaris*, which turn into male-oriented and female-oriented themes.

For example, I always used to say: Why don't they ask me about politics? Why do they always ask me about Joane Somarriba, Edurne Pasaban, women, rape...? Why don't they ask me about other things? Well, today I think ok, so that's just what they ask me about, and perhaps it's related to your role or maybe your stereotype, don't you think? Some men always sing about the same themes: certain people are always asked about the (Basque) struggle for independence, even though there is a wider range of themes available for men, right? So, this has to do with gender, but it also has to do with each person's individual role (150212_ET4_E).

Can the themes also be classified? For example, into pink and blue themes? Or also into what are considered important and unimportant themes? (150212_ET4_E)

It could be the case that there are blue themes and pink themes and so we women go on singing about being mothers, daughters, whatever. And then we all also know that as women we are involved in the struggle for sexual freedom and as a result, for women, there are themes directly related to gender in ideological terms. And then the next step will be that there will also be themes sung by women which are more serious, namely those related to politics, opinions, views on political events, on economic events, those themes set on very recent current affairs and which many bertsolaris really like. (150212_ET4_E)

When they mention "male themes", they refer to the characteristics which are associated with the masculine gender role within the sex/gender system, given that *bertsolaritza* is a reflection of society. These characteristics are public space, mentality, reason and opinion, which are the subjects of the *bertsolaritza* themes set for men. Men are viewed as being capable and responsible enough to talk about politics, in the broadest sense of the word, highlighting the importance of these themes for them.

First there were no women, now there are women and they are mothers, daughters, which for me is the first step and thank God for that, of course, because I would like to hear the mother speaking through the voice of a woman, I prefer that, you know? So I'm happy with that. Then the next thing is your opinion, who is asked about their opinions? Well that's like in society, and so men's opinions are linked to being the important opinions, and women's voices are linked to the intimate viewpoint. (150212_ET4_E)

There is also a sphere that is more intimate or more alternative or more peripheral which doesn't come up as much. Why not? Because it is not important, because it doesn't belong to everyone, or at least that's how many see it, don't you think? These themes aren't as popular, aren't as social, the stage isn't the right place to talk about such things, right? Why not? Because the audience is the general public and because it clashes with the context. (150212_ET4_E).

Influenced by hetero-patriarchal traditions, "female themes" appear in relation to private spheres, intimacy and the body. Furthermore, this is all closely linked to sex, gender and sexuality, with issues related to feminism and «the women's liberation movement» being viewed as melodies to be sung about by women. And as if this was not enough, when *bertsos* related to those topics are created, they are presented as conflictive, as providing negative viewpoints and as complaints, an attitude which severely restricts their development.

But I don't know, in one way, I would say that if a woman is singing about abortion, she will see that as a female theme, don't you think? However, if a man is singing about masturbation I wouldn't say that he would see this as a male theme (...) Whereas rape... in my view, this is an easy bertso to sing, it's a safe bet. For me there are themes that whenever you sing about them, people always clap, and one of them is the role of a woman who has been raped. Everyone, both men and women, know that when you sing that role, the applause is guaranteed. (150131_ET2_G)

I sing what the audience wants to hear: long live the women's struggle and long live women, I am a woman who has been raped but I will survive. And well you know I think we've all heard that bertso style and sometimes, at least, I myself have noticed that the

woman singing has done so because that's what's expected of her, not because it's what she really feels... (150131_ET2_G)

Do themes concerning recent issues within feminism also appear in the world of bertsolaritza? They set these themes for women. In addition to this, these themes are problematic. Often themes about women or about gender are made problematic, and we incorporate speeches, anger, proclamations, victimization and seriousness without wanting to do so. We need to make a greater effort to find a balance. (150306_Er3)

It is evident that in the 21st century, both female and male stereotypical roles and inequality are still present. However, while in the past these were evident and intentional, they are currently manifested unintentionally and indirectly. To a certain extent, the aforementioned androcentrism is still very present in the representation of each role. Whereas men are neutral and have several different registers, women are first and foremost women and then their other roles. This means there are no neutral themes or roles for women.

The stereotypical image is not so common nowadays, at least not in a direct way. Perhaps we should take the time to do an analysis of a bertso contest slowly and in more detail, because maybe in the contest itself you don't realize, because it's not the bertsolari's intention to give a speech, at least not a sexist speech, but when you analyze the bertsos I think there is a lot of room for improvement. (150131_ET2_G)

Bertsolaris have experienced difficulties when attempting to propose new roles due to the influence of the social standards and constraints of existing male and female roles. Enormous effort is therefore required to overcome stereotypes. Participants mentioned that there are few opportunities for this due to the fact women's themes can only be developed in feminist spheres.

For me as a theme-setter, it is also difficult to set a theme featuring women who don't usually appear that will nevertheless be interesting, a theme which won't go down badly with the audience and which won't provoke the typical response: «here she goes again, it's always about gender with her». And then I'm a little like, when you don't know what to do, you say to the other person «Which one would you prefer?» (...) I think today theme-setters have a lot of responsibility and it's really difficult for me to avoid the whole issue of the marked gender, the fact that women are the marked gender. I mean, how can you set the theme of a businessman, and only a businessman? How can you achieve that? It's almost impossible. (150212_ET4_E)

Participants stated that great progress has been made regarding theme selection, proposal and development, but that there are still a lot of improvements to be made. They say that the next challenge is to bring the themes up to date and for this a lot of courage is needed.

It is becoming increasingly easier to break down what we were taught, but there are still, even now, many situations which take us back to square one. Gender is being dealt with more and more care in bertsolaritza, but being more careful doesn't mean it is treated with the utmost attention. What's more, sometimes they think they're setting you a really great theme, and then they go and spoil it for you and you think «not that one too». (150306_Er4_E)

I think things are changing there too, I'm no expert on judging or theme-setting but you know, from the contests and from what I've heard, I think things are changing. To give you an example, in the last Bizkaia championship final which was held in December, both homosexuality and transexuality came up in the themes. There were some interesting themes in terms of content and to work on in terms of discourse. (150131_ET3_E)

4.3. ROLES SUGGESTED IN THE THEMES

It is necessary now take a close look at the roles proposed in the *bertso* themes. Firstly, and going back to what was said in the section on themes, there are leitmotifs connected to women's and men's experiences and the roles and relationships these attract. Regarding roles, it is easier for women to break out of these traditional roles than it is for men. This is because women have developed, or are developing, political awareness. Hence, women, in addition to playing these traditional roles, can also play other roles, whereas men find this impossible. One of the consequences is that it is necessary to develop a political consciousness of what being a woman means, in that being a «person» often means giving up being a «women» as a consequence of androcentrism (men are neutral and woman are marked).

Let's take a typical modern theme: you are a bottle of water or you are handed a bottle of water. Now let's think about the generation gap. If, forty years ago, five women were given the theme of a bottle of water they would all probably have approached it by, say, giving it to their children or to someone they were looking after. We, on the other hand, have developed more of a public outlook, and this has been the predominant masculine stance, right? So, if we were given a bottle of water, we would probably associate it immediately with a hunger strike or one of the well-known public sphere roles, and I think that we simply don't realise that other spaces may also underlie the themes. (150109_ET1_E)

Once two women bertsolaris had a bertso contest and were told that they were pelotaris (Basque pelota players). And so of course, when you hear the word pelotari, most of the audience think that it's a man and so then, when they were deciding on the melody for the verses, one said to the other, hey, we're women, and so they started singing as women. (150131_ET2_E)

In terms of relationships, the predominant model (i.e. the heteronormative model) is almost always adopted. When a couple is mentioned, reference is mostly (and implicitly) made to a husband and wife, or a man and a woman, omitting other real opportunities to explore other types of relationships.

Normally, whenever there is a theme involving partners, we always imagine a husband and wife, and so although this is more normal, within this normality I think there is a lot missing. We still find it difficult to assimilate and understand what exists outside our role, even though it's perfectly normal. (150131_ET2)

Right now I am consciously realising that when I was singing with a man at a bertso-dinner with an open theme, our flirting together was mentioned several times, because it works well and because you know it will get some laughs. Singing with a woman bertsolari at a bertso-dinner I don't think I've ever done that. I, or we, simply didn't go

there, and then you think: «Heavens, why do I do that? Why will I use that trick with one bertsolari and not with another?» (150109_ET1_E)

What should be done about these stereotypical traditional roles and relationships? Are there opportunities to present other images? What happens when this is attempted, and these images transgress the paths established by social norms? Below is an example of the challenges, difficulties, risks, and consequences inherent in breaking away from the patriarchal worldview.

They set a theme for you, «You are in Mali on holiday and a woman hands you a starving baby and tells you: 'Take it to Europe'». You should say this, «Why shouldn't I take it, I will give it this chance, and I'll dedicate my life to giving this baby a good life», maybe that's what you are expected to say and if you say: «Well I won't take it and I will go to France to take part in a protest in favour of de-colonisation», maybe it isn't what is expected, they won't like it, it won't go down well and you'll have lost three bertsos. (150109_ET1_E)

On stage, the themes lead to stereotypes which mums, grandmas, daughters or the general public can understand almost immediately. *Bertsolaris* only have a few minutes to be successful, to be understood, whereas decoding can take centuries.

Imagine they tell you: «You are the parents of three children and you have been looking after the children for many years and now the two of you are alone for the first time in ages». Well, you have to improvise and in a narrow eight to ten meter verse you have to give an image with a message and a joke or a reflection which will make the audience laugh. You can't dress up and you don't have any props. You only have your voice and with your vocal discourse you have to create that woman to be recognized by everyone, you have to describe a depiction of woman that everyone can imagine if what you are saying has to be understood. (150212_ET4-E)

Hence in these cases, *bertsolaris* tend to lean towards archetypes and to sing about women who are socially recognizable. They portray traditional roles, characters in line with social norms, those accepted by society.

It's hard to portray a wife or a relationship that is, I don't know, unusual. A liberal, a hippie, a woman who is, let's say, a bad mother, a mother who smokes, a party animal, a mother who is detached... unless the theme explicitly describes such a character, it's difficult to make the audience imagine, just using your words, a woman who is not «the norm». So, we are constrained by this at all times. If you are told to be a grandmother, it is difficult to play a grandmother who is a lecturer at the university's IT department, and it could be, as I said in the previous example, that you will always be a grandmother who doesn't know how to turn on a computer, who sits by the fireplace, doing her knitting. That's what people are thinking. Then you start singing... (150212_ET4-E)

The solution? Difficult, because verses are an exercise in credibility and the typical audiences usually believe that fiction is greater than fact. Consequently, it's difficult but possible. We can do it by avoiding stereotypes when specifying roles and by each one of us striving to overcome our own inertia. (150306_Er5_E)

4.4. STYLE CATEGORIES

So far little has been said about the development and interpretation of the themes given, or the way in which roles are normally managed, something closely linked to the (traditional) style of singing *bertsos* live.

Maialen Lujanbio gave a talk on this theme in a Bertsolamintza (Bertso Talk), stating the following: «The themes don't change, in literature, in bertsolaritza, in theatre, they adapt to the times, but it is the way the themes are dealt with that needs to change.» And I feel that this is our biggest failing, our interpretation of the themes hasn't really changed as our times might have demanded. We have played classic couples, arguing couples, so although this wasn't part of our everyday lives, they were easy jokes, weren't they? For this reason, I think we haven't thought enough about how we interpret and develop the themes given. (150109_ET1_E)

As stated earlier, the way in which themes are interpreted and roles are played is heavily influenced by the audience's expectations. Since *bertsolaris* are classified according to gender and they have to respond to certain expectations, they often feel obliged to adopt a specific style.

I believe that more than the theme itself, it's about what it is expected of us. I mean, it might be the same topic but what people expect is different regarding this topic, and the issue might be the same but it's more about how the audience expects that theme to be interpreted. (150131_ET3_E)

In life, and in bertsolaritza, we're not neutral beings. Our gender and what the audience expects from our gender have an influence on our style. And also, what the theme setter sees in us. (150306_Er5_E)

In the first round of bertsos in the Bizkaia Championship, in the response pair of lines there was a woman theme setter and she had to sing a pair of lines. One bertsolari answered her: " You're a pretty girl, I'd like to have to have your photo in my room, etc.". And, you know, if those sorts of themes are set... and, of course, we don't really understand why people like this. I think it's morbid fascination. But anyway, this made the theme-setter very ill-at-ease, she told me that, and then she said, «Oh my God, look what they're saying to me and they say nothing to him», right? And there are a lot of cases like that. (150131_ET2_E)

Flirtation has always been considered as a valid tool as well, even though it could be said that it is used less and less as the easy option. And a typical approach for men is the teasing/flirting style, which is still unusual among women.

It is something that has happened often, even when sexual relations or flirting are not mentioned in the themes, they are injected into it when a woman and a man are singing (not so often when two men and two women are singing, since they are not normally seen as potential couple material, unless it's in order to make a joke). But I think there have been some changes regarding this, and I haven't noticed it as much in recent years. As a resource, sure, but not as a constant safety net. Also, it is more typical to see a man engaging in this than a woman; the same is true out on the street, because it is more accepted (more normal). (150306_Er5_E)

Hence, the predominant traditional style prevails; i.e. it is still typical to sing in a style based on clichés and stereotypes. This is because in the *bertso eskolas*, the main focus continues to be technique rather than the different themes, roles and styles which some women *bertsolaris* have been demanding.

Yes, for me that's the key point, not just what is sung but how it is sung. Here I have an example based on stereotypes from the Zarautz championship. After having reached the final stages, a friend said to me: «Damn! How often were penises mentioned and how seldom vaginas!» and I replied «yeah but what sort of comments were made about penises? Always the same, big or small.» So, it isn't just what it is sung about but how it is sung, and in the end this is all connected to the stereotypes we all have inherited. What we sing about is still based on these, and ultimately if you only work on the technique, you can be the world's best in terms of technique, but you will go on singing based on the same old stereotypes. And then I think that's what leads to these crises, that's my main point. (150109_ET1_E)

Regarding the different styles, with the generational shift came a new way of creating *bertsos*, adopted by the young *bertsolaris* who took to the stage in the 1990s. Women started to enter the *bertso* system roughly during this same transitional period, when the canonical style of *bertsolaritza* was still in place, but modern and post-modern themes were being gradually incorporated.

When we talk of tradition and current bertsolaritza there is a hiatus or a huge transformation, that's what they usually say, right? When we transitioned from a rural environment to an urban environment bertsolaris went from being uneducated illiterates to being university-educated rich children. As a result, there has been more openness in terms of proposing, or formulating, a wider range of themes, so nowadays we no longer sing about «spring», which is a huge qualitative leap forward, although not directly linked to gender or the incorporation of women into the bertso system. (150109_ET1_E)

Maialen Lujanbio is the most important symbol and point of reference for this change and the new renewed *bertso* style. She has created a new personal style, which is most often described as «subtle». Like the rest of her generation, she trained at Andoni Egaña's school, but she learnt to make her own way by creating her own lexical style and in turn has become an important point of reference, even for Egaña himself, as all participants mentioned at different times in the discussion groups. In addition to Lujanbio there are also other mentioned who have broken away from the traditional style and who have taken the gender perspective into consideration.

But in one particular type of bertso style, for me, the revolution has been Maialen (...) I think that there has been a massive evolution in terms of awareness in general and gender awareness in particular, and for me this has meant moving away from masculine models towards other types of models. Which singing style? Which perspective to adopt? What to say? How to say it? What things are strong on stage? Now I can say, look, this is our reference and it is no longer a female or male reference but rather a personalised one, and in a way one which has moved away from those classic forms of bertsolaritza. (150223_ET5_G)

In fact, I think there is a lot of room for improvement regarding how to overcome the forms handed down to us, right? What should we do, what shouldn't we do and what

do I want to do once the weight of gender has been lifted for both women and men. (150223_ET5_G)

I would say [regarding the personal style among men] that within the evolution of these bertso styles, right now, Igor Elortza³ comes to my mind, for instance. In my view he is an important point of reference and I don't know if this will clear anything up or is overly scientific.... but he has gone from offensive bertsolaritza towards being more faithful to the truth, saying very personal things (...) And I feel gender does have a lot to do with that, so as this fades away, it seems to me that these loaded gender issues will also fade away. (150223_ET5_G)

With regards to the way gender is dealt with, it may be useful to turn to young women *bertsolaris* who are exploring this path in different ways, and who have also suffered the consequences. Two names mentioned often in the discussion groups were Uxue Alberdi and Alaia Martin.

I have to say it, right? It seems to me that sometimes, for example, Uxue Alberdi has become a standard-bearer due to her bertso style. But to engage in that bertso style, is it really necessary to confront your oppression? This is something completely different and if we compare this to Maialen Lujanbio's bertso style, it seems to me that the message is also present there, but in a more subtle way. (150131_ET2_G)

I don't know if I would call Uxue an innovator, but in one sense her bertso style has done her a great deal of damage, because I feel that when Uxue Alberdi⁴ is mentioned, people immediately think of... [something negative]. It is often said that there aren't many venues... that she doesn't have access to too many venues, for this very reason or for the way she sings.... [as a self-declared feminist]. (150131_ET2_E)

In terms of bertso themes and style, in my view, we're often dependent on what the majority expects. Courage is needed to break away from what it is demanded by political correctness, to say something different from what will receive a big applause from the large majority, to dare to stand alone on stage, to express dissent. (150306_Er_2)

5. DISCUSSION

Regarding the first aim of this paper, it should be mentioned that traditionally, the theme of women has been a stereotypical theme in the male discourse: the mythical mother, the emasculating wife, the sexy lover, the daughter in need of protection, etc. (Ellmann, 1968; Millett, 1995; Pérez, 1996; Showalter, 2009; Gilbert & Gubar, 1998). However, when women *bertsolaris* train, they are exposed to sexist lyrics in the melodies they learn in the *bertso eskolas* and these are unintentionally reproduced later on in their own *bertsos*. Hence, as part of this transfer of knowledge, women also inherit a sexist legacy and for this reason, the stereotypical theme of women has not only been present in representations by men *bertsolaris*, but has also been learnt and reproduced by women.

³ A *bertsolari* who took part in the last championship and is known for his feminine style.

⁴ Alberdi is a writer and *bertsolari* who is well-known for her feminist stance.

Nevertheless, the theme of women has been changing ever since women started going up on stage and singing, and especially since, instead of singing about women, *bertsolaris* started singing with women. The topics started to change when women began to move from being objects to being subjects (Segarra & Carabí, 2000). Rather than remaining an abstract theme, they became a flesh-and-blood reality, shifting from the ideal to the real, from the unknown to the known. This resulted in women singing face to face with men, portraying the reality of women in an objective manner.

Since women went from being an object to becoming a subject, hence regaining their agency, there has been a great leap forward in the way women are portrayed, with mothers, daughters and wives relating their own reality (Ramos in Lasarte, 2016), rather than that of the male discourse. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of work to be done and there are still some major obstacles along the path. One of the most significant difficulties which often arises is the type of women proposed for women *bertsolaris* to sing about. This obstacle is a clear gender challenge and androcentrism (Alvarez-Uria, 2014) is still predominant. This means that when, in addition to being a woman another role is added, that of politician or businesswoman, for example, it is difficult for a woman *bertsolari* to remove the gender equation from this role, i.e. to remove the mark of being a woman from the role of being a businesswoman.

Female and male roles and stereotypes are still very much alive in the 21st century; what was once more evident now manifests itself unintentionally and indirectly. Androcentrism continues to be very present in the representations of every role. Whereas men are neutral and have several registers, women are first and foremost women, and only then businesswomen or whatever else the role may demand. There are no neutral roles for women.

Continuing with women as an issue, there is another clear consequence of the changes that have taken place over recent years, which involves women *bertsolaris* mostly singing about women's concerns, as if those were their exclusive domain. Furthermore, this trend concerning certain themes set for women (violence, children, the home, the family) has prompted women *bertsolaris* to often take on the role of victims.

Regarding the study's second aim, it has been observed that there are differences between the themes set for women and men. These could be classified into important and non-important themes, into blue themes and pink themes. Women sing about themes linked to gender issues (the family, emotions, caring for others) and men about those linked to politics and the social and economic situation. Thus, women's themes appear in connection with personal space, the body and the women's liberation movement.

Men are asked their opinion on important subjects, whereas the more intimate sphere is reserved for women. This personal and alternative sphere is not discussed so much as it is not so popular, not so social. In other words, it is not conversed so much because the audience is very general and because a *bertso* of this nature would clash with that context.

Concerning the third aim, and due to the constraints of the social rules and limitations pertaining to men's and women's roles, *bertsolaris* find difficult to propose new roles. Overcoming stereotypes requires much time and effort for *bertsolaris* and, as mentioned previously, it also means challenging the audience's response.

Women find it easier to escape their roles than men, as women have developed, or are developing, political awareness. One of the consequences of this is that as a woman, it is essential to develop political awareness, since being a «person» often means giving up being a «woman», due to a desire for neutrality and the negative connotations attached to certain labels.

Regarding relationships, the predominant model, namely heteronormativity (Alvarez-Uria, 2014), manifests itself through the roles sung in *bertsolaritza*. Husband and wife are represented in most cases; other types of relationships are invisible.

Breaking away from both these models and stereotypes is a difficult challenge because it is necessary to sing socially-recognised roles, since *bertsolaris* only have a few minutes in which to make themselves understood. It is difficult because *bertsos* are an exercise in credibility, and because the audience is accustomed to believing fiction over facts. It is difficult but possible, provided that an effort is made to eschew stereotypes when specifying roles and each individual strives to overcome their own inertia.

Over the years and across different cultural expressions, the themes have remained the same. What needs to be changed is how the themes are interpreted and this is no easy task. The traditional style, or in other words the style based on clichés and stereotypes, continues to be used for singing, proving to be an obstacle along the path towards what some women *bertsolaris* have called for, i.e. the incorporation of different singing themes and roles, and the creation of a different style.

A new *bertso* style came with the arrival of a new generation, specifically with the young *bertsolaris* who started appearing on stage in the 1990s, and modern and post-modern themes began to be introduced. Maialen Lujanbio is the paradigm of the new style. Starting from a masculine *bertso* style, she explored all the currents developed in *bertsolaritza* until finally creating her own style and indirectly integrating gender management into this.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that it was women *bertsolaris* who started changing the image of women from being objects to subjects, and in doing so they started to change how women are represented. From being an abstract, completely stereotypical theme within the masculine discourse, women have made themselves visible. Women *bertsolaris* have both proposed and accepted the singing of women's issues and in many cases both roles and stereotypes are recreated. However, as women *bertsolaris* have started to gain political awareness, stereotypes and roles are beginning to be decoded and as a result of this change, real, plural representations of women and new roles have been incorporated, created by women *bertsolaris* from their own discourse.

6. SYNTHETIC CONCLUSIONS

1. Regarding the theme of women, participants state that the first significant step taken involved women talking about women. However, they still must face the challenge of exposing androcentrism.
2. They mention that before, the roles were evident and intentional, whereas now they manifest themselves unintentionally and indirectly.

3. They say it is very difficult for them to sing the role of an unseen woman, a new type of woman or a plural woman.
4. They feel there is a need for more up-to-date themes and they see this as a challenge.
5. Women find it easier than men to escape from their roles, as women have developed, or are developing, political awareness.
6. They speak of the credibility of *bertsos* and consider it a difficult task to break away from stereotypes since what needs to be understood in minutes might require centuries to decode.
7. The themes do not change over time, they always remain the same. Participants mention that what needs to change is how these themes are interpreted and that this is not an easy task.
8. The young *bertsolaris* who started appearing on stage in the 1990s, along with women *bertsolaris*, have brought with them a new type of *bertso*. Since that time, modern and post-modern themes have been added to the canonical *bertso* style.
9. Maialen Lujanbio has her own *bertso* style. She has gone from a masculine to a feminine discourse by trying out different styles and finally creating her own discourse and *bertso* style.
10. There has also been an evolution in *bertso* styles, moving away from the masculine style towards a more personal style and one name was mentioned in relation to this: Igor Elortza.

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8. ANNEXES

As can be seen in this improvisation exercise, the **gaiak** (themes or subjects) are set and this is done by the **gai jartzaile** (theme setter). The theme setters are usually experts in improvised verse singing. The *bertsolari* has to sing shortly after the topic has been presented, in accordance with the chosen melody and meter.

Several references have been made to *bertso eskolas*. There are not only *bertso eskolas* in the Basque Country but also in Catalonia, as seen in the documentary *Glosadors*. In these *bertso eskolas*, the *bertso*-singing methodology is taught to both children and young people, and students also learn to improvise *bertsos* in a relaxed setting and to enjoy singing. These are the most important features of *bertsolaritza*, the technique and the live aspect. Finally, it should be highlighted the foundation of the **Bertsozale Elkarte** (Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza*) on 18 June 1978 (Agirreazaldegí, *et al.* 2007; Armistead *et al.*, 2005). The driving force behind the present success of *bertsolaritza*, the Association has 70 employees and 2,400 members. It has launched a number of initiatives: the Documentation Centre, research, competitions, activities and programmes. Its work focuses on transmitting *bertsolaritza* know-how and it aims to protect, foster and conduct research on this improved art form.

In 2009 a **Genero Batzordea** (Gender Committee) was formed whose purpose was to cultivate a gender perspective in all workshops.

Agency. Social Scientists use this term to refer to the capacity of the individual to act freely. Social structures (social classes, religions, genders, ethnic groups and so on) limit and direct the individual's actions by socially assigning their position in the hierarchy. Hence, agency means overcoming the oppression created by these social structures and for women, it means eschewing the role of victim and adopting the capacity to act as active subjects (Alvarez-Uria, 2014) by getting up on stage and starting to occupy the public space by singing *bertsos*.

Subaltern voices, Ranahit Guha (2002) argues that throughout history, silenced voices have had three consequences, two of which will be referred to here. Firstly, the denial of any knowledge of the presence of women in *bertsolaritza* and secondly, the political and ethical repercussions of this denial (women *bertsolaris* have not had the right to use their voice, mainly because men spoke on their behalf).

Empowerment. This word is hardly ever used to refer to people formerly in positions of power. It is a concept normally used to refer to the poor, the oppressed and the socially marginalized (Rowlands, 1997). Women need to be the subjects of their own empowerment and without agency, empowerment is impossible. In this case, women *bertsolaris* are indeed the agents of their own empowerment. The empowerment process is the development away from gender imbalance towards gender equality, (Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2015), a process of reclaiming denied power. The history of women *bertsolaris* is a paradigm of this empowerment.

Androcentrism. This is the term used to describe the practice of adhering to male-focused discourses, standards and references. In other words, the androcentric outlook places man at the center of the worldview, as the neutral element, taking all things done by men as its reference, making this the normal viewpoint, the universal, general representation of humanity (Alvarez-Uria, 2014). As stated earlier, much headway has been made in speaking about the issue of

women in *bertsolaritza* (from different perspectives) and ensuring the presence of women in this art form, but due to the technical features of *bertsogintza*, androcentrism has not yet been completely removed from the *bertsolaritza* system (the verses need to be created and understood very quickly, which requires the *bertsolari* to produce highly coded and easy-to-understand messages, as mentioned above). Another consequence of these characteristics is heteronormativity (see next section).

Heteronormativity. Heterosexual relationships become the model and the standard to be followed. Heterosexuality is assumed as the common sexual identity, as this is the norm in our society. As a result of this ideology, all non-heterosexual relationships are dismissed and categorized as "abnormal" or "different", thus facilitating homophobia and lesbophobia (Alvarez-Uria, 2014). Only recently have more natural homosexual roles appeared in *bertsolaritza*.

Sexism. Sexism has its roots in male domination and female oppression. Unlike androcentrism, it is a more active, evident attitude and displays contempt and disdain towards women. This contempt may give rise to both abuse and denial, by emphasizing femininity and displaying.