Women and Gender in Modern Latin America

Historical Sources and Interpretations

Edited by
Pamela S. Murray
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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an explosion of interest in the twin subjects of women and gender, the latter referring to socially constructed (as opposed to biological) differences between the sexes along with culture-bound notions of masculinity and femininity. This explosion is reflected both in the popular media and in the work of scholars from various academic disciplines including social scientists and historians who specialize in the study of Latin America. Historians, in particular, have done much to recover a female past that once stood at the margins, seen as peripheral to the “main story” or traditional narrative of Latin American history. Widening the trail blazed by a pioneering generation of feminist scholars—the first to confront the male-centric bias, or male chauvinism, that in the 1970s still pervaded academia—they have greatly expanded our knowledge of women’s roles and activities since the days of the first Iberian colonizers in the region. They also have explored the meaning of gender within the hierarchical, patriarchal, corporatist, and multiethnic societies that arose during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. An important sign of the growing maturity of their scholarship was the appearance, over a decade ago, of Susan Socolow’s Women in Colonial Latin America (2000), a fine synthesis of the historical research that by then had accumulated.

The present volume seeks, in part, to complement Socolow’s book. It introduces students to the history of women in the modern or postcolonial period, that is, the 200 years since the start of the Latin American wars of independence (1810–c.1825). It also builds on Gertrude M. Yeager’s pioneering 1994 anthology, Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History. Yeager’s book broke new ground in compiling diverse scholarly and other writings on Latin American women and, not least, in broadly interpreting women’s experience(s) in the modern era for the benefit of college students and general readers. Its first half, entitled “Culture and Status of Women,” introduced readers to basic cultural aspects of that experience.
Seven selections from works by both U.S. and Latin American authors highlight distinct Latin American feminine ideals, stereotypes, and images—the gentle, grieving Madonna (Virgin Mary) or the man-eating prostitute celebrated in early Argentine tangos, for example—that have shaped popular perceptions of women in the region and help explain their place within society. The book’s second half, “Reconstructing the Past,” meanwhile, stresses the ways in which both historians and social scientists have looked beyond the images and delved into female realities. Its thirteen selections reveal some of the actual social, economic, and political conditions of women’s lives since the early nineteenth century; they also exposed students of the time to the ideas and methods of leading scholars in the still-infant subfield of Latin American women’s history.1

This volume, Women and Gender in Modern Latin America (WGMLA) may be seen as an expanded and updated version of Yeager’s anthology. Its 49 selections, excerpts from both primary and secondary sources, reflect the sheer growth in knowledge about Latin American women and gender over the last two and a half decades. They also form the basis of a new, more comprehensive survey focusing on these two interrelated subjects through the early twenty-first century. Organized into nine chapters, they stress women’s experiences—along with the history of gender relations (relations between the sexes, broadly-speaking)—as an integral part of a larger story or master narrative that, until recently, had largely excluded them or bestowed only nominal attention. As historian Nara Milanch observed not long ago, “The histories of women and gender do not constitute a story separate from and parallel to other accounts of social change [but] rather ... are threads that, inextricably intertwined with others, constitute that [same] narrative.”4

WGMLA, in addition, exposes students to important trends in historical scholarship since the time of Yeager’s volume. A key trend has been the shift away from an analytical focus on women per se (including the “her-story” approach initially embraced by scholars eager to rescue women from historical oblivion) in favor of a focus on gender. Defined by historian Joan Wallach Scott as “a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes and ... [as] a primary way of signifying relationships of power,” gender is a relational concept implying attention to men as well as women.5 It allows scholars to consider how “male” and “female” subjects or identities are socially constructed as well as culture-bound. Perhaps more important, it allows them to ascertain, in the words of another historian and practitioner of gender analysis, “how representations of femininity and masculinity structure institutional power.”6

Historians of Latin America, especially in England and the U.S., have embraced gender analysis with enthusiasm. They have examined, for example, the diverse ways in which gender has structured the formation of modern Latin American nation-states—and in which the latter, in turn, have structured or shaped gender relations.7 As a number of the selections in the present volume demonstrate, particularly for the nineteenth century, this has involved
American authors highlight us, and images—the gentle, \_\_ prosti_\_ute celebrated in popular perceptions of within society. The book’s stresses the ways in which the images and delved some of the actual social, since the early nineteenth the ideas and methods of American women’s history.3 In America (WGMLA) may eager’s anthology. Its 49 sources, reflect the sheer and gender over the last new, more comprehensive through the early twenties, women’s experiences—between the sexes, broadly-aster narrative that, until ly nominal attention. As histories of women and parallel to other accounts trically intertwined with tant trends in historical md has been the shift away the “her-story” approach from historical oblivion) Joan Wallach Scott as “a v ed differences between relationships of power,” men as well as women.5 e” subjects or identities mps more important, itrian and practitioner of id masculinity structure and the U.S., have examined, for example, formation of modern in turn, have structured sections in the present century, this has involved examining state gender ideologies that found expression in the rhetoric of early republican leaders; in laws and constitutions; and in court cases in which assumptions about the proper roles of men and women, along with class prejudices, contributed to official courtroom arguments and decisions. It has involved attention to the role of public educational institutions and other public spaces or arenas that, as in the case of the mid-nineteenth century Brazilian law students examined by Andrew Kirkendall, nurtured a distinct, exclusively masculine, ideal of national leadership—one that automatically disqualified women while marginalizing men with “feminine” attributes.

Historians also have explored, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent so far, how gender has interacted with economic life including the process of economic modernization. Some of the selections in WGMLA, for example, show how women’s incorporation into the ranks of modern industrial wage labor—a trend that raised their income-earning possibilities—occurred within the context of a gendered occupational structure; based on old ideas about sex-appropriate labor, this helped ensure, overall, that their wages and advancement opportunities remained considerably inferior to men’s.

This volume mines a rich, established vein of woman-focused social history, as well. Examples appear in selections highlighting women’s activities within families and households, the world of work, and daily life including their roles in household maintenance and consumption—social reproduction roles in which mothers and housewives everywhere have long engaged in. These readings show the extent to which women’s lives have been affected by factors other than gender. They reveal how, just as during the colonial period, class, race, and ethnicity, along with age, income/wealth, and country or regional origin have shaped the nature of female experience in the modern period; these elements, along with the influence of evolving national identities, should be considered by historians seeking to understand the status, opportunities, and material quality of life of women across the region. WGMLA also incorporates the work of scholars deploying the methods and concerns of social (and, to some extent, cultural) history to shed light on women’s past political roles and activities. Various selections in chapters one and three, for example, demonstrate that in the nineteenth century, women—including illiterate or semi-literate members of the lower classes—were not as removed from the realm of politics and public life as it might seem, or as dominant gender ideologies might have us believe. They reveal women’s political awareness and mobilization during the Spanish American independence wars and beyond. Murray’s selection in particular shows how, despite their exclusion from the formal rights of citizenship, women in mid-nineteenth-century Colombia formed part of the same two-party political culture as men. They, too, took sides, identified with either Liberals or Conservatives, and learned to navigate partisan weather storms with the help of friendships and personal alliances.

By the early twentieth century, however, educated middle-class women (already active in civic and charitable organizations) were turning to a new,
more gender-aware kind of politics. As the selections in Chapter 4 illustrate, this involved efforts to improve the social and legal status of their sex, wives in particular; to enhance women's access to education and employment; and to win female suffrage. Feminism in all its diverse manifestations has continued to help women win new rights and move toward greater social, economic, legal, and political equality with men. Although subsequent selections—highlighting women's roles in late-twentieth-century revolutions, right-wing reaction/counterrevolution, and grassroots human rights movements—prove that it certainly is not the only form of female political activism, it remains an important and influential one.

Not least, through its sampling of a wide array of primary sources, the present volume allows women to speak for themselves. Such sources include letters, speeches, newspapers, travel accounts, advice books, and archival documents such as the record of a Mexican ecclesiastical divorce case and the last will and testament of an enterprising ex-slave and merchant of Bahia. While privileging female voices in general, they also incorporate male voices including some found in trial records, speeches, and writings. They represent new material—about half of the primary source selections included here are appearing in English for the first time, having been translated especially for this volume. Overall, too, they shed light on the activities of ordinary women as well as members of the region's more privileged middle and upper classes. They reveal the diversity to be found among members of the female sex, offering readers a peek into the lives of both the prominent and obscure, rich and poor, white and black, indigenous and mixed-race, urban and rural and, while focusing on key nations such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, of women from across a vast, highly diverse region. A pioneer and leading practitioner of the now-burgeoning field of Latin American women's history, Asuncion Lavrin notes that "women inhabit many worlds at many levels." WGLMA seeks to convey a sense of those many worlds and of the complexity that has marked women's experiences since the dawn of the national period.

Like its predecessor, this volume also seeks to give readers a sense of both change and continuity in women's roles over time. It also keeps an eye on the evolution of gender relations, especially in the last century. To what extent have those relations changed in response to the influence of new ideas and circumstances such as women's increased involvement in the paid workforce, access to education, participation in social and political movements, and control over their own reproductive capacity? In what ways have they borne (continued to bear) the mark of past inequalities between the sexes—patriarchy or male gender dominance? Speaking to more is, to what extent have modern Latin American societies conditions for both men and women while also reducing restrictions based on gender? These are just a few of the readers to ponder and explore through further research.
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Notes
1 This brief definition is based on that found in Mrinalini Sinha, Gender and Nation (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2006), 6.
2 An earlier synthesis of Latin American women's history, covering developments since pre-Columbian times, were the essays by Marysa Navarro and Virginia Sanchez Korrol in "Restoring Women to History: Teaching Packets for Integrating Women's History into Courses on Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East" published by the Organization of American Historians (1988); these later were revised and published in M. Navarro and V. Sanchez Korrol with Kezia Ali, Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).
3 Gertrude M. Yeager, ed., Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History (Wilmington, NC: SR Books, 1994). This volume also has an interdisciplinary character as it incorporates the work of social scientists and literary scholars.
7 For a useful, pioneering synthesis of the history of state-gender relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see the introductory essays by historian Elizabeth Dore and sociologist Maxine Molyneux respectively in Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux, eds., Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2000).