maruja

by María Soledad Caballero Sánchez

Abstract:

*El **diccionario** de la **Real Academia Española** define "**maruja**" como la **mujer** dedicada en exclusiva a las **tareas domésticas**, un término ligado a **estereotipos negativos** como el chismorreo, la mojigatería y la dependencia televisiva. Sin embargo, este concepto ignora que estas mujeres sostienen de forma gratuita el **cuidado** de **niños**, **ancianos** y **personas dependientes**.*

*Históricamente, la sociedad ha mantenido una **profunda brecha de género** en el acceso al empleo y los **roles** de **poder.** Mientras los **hombres** han ocupado los **espacios económicos**, **políticos** y **académicos**, a las **mujeres** se les ha relegado al **ámbito** del **hogar**. Esta desigualdad se agrava por la desvalorización sistemática del trabajo considerado femenino frente al masculino. En consecuencia, el **uso despectivo** de la palabra "**maruja**" refleja un **sentir popular** que **minimiza** las **tareas** del **hogar**, considerándolas de **menor categoría** y perpetuando un **estigma** profundamente injusto para quienes las realizan.*

The **derogatory term** "***maruja***" labels **housewives** through **negative stereotypes** like gossiping. This reflects a **deep social gender gap** that relegates women to **domestic spheres** while systematically **devaluing their essential**, **unpaid caregiving work** compared to men's roles, thus perpetuating an unjust **historical stigma**.

Etymology:

Etymologically, '***maruja'*** is a perfect example of semantic degradation. It originally meant '**beloved'** (in Hebrew), then became the affectionate nickname '**Mariquita**/**Marieta**' in Spanish households, and ultimately mutated into a **derogatory adjective** that devalues the figure of the housewife. Its linguistic influence has been so powerful that it even **generated** its own accepted **verbs** and **nouns**, such as '***marujear***' (to gossip/to behave like a ***maruja***) and '***marujeo***' (housewife-style gossiping).

The term '***maruja'*** entered the **Royal Spanish Academy** (RAE) dictionary in 1803 simply as a strict synonym for the name **María**. Since it was an extraordinarily popular name among **working-class women**, collective usage began using '**las Marías**' or '**las Marujas**' to refer to all **housewives**. It disappeared at the end of the 19th century and was not accepted again by the RAE until 2001.

However, this time the term '***maruja***' returned with a completely **different connotation**, loaded with prejudices built up since the 1970s. Coinciding with the **Spanish Transition** to democracy (that is, the end of the Francoist regime that lasted from 1939 to 1975) and the progressive **entry** of **women** into the **labor market**, the term moved away from being a proper name and began to **take on** new and complex **connotations**.

The different facets and evolutions that the word has experienced since then are structured under the following meanings:

1. The Derogatory Stereotype (1970s–1980s)

With the rise of second-wave feminism and the end of the Francoist regime, the **model** of **women** confined to the **home** was viewed through a **critical lens**.

'***Maruja***' became a **pejorative** and **classist label** connected with:

- **isolation:** it **defined women** dedicated exclusively to **domestic chores**, whose only window to the outside world was **mass-consumption** of TV or radio
- **dependence:** it **caricatured** women considered "left behind" by the country's modernization and liberation

efforts.

2. The Media Boom (1990s)

The arrival of **private television networks** and morning **talk shows commercialized** the **stereotype** as:

- **target audience:** TV programs targeted stay-at-home women, transforming the ***maruja*** into a **profitable consumer profile**
- '**m*arujona*':** the term evolved into augmentative forms like ***marujona***, amplifying the **caricature** of a woman obsessed with ***prensa del corazón*** [celebrity gossip] and low-brow television.

3. Gender Detachment (2000s–2010s)

As women integrated into the **workforce**, the term lost its strict connection to housewives and the female gender, with the addings:

- '***marujo***': the **masculine counterpart** emerged, shifting the focus from domestic labor to social behavior
- '***marujear'*** and '***marujeo***' became **universal colloquialisms** for the absolute act of **gossiping**, completely detached from social class. Anyone could say: "***Vamos a tomar un café para marujear***" [Let's grab a coffee to gossip].

4. Current Status (2020s–Present)

The term has transitioned from a **sexist insult** to a **generalized trait** of **Spanish social interaction** as seen in different contexts:

- **RAE normalization:** the ***Real Academia Española*** officially includes **three definitions**: the classic **derogatory housewife**, the ironic **masculine version**, and a **gender-neutral term** for a '**gossipy person**'
- **cultural resignification:** today, it is frequently used in a **playful**, **self-deprecating** manner to describe anyone who **enjoys harmless gossip** or **reality TV**.

Cultural specificity:

Regarding its representation in **popular culture**, the archetype has shifted between **comic caricature** and **critical dignity**.

In **Spanish cinema** and **television**, it has been reflected in the following:

The **comedy sketches** by the duo ***Martes y Trece*** (1978-1997) portray **humorous gags** about **domestic life.**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martes_y_Trece)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Have_I_Done_to_Deserve_This%3F_

The famous fim by Pedro Almodóvar (1984) ***Que es hecho yo para merecer esto?*** [What Have I Done to Deserve This?] is a dark comedy portraying the **life and misadventures** of an **overworked housewife.**

The traditional humor of TV series like ***Aquí no hay quien viva*** [No One could live here] (2003-2006) is a **Spanish TV comedy series** about lives and interactions within a **chaotic neibourghood community** which **satirizes** the different personalities of the characters in general and of the **houseviwes** in particular.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aqu%C3%AD_no_hay_quien_viva

In music, highlights include traditional ***copla*** **songs** (a Spanish traditional music and poetic genre of four-line stanzas) and **liberation anthems** such as **Ella** by the **singer Bebe**.

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gftyE0NUvb8

A hymn to **women's freedom** and **empowerment** after a period of chores and distress, in a passage it says:

Hoy vas a ser la mujé que te dé la gana de ser	Today you're going to be the woman you want to be
Hoy te vas a querer como nadie te ha sabí'o queré	Today you're going to love yourself like no one has ever known how to love you
Hoy vas a mirar pa'lante	Today you're going to look ahead
Que pá atrás ya te dolió bastante	Because looking back has hurt you enough
Una mujé valiente, una mujé sonriente	A brave woman, a smiling woman

At an **international level**, the **music video** for ***I Want to Break Free*** by **Queen** (1984) stands as the ultimate Anglo-Saxon icon of this myth. Parodying British soap operas, the band used **hair rollers**, **housecoats**, and the famous image of **Freddie Mercury** with a **vacuum cleaner** to turn the **frustration** and **boredom** of the **housewife** into a **universal cry** for **emancipation**.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4Mc-NYPHaQ

Problematization:

The **systematic use** of the concept of ***maruja***/**housewife** in the **media** produces three high-impact **psychosocial effects**:

1. **infantilization** and **intellectual restriction**: the main effect is the **direct association** between **housework** and a **low cultural background.** By pigeonholing this group of people under the stereotype of the '**TV-dependent**' or **gossiping *maruja***, the media assumes **they lack interest** in topics like **politics**, **culture**, or **science**. This is used to justify **broadcasting lower quality** or **purely sensationalist content** during **daytime** hours;

2. perpetuation and **normalization** of the **gender gap**: by flooding screens with images where **only women** with this profile **care about laundry**, **cleaning**, or l**ooking after dependents**, the **media normalizes** the idea that the **domestic sphere** belongs exclusively to **women**. This creates a **social mirror effect**: since men are not shown taking on these tasks naturally, shared responsibility in households is held back;

3. economic devaluation of **care work**: media language tends to present these **women's activities** from a **humorous perspective** or as lower-category work. The effect of this **bias** is that it hides the **real weight** that **unpaid domestic work** has on the **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** of every country. By turning the **caretaker** into a **comic caricature**, her work is stripped of **any labor** or **political dignity.**

Communication strategies:

The term '***maruja***' works as a **rhetorical tool** for **social devaluation**. It uses strategies like **degrading metaphors**, **condescending irony**, **hyperbole**, and **metonymy** to destroy women's credibility and reduce their complexity to a **simplistic cliché**. As a performative act, this usage creates **shame** and **self-limitation** for women while reproducing **power relations**.

Subversion:

Feminist authors have provided some key reflections and references to **challenge** and **subvert** the the socio-culturally constructed representation of the **housewife** (please refer to the **Annotated Reading List** at the bottom of the page).

In **Spanish feminism, journalism,** and **academia**, several **key figures** have analyzed the **pejorative**, **sexist**, and **classist** weight of the term '***maruja'*.** Among them, is **Maruja Torres**, a **feminist journalist** and **writer** who vindicated the very name ***maruja*** for **herself.** As a post-war, **working-class** born journalist, she denounces how the **term** was used to **strip dignity** away from **lower-class women** whom the Francoist regime forced into domestic confinement. For Torres, the ***maruja*** of the 1970s and 1980s was never uneducated by choice, but rather the victim of a **systemic denial** of **education**.

Similarly, **contemporary feminism** in **Spain** has started a process of **linguistic reclamation** to transform the **insult** '***maruja'*** into a symbol of **pride**, **resistance**, and **dignity** through three main pillars:

- from a derogatory expression, the term '***marujeo***' is now being conceived as a **support network**: **neighbourly chat** and sharing secrets is reclaimed not as empty gossip, but as a **historical tool** for **survival**, **support**, and **detecting domestic violence** against individualism;
- **powerful *marujas***: spaces like the podcast ***Deforme Semanal Ideal Total*** [Total Ideal Weekly Distortion], a Spanish podcast of **culture**, **politics**, **feminism**, and **humour,** popularized this concept to **blend high culture** with the **enjoyment** of **everyday life**, removing **guilt** and **honoring** the lineage of **mothers** and **grandmothers:**

https://www.youtube.com/@DeformeSemanalIT

- **unionism and political identity: domestic** and **care workers' movements** are adopting the **term** in protests to **demand labour rights**. They are transforming the figure of the submissive woman into an **organized worker claiming** for her own **rights**. This communication strategy successfully challenges **stigma** and **prejudices** by stripping the insult of its power to hurt, while **recognizing care work** as the **invisible** but **vital engine** of all societies. In Spain, the phenomenon of **reclaiming terminology** and **transforming** the **stereotype** of the **submissive woman** into an **organized** and **combative worker** has extraordinary and **pioneering examples** in Europe. Domestic and care workers' collectives have resignified the historical stigma of the '***sirvienta'*** [servant] or '***chacha***' [maid] — sister concepts to the traditional ***maruja*** — and turned them into a **banner** for **political struggle**.
  The clearest and **most iconic examples** of this movement in Spain are:

***Territorio Doméstico* and the 'Catwalk of Precariousness' (Madrid).**
This collective, born in Madrid in 2006, is the ultimate example of the **aesthetic** and **political transformation** of the **caregiver** concept in Spain. Instead of traditional demonstrations, they use **performative actions** such as street theater, music, and humor to subvert stereotypes. They are famous for their '***Pasarelas de la Precariedad***' [Catwalks of Precariousness], where they march through central Madrid dressed in their **aprons**, **feather dusters**, **mops**, and **scrubbing gloves**. By exhibiting these **tools of trade** with pride, combative music, and collective choreography, they **resignify** and **dismantle** the image of the **submissive woman** confined to private spaces. They turn the **uniform of servitude** into a symbol of **union power** and **collective resistance**. Their **slogans**, such as "***Porqué sin nosotras no se mueve el mundo!***" [Without us, the world doesn't move] have redefined **working-class pride** in Spain.

March of the *Territorio Doméstico*, Madrid, June 2020
(Photo by Ela Rabasco)
https://www.facebook.com/territoriodomestico/

March of Las Kellys on May, 23, 2026 in Granada
https://www.izquierdadiario.es/Las-Kellys

The phenomenon of *Las Kellys* (Hotel Housekeepers).
Although they belong to the **hospitality sector** rather than private households, **hotel housekeepers** (those who clean hotel rooms) suffered for decades from the **same classist stigma** of being considered the **invisible** and **precarious labor force** of cleaning. For this autonomous union, their **name**, reclaimed with irony, has become a **banner**: ***Las Kellys*** comes from the **popular Spanish expression *"las que limpian"*** [the ones who clean]. Breaking away from the submission that **major hotels** expected of them, they **organized independently** through **social networks** in 2016. Then, moving from invisibility to Congress, they managed to bring their **direct labor demands** to the **Spanish Congress of Deputies** and the **European Parliament**, proving how a **historically feminized** and **invisible collective** can become the **vanguard** of the **trade union struggle** against **outsourcing** and chronic **occupational health issues.**

Songs, Choirs, and the Soundtrack of Care.

The transformation of the submissive woman into a combative worker has consolidated in Spain through **popular music** at **demonstrations**. Collectives such as the ***Asociación de Trabajadoras de Hogar de Bizkaia*** (**ATH-ELE**) [Association of Domestic Workers of Bizkaia] or the **National Care Network** have **modified** the **lyrics** of **traditional songs** to use them in their protests. Example of musical combats are the hymns generated in protests or modified versions of traditional folk songs (***coplas***). In their lyrics, they explicitly sing about how they were expected to be "**part of the family**" (a paternalistic **strategy** used to **avoid paying overtime**) and how they now **demand** written **contracts**, **labor inspections,** and **risk prevention**, shattering the myth of domestic obedience.

SEDOAC and Media Activism.
The association **SEDOAC** (Active Domestic Service), led mainly by **migrant women,** has carried out a **fundamental linguistic** and **political battle** within Spanish mass media and institutions. Assaulting the social narrative of **their work** as '**service'**, they have systematically **rejected colonial** or **paternalistic terms** like '***muchacha***' [girl], '***chica del servicio***' [service girl], or '***interna***' [live-in] (when framed as household possession) on television sets and public debates. Through **digital campaigns** and **protests** outside the Ministry of Labour, they, as political subjects of rights, imposed the **legal terminology** of ***Trabajadoras del Hogar y de los Cuidados*** [Domestic and Care Workers]. This **semantic shift** in protests was the engine that forced the **historic 2022 reform** granting them **unemployment rights**, followed by the landmark **occupational risk prevention laws** enacted recently, finally solidifying the **concept** that a **home** is a **workplace** and they are **organized workers**.

March of SAD (*Servicio de Ayuda a Domicilio)* [Home help aid], Madrid, November 2021
(Photo by Leah Pattem)
https://madridnofrills.com/dignify-spains-domestic-workforce

Discussion:

The discussion revolves along the axes of **culture, gender**, and **power**:

- **social reflection**: it questions the internalized classism of our language. Is rejecting the term actually a dislike for the working-class and rural world? Do we seek to look 'modern' by devaluing the home compared to success in the job market?
- **recontextualization and resistance**: it analyzes the limits of feminist reclamation. Can a word born out of oppression ever be completely cleaned up, or will it always carry its stigma? Is this transformation a real change or just a purely aesthetic and digital victory?
- **interdisciplinary connections**: it links economics, sociology, and psychology. Why does the economic system use its language to ridicule the very care system that keeps it alive? How does this media mockery affect the mental health of those who provide care?
- **intercultural analysis**: it looks at global bias in other languages. Why do all cultures create a degrading female archetype for the home, but not a male one? Is there a similar term in your own country?

References/Further Readings:

Annotated Reading List

In Spanish

- Jiménez Sureda, M. (2026). ***Brujas y marujas: Historia, mujer y estereotipos en sociedades reptilianes. Del techo de cristal al muro de hormigón*** [Witches and Housewives: History, Women and Stereotypes in Reptilian Societies. From the Glass Ceiling to the Concrete Wall]. UAB (Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona). "*Para someter a una mujer, hay que transformarla en una bruja o en una maruja*" [To subjugate a woman, you have to turn her into a witch or a housewife]. This essay explores the links between history, misogyny, symbolic violence and contemporary culture, drawing parallels between the witches of the past and the discourses that still devalue women. https://www.uab.cat/web/sala-de-prensa/detalle-noticia/brujas-y-marujas-arma-de-sometimiento-segun-montserrat-jimenez-en-su-nuevo-libro-1345830290069.html?detid=1345995874448

- Montero, R. (2013). ***La ridícula idea de no volver a verte*** [The foolish idea of not seeing you again]. Seix Barral. The author reflects on the term *maruja* subverting its meaning from the traditional insult to the valorization of the women of previous generations who had developed strong strategies of resistance and survival inside the patriarchal society.

- Poblet, G. (2024). ***Criadas de la globalización: Servicio de hogar, género y migraciones contemporáneas***. [Maids of Globalization: Domestic Work, Gender, and Contemporary Migration]. Barcelona: Icaria.
  The book investigates the reality of migrant women who go to Spain looking for a better future and better opportunities for themselves and their families but have no other choice than working as maids, housekeepers, nannies, or caregivers for the elderly in other people's homes, working 24-hour shifts without rights or breaks.

- Torres, M. (2026). ***Cuanta más gente me jode, más buenos momentos tengo*** [More people get on my nerves, more happy moments I have]. Temas de Hoy.
  Mixing anger, tendeness, irony, grief, and resistence the author retraces her experiences as war reporter, journalist, activist in different parts of the world with the conviction that the worse the world gets, the more important it is to protect the good moments.

  Torres, M. (2018). ***La desaparecida*** [Disappeared]. In Montserrat Lunati (Ed.). *Rainy Days - Días de lluvia: Short Stories by Contemporary Spanish Women Writers.* Aris and Phillips Hispanic Classics.
  From a psychological and gender-based perspective, the story examines the loss of identity and the invisibility of women in certain social contexts or stages of life.

  Torres, M. (1997) ***Un calor tan cercano*** [Such a close warmth]. Alfaguara.
  The author recalls her early years of life in the poor quarter of *El Raval* in Barcelona, depicting the complexities of growing up and the paths that lead to autonomy and compassion. Reprinted in 2005 by Editorial Planeta.

  More info on Maruja Torres at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maruja_Torres

- Viñuales Sarasa, O. (2011). ***Y no fueron marujas*** [And they weren't housewives]. Bellaterra Edicions.
  In this volume of the 'Relatos' collection, nine women aged between 55 and 70 explain why they decided to break away from gender roles during Franco's dictatorship. https://www.bellaterra.coop/es/libros/y-no-fueron-marujas

In English

- Adichie, C. N. (2017). ***Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions***. Knopf.
  Written as a letter to a friend, the book offers advices on how to teach a young girl to become an independent woman, also by challenging the social expectations of relegating a woman to traditional domestic roles.

- Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). ***The second sex***. Gallimard.
  In the chapter on domesticity, the author sustains that domestic labour keeps women trapped into repetitive cycles that produce no legacy, preventing them to become autonomous individuals and agents of their existences.

- Butler, J. (1990). ***Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity***. Routledge.
  The author introduces the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not a biological nature, but rather a series of repeated acts socially imposed.

- Costa, M. D., & James, S. (1972). ***The power of women and the subversion of the community***. Falling Wall Press.
  This foundational feminist text maintains that housewives are the invisible and unpaid working class, and that house labour is functional to capitalism since reproduces power relationships, preventing women to participate

to social production.

- Criado Perez, C. (2019). ***Invisible women: Data bias in a world designed for men***. Abrams Press.
  The book exposes how big data collections reproduce gender inequalities and prejudices, effecting negative effects on women in fundamental matters such as e.g., health issues.

- Davis, A. Y. (1981). ***Women, race & class***. Random House.
  From a Black feminist, historical, and political perspective the author examines race, class, and gender inequalities and the women's struggles to liberation.

- Davis, L. S. (2024). ***Housewife: Why women still do it all and w at to do instead.*** Legacy Lit.
  The book examines the social history of the housewife archetype and reveals the lie of 'the American way of life' based on the gender divide 'breadwinner vs homemaker'.

- Federici, S. (2012). ***Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle***. PM Press.
  The book displays forty years of research and theories on women's struggles regarding housework and social reproduction, also examining how to redefine it to challenge capitalist relations.

- Friedan, B. (1963). ***The feminine mystique***. W. W. Norton.
  The text highlights the women's struggle against societal traditional roles which hinder them to pursue personal goals and stresses the importance of recognizing women's true voices.

- Illouz, E. (2007). ***Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism***. Polity Press. Emotional ties actively reproduce gender roles, reinforce gender divisions, and the split between public and private spheres, all essential factors of a powerful emotional culture that was essential to the rise of modern capitalism.

- hooks, b. (1984). ***Feminist theory: From margin to center***. South End Press.
  The author demonstrates how mainstream feminism's emphasis on white, professional women has hidden the vital role that women of colour and poor women have played in the liberation movement.

- Oakley, A. (1974). ***Housewife***. Allen Lane.
  Through four case histories, the author examines the history and modern reality of women's domestic roles, challenging traditional values that tie work exclusively to men.

- Woolf, V. (1929). ***A room of one's own.*** Hogarth Press.
  A major classic of feminism and feminist literary theory, the book argues that women need financial independence and private physical space to be able to express their creativity.

AI Disclosure:

Artificial Intelligence (ChatGPT) was used for approximately 40% of this text to assist with translation, stylistic editing, and structural formatting specially in the parts of discussion, problematization and subversion based on the author's original data.

How to cite this entry: Caballero Sánchez, M. (2026). Maruja. *In Other Words. A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness.* Published: 19 October 2026. [https://www.iowdictionary.org/word/maruja, accessed: 18 November 2026]