HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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GENDER IN LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY

The colonial period The centuries after Spanish and Portuguese conquest were formative in many ways. Colonial administrators and the clergy sought major changes in indigenous gender relations, yet significant differences remained among different ethnic groups (with African slaves added to the mix in several cases); high rates of illegitimate births left a durable legacy; at the same time, Church authorities, particularly by the 18th century, urged a particularly vigorous argument in favor of the joys as well as moral worth of appropriate family life—another lasting contribution in a society where family values continue to resonate strongly. Indigenous peoples had well-developed gender systems, many of which – as with the Mayans – emphasized female inferiority, but with specific features that differed significantly from Christian standards. In some cases, for example, men and women had a trial period, including sexual relations, before committing to a permanent marriage. To Spanish observers, this was one of many signs of widespread sexual immorality. Some indigenous groups managed to retain some existing practices, if only by concealment – for example, marriage among close relatives. But Spanish influence did introduce new restrictions on the behavior of many women. At the same time, sexual exploitation of native women by Spanish colonists was widespread – beginning with Columbus' first intrusion into the Caribbean and bolstered by a preponderance of men among initial European arrivals. Rates of illegitimate births were high as in consequence, a pattern that has survived into the present day, where Latin America has the world's highest rate of children of children born to unmarried parents. This did not, and does not, always involve basic family instability however: in some cases, by the later colonial period and beyond, groups of women combined to help take care of children, and in other instances, particularly in the lower classes, stable unions formed – simply without benefit of formal marriage. Here was the source of another durable theme: significant differences between the family patterns of higher-status groups, mostly of European origin, and those of working class and peasant segments. Upper-class criticism of lower-class family habits, and occasional efforts to regulate, persisted in Latin American history into the early 20th century. Adding to diversity: the Spanish church strongly emphasized family values – beginning with the example of the holy family itself. Sermons from the early 18th century highlighted the family as "bound together" like the "fingers of a prodigious hand"; in this process, while veneration of Mary was vital, the figure of Joseph was transformed into a dominant father figure, "the one that stands above the rest" – emphasizing, in other words, a patriarchal structure as well as the centrality of the family to human morality and happiness. Spanish Catholicism did introduce the monastic movement to Latin America, including small but vital groups of nuns. Convents provided some women an alternative to marriage and even a refuge from male violence, along with opportunities for education. A few nuns even achieved eminence as authors and scholars. Yet convents also participated in the process of sexual regulation, punishing women regarded as immoral. Finally, overlaying the whole colonial system, was the heavy reliance on the labor of women as part of the expanding agricultural economy – including of course women imported from Africa as slaves.

The nineteenth century This period, so crucial in many aspects of Latin American history, saw little change in gender relations. Many individual women participated in the independence struggles early in the century, sometimes in military action, sometimes through spying or offering financial support – and a few had been executed But the new republics did not do much to alter gender patterns. Agricultural work prevailed for both men and women, if anything intensifying in response to demands of the export economy. Most women were still banned from the professions, and in some places they could not even testify in courts of law. Control by fathers and then husbands was substantial: married women in the upper and middle classes could not enter into contracts or take an outside job without permission of their husbands. In some cases, liberal regimes, eager to live up to European standards, tightened controls. In Mexico for example, during the early part of the century some women who became pregnant as a result of rape were not punished for infanticide; later on, however, more rigid rules against murder prevailed. Only in education was there much change in the other direction, as many leaders believed schooling girls would make better mothers, more capable of educating their own children. Thus Mexico City required school attendance from boys and girls alike, after 1842. In most places female literacy still lagged but

there was some movement. Growing numbers of women became primary school teachers, for example, and they would begin to provide momentum for new women's organizations by the end of the century. By this point women's groups began to form in various places, often in contact with feminists in the United States and Europe, and seeking more equal rights in various aspects of life.

Major trends since the late nineteenth century The past century – literally, from the 1920s and 1930s onward – has seen huge changes in Latin American gender patterns, building in part on the increasing efforts of women's groups from the late 19th century onward. Three or four factors have combined. Major political shifts, like the 1910 Mexican Revolution or the 1959 Cuban Revolution, while they did not necessarily prioritize gender reform, shook up established structures and gave some women new professional opportunities. Feminist agitation, bolstered but complicated by foreign example and international women's rights standards, steadily pressed for change. By the early 20th century some United States feminists extended their efforts to Latin America, often with patronizing assumptions of local inferiority. As Latin American groups sprang up, they placed greater emphasis on social and economic change, and not just political rights, than had been true in the United States, and they gained stronger representation from the working class. Momentum developed slowly: in 1922 a Brazilian women's magazine noted that "ours in a feminism that preserves religion and family...demanding that equality that is indispensable but always seeking the collective happiness and progress of the nation". But efforts to seek change gained momentum. Along with this, levels of education for women, already improving in the 19th century, advanced fairly steadily. By the later 20th century over half of all secondary education enrollment was female, and substantial gains occurred also at the university level. Greater education set the basis for new economic and political opportunities; it provided many women with new motivations and knowledge to limit birth rates as well, hoping to be able to support even higher educational levels for their children. Finally, while economic challenges continued to shape Latin American society, urbanization and considerable industrialization did advance in many places, given women new if sometimes demanding jobs in factories and offices. Several major changes resulted from a confluence of these factors. Beginning in the 1930s in countries like Brazil, but accelerating right after World War II, women gained the vote. Other legal changes included firmer protections of property rights for women. The 1970s saw a decisive turn to lower birth rates. Many women told of their insistence here, often against the wishes of both husbands and priests. By this point also, women were gaining unusual widespread political roles – far above international averages. Several countries had the world's highest rates of female participation at the level of cabinet minister. Parliamentary participation was even stronger by the early 21st century with 25% of all representatives female (in contrast to 18% at that point in the United States). None of these developments of course was without contestation. Conservatives opposed many changes. A culture of *machismo* persisted, along with frequent celebrations of women for sexual beauty – as on the beaches of Brazil during carnival; rates of sexual violence may have been unusually high. Bitter disputes arose over issues like abortion, a subject that began to attract feminist interest by the 1970s. Only a few countries, like Argentina, offered extensive abortion rights by the 2020s; far more allowed it only in cases of rape or incest or where a woman's health was at risk; and a few, particularly in Central America, continued to punish it harshly. Correspondingly, rates of illegal, often risky, abortion ran high throughout much of the region.

Study questions

1. What were the main complexities in Latin American gender patterns during the colonial period?
2. Why and how does educational change stand out, among other possible emphases, during the 19th century? To what extent did it run ahead of developments in other areas?
3. What have been the most striking changes in gender patterns since the 1920s? By comparative standards, what areas have seemed to lag?

Further reading

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