

September 2023

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Recommended Citation

Baize, Eden E. (2023) "Mama's Got a Brand New Degree: Education and Changing Perceptions of Femininity During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917)," *The Cardinal Edge*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 15. Available at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/tce/vol1/iss3/15>

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Cover Page Footnote

I'd like to thank Dr. Christine Ehrick for guiding me through this project and Abigail Stanger for editing it. Your support and suggestions were invaluable.

Mama's Got a Brand New Degree: Education and Changing Perceptions of Femininity During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917)

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ABSTRACT

Bloody struggles, tense political debates, and general unease characterized Mexico in the early twentieth century. Under former president Porfirio Díaz, tensions grew as the lower classes pleaded for labor and land reform, culminating in a violent period of revolution from 1910 to 1917. As with all conflicts of this scale, the Mexican Revolution prompted the challenging of many long standing social conventions, specifically as they pertained to the role of government and the organization of social classes. With the restructuring of society already underway, many activists capitalized on the uncertainty of the era to push against the subjugation of women. Feminist movements were not new to Mexico; however, the revolution presented an opportunity to raise women's stations and make space for them outside of the home. With this campaign to bolster women's positions in society came critical examinations of the existing gender roles and perceptions of femininity. Class struggles revealed how typical understandings of women's role in society—specifically remaining confined to the home—derived from upper class customs, and often proved inapplicable or unattainable for those of lower socioeconomic standing. This period also saw immense conflicts between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church on the grounds of political power and land ownership, however the Church provided one of the few opportunities for women to participate in the public sphere. This relationship helped define many aspects of femininity as the revolution approached and became a prominent discussion point in the fight for education as many champions of the anti-clerical movement argued in support of women's education as a means to decrease their reliance on the institution. Women's suffrage, soldaderas, prostitution, and sex education all played key roles in exposing and morphing how Mexican society conceptualized femininity. The fight for women's education became a focal point of revolutionary Mexico by embodying the Mexican public's attempt to integrate changing perceptions of femininity into the emerging modern era as the struggle pushed many women from their previous places in the home into the public sphere.

KEYWORDS: The Mexican Revolution, Feminism, Yucatan, Education, Female Education, Mexico, Femininity, Anti-clericalism, Prostitution

Bloody struggles, tense political debates, and general unease characterized Mexico in the early twentieth century. Under former president Porfirio Díaz, tensions grew as the lower classes pleaded for labor and land reform, culminating in a violent period of revolution from 1910 to 1917. As with all conflicts of this scale, the Mexican Revolution prompted the challenging of many long standing social conventions, specifically as they pertained to the

role of government and the organization of social classes. With the restructuring of society already underway, many activists capitalized on the uncertainty of the era to push against the subjugation of women. Feminist movements were not new to Mexico; however, the revolution presented an opportunity to raise women's stations and make space for them outside of the home. With this campaign to bolster women's positions in society came critical examinations of the existing gender roles and perceptions of

femininity. Class struggles revealed how typical understandings of women's role in society—specifically remaining confined to the home—derived from upper class customs, and often proved inapplicable or unattainable for those of lower socioeconomic standing. This period also saw immense conflicts between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church on the grounds of political power and land ownership, however the Church provided one of the few

opportunities for women to participate in the public sphere. This relationship helped define many aspects of femininity as the revolution approached and became a prominent discussion point in the fight for education as many champions of the anti-clerical movement argued in support of women's education as a means to decrease their reliance on the institution. Growing feminist movements also argued for women's suffrage, another debate which placed the issue of education at its center. This discourse surrounding evolving perceptions of femininity permeated throughout Mexico, but these burgeoning feminist movements took on a different, more radical form in one specific region: the Yucatán.

The Yucatán possesses a unique political demographic, resulting in a long history of revolution and progressive ideation; because of this, the state experienced debates regarding women's position in society decades before it entered the larger Mexican conversation. This head start changed the nature of the education debate, catering more towards promoting women's positions as a separate fight from the push to weaken their relationship to the Catholic Church. While decreasing the Church's power certainly played a role in the Yucatán, the larger conversation focused on how the role of wife and mother could aid in the revolutionary effort, capitalizing on traditional gender roles to garner support for a conflict that had the potential to alter those roles. Women did play a large role in the struggle, following the armies as *soldaderas*, becoming nurses, cooks, and soldiers. *Soldaderas* were not unique to the Yucatán, however their work epitomized using their traditional roles as wives and mothers to aid in the revolution, eventually granting

themselves a higher level of freedom. Furthermore, conversations regarding women's sexuality contributed to emerging ideas of womanhood as education became seen as a solution to prostitution. Prostitution increased in the early twentieth century, raising concerns for public health and morality. The panic led to the elevation of education as a solution, arguing women became prostitutes because they lacked the education to seek alternative employment, but it had the added benefit of opening broader dialogues about women's sexuality and sex education. The fight for women's education became a focal point of revolutionary Mexico by embodying the Mexican public's attempt to integrate changing perceptions of femininity into the emerging modern era as the struggle pushed many women from their previous places in the home into the public sphere.

The relationship between women and the Catholic Church represents one of the strongest traditions of femininity in pre-revolutionary Mexico, while additionally providing insights into the struggle between the Catholic Church and the Mexican state. The Catholic Church holds a towering position throughout Mexican history. Though its presence in Mexico remains one of the many enduring legacies of colonialism, Catholicism holds a special place in Mexican culture—becoming so entwined with Mexican identity that the two cannot be separated. The Church's prominence threatened the political institutions still trying to stabilize themselves and establish their own rule by diverting the loyalties of some Mexican citizens away from the state. Because of this, the Catholic Church and the Mexican government naturally

opposed each other, with the issue coming to a head after the 1917 constitution dealt a decisive blow to the Church's power. Dr. Patience Schell explored the extent to which the 1917 constitution exacerbated these struggles in an article examining the role of Catholic women during the Revolution: "The 1917 Constitution denied the Catholic Church juridical existence, strictly restricted its role in primary education, prohibited religious organizations from holding property, nationalized actual church holdings, and denied clergy any political role or the right to vote."¹ While struggles between the Church and the Mexican state extend far beyond the issue of women's rights, understanding the contention between the Church and the state is crucial in understanding the burgeoning feminist movement because in the Church, women found the most freedom in regards to participating in the public sphere. This freedom colored early ideas of femininity as women and the Church became intrinsically linked. Their loyalty to the Church unsettled those in power when women began fighting for rights—such as voting rights—because they feared these women would only channel more power to the Church by voting for things that favor it.

This issue of curbing Catholic dominance manifested in the education debate, with those opposed to women's suffrage arguing that because women lacked education, they would be forced to rely on the Church to make an informed decision as a result of the preexisting relationship of women to the Catholic Church. In an essay focused on the

¹ Patience A. Schell, "AN HONORABLE AVOCATION FOR LADIES: The Work of the Mexico City Union de Damas Catolicas Mexicanas," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no.78 (1999): 80.

vote for women in Mexico, Sarah Buck analyzed the rhetoric in this notion of unpreparedness, breaking the argument into its corollaries: “[W]omen were naturally more conservative; they favored traditional values; and they were susceptible to the influence of the clergy, making their political participation a threat to revolutionary programs and progress.”²² In an era of revolution, rebel supporters immediately neutralized anything that appeared to impede the revolutionary agenda; positioning women’s suffrage in opposition to revolutionary values conveniently delegitimized, and to some extent, villainized, women’s suffrage. Buck continued to explain how exemplifying women as the pinnacle for conservatism allowed Mexicans to impress the preexisting gender roles further, demonstrating their fear that enfranchising women would empower them to leave the household and erode social order to the detriment of society.³ This apocalyptic sentiment contributed heavily to the education debate. Men and women alike feared ramifications to the very fabric of society if women were no longer confined to the home and instead took on roles in the public sphere, enabled by education.

The notion that women remain confined to the home heavily influenced pre-revolutionary education, however it betrayed how many aspects of femininity derived from the upper classes, positioning women’s education as a catalyst through which to discuss existing

²²Sarah A. Buck, “The Meaning of the Women’s Vote in Mexico, 1917-1953,” in *The Women’s Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953*, ed. Stephanie Mitchell and Patience A. Schell (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 74-75.

³Buck, “The Women’s Vote,” 75.

class struggles. The late 1800s in Mexico, under Porfirio Díaz, witnessed a boom in population as people began migrating from rural communities into city centers.⁴ With this major influx of often lower class individuals came growing class tensions which influenced early discussions of women’s roles in society, shaping the education debate by evaluating what type education would best prepare them to assume these roles. In a letter published in *Panorama de las Señoritas Mejicanas* in 1842, a woman who published under the name Angélica highlighted how the Mexican public’s perception of women’s roles, as defined by the privileges and customs of the social elite, resulted in inadequate education for many women: “Young women without a dowry and of a middling condition, that today are called upon to make their own future, like men, in seeking true instruction that leads to talent and decides their fortune, infrequently find in these studies the lessons that would stimulate and aid them.”⁵ The author not only highlights the inequalities that leave many women unprepared for their future, but also references the shifting social obligations which prompted women to leave their homes in larger numbers. She further impresses on her audience that limiting a young woman to solely receive instruction to prepare her for a life in the private sphere excludes the many women who cannot remain at home, stating “Be that as it may, in this peaceful time of labor and industry, in which women have long participated in the dangerous and

⁴Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 11.

⁵Angélica, “The Education of Women,” in *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader*, ed. Nora E. Jaffary (New York City: Westview Press, 2010), 220.

agitated life of men, a great number of them go it alone...without there having been an educated and friendly voice to teach them.”⁶ The author counters the belief that women’s education need only be confined to the realm of the household by explaining that many lower class Mexican women already hold positions in the public sphere. Not only was the educational system for many women skewed towards the upper classes, but it was negligent, prompting many educational advocates to lobby for wider, more accessible curricula.

These debates regarding the position of women in society, specifically as they pertain to education’s role in advancing women’s rights, possessed few new arguments, as the Mexican state of the Yucatán had been at the forefront of these feminist debates for decades. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Yucatán functioned as the central hub of the Mayan Empire. Though the Spanish conquered the Mayans, the rich culture and history of the Mayans endured, even into the present day. This created a left-leaning political environment, particularly receptive to revolutionary ideals and resulting in this region taking on the education debate as early as the 1870s.⁷ In an article examining the role of education in shaping female identity, Melchor García dissected the different motivations behind promoting female education, and in doing so, highlighted the active role feminist organizations like *La Siempreviva* had in the

⁶Angélica, “The Education of Women,” 221.

⁷Melchor Campos García. “Public Discourse and Models of Womanhood in Yucatán, 1870-1902.” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 95, no.4 (2015): 559.

period leading up to the revolution. Specifically, García examined how education became a tool for “molding mothers” who were loyal to the emerging republic.⁸ They explained how this public effort to redefine womanhood to fit into the modern era allowed space for feminist organizations to add their voice, arguing for a more equitable repositioning of women in society. Preexisting social restructuring placed the Yucatán in a unique position as it entered the revolutionary period, while also introducing one of the primary motivations for educating women.

The use of education to shape mothers and wives in support of the Mexican state harkens back to the fear that women’s education would collapse Mexico’s entire social structure and feminists’ attempts to assuage these concerns. The governor of the Yucatán during this period of the early twentieth century, Salvador Alvarado, supported women’s education on this basis, simultaneously demonstrating the progressive movements of the Yucatán. Stephanie Smith explained in her book, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution*, that Alvarado championed women’s education as a method to get women involved in the revolution and to weaken the Catholic Church’s power. His call to action served a dual purpose; while it urged women to join the fight for freedom, it also highlighted their role in restructuring society.⁹ The easiest way for women to accomplish this goal resided in their

role as mothers and wives:

Alvarado further contended that women’s education was crucial in ensuring the continuing success of Mexico’s families. In fact, the governor argued that women’s lack of education could have dire consequences for the family, because without proper training a woman could not provide a home where her husband would be happy.¹⁰

Though modern audiences might balk at this sentiment’s classification as progressive, this argument played a major role in advancing women’s education across the world. Smith’s statement showcases the way in which education reflected perceptions of femininity at the time, in addition to how activists began to utilize it to raise women’s social positions. Many women in Mexico during this time strove to assume the role of wife and mother, making Alvarado’s statement incredibly compelling. In addition to providing convincing rationale for why women should be educated, he also used the education debate to garner female participation in the larger revolution.

Alvarado capitalized on the push for social mobility to propel the education debate into the larger context of the revolution. In an essay examining the impact of education in the Yucatán, Smith explained how Alvarado combined these three social events—the definition of women’s place in society, the push to educate

women, and the desire to enact revolutionary ideals—to accomplish his goal of supporting the revolution:

Alvarado declared that women could not enter the struggle for emancipation without first being properly prepared. In fact, he argued women were in dire need of education to be able to live an honest and independent life (a coded reference to prostitution) to comply with their revolutionary responsibilities to help build a new society and to elevate their positions in the process.¹¹

In Smith’s characterization of Alvarado’s stance, he asserts that women not only had the capability to join the fight for freedom, but the responsibility to fight. His mobilization of women reflected the wider trend of women leaving the homestead in the name of the revolution—which would factor heavily into the evolving ideas of femininity. Further, he explained that education would not only enable women to participate in the current revolution, but that it would also permanently raise their station—an enticing offer for many women. His argument embodies more liberal stances which acknowledge women’s position at a disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts. Though many institutions contributed to this systemic imbalance, education constituted one of the most glaring injustices, clearly favoring education for men over women.

The addition of women to the revolutionary effort, specifically through the emergence of *soldaderas*, reinforced the shifting demands of women as a result

⁸ García, “Models of Womanhood,” 559

⁹ Stephanie J. Smith, “Educating the Mothers of the Nation: The Project of Revolutionary Education in Yucatán,” in *The Women’s Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953*, ed. Stephanie Mitchell and Patience A. Schell (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 39.

¹⁰ Smith, “Educating the Mothers,” 39.

¹¹ Smith, “Educating the Mothers,” 40.

of the conflict, while simultaneously echoing Angélica's aforementioned sentiments regarding the dangerous lives many women faced unprepared. The *soldaderas* were female members of the Mexican military, often wives of soldiers, who accompanied their men into the army. These women served as nurses, cooks, soldiers, and many other positions, including as moral support. The *soldaderas* epitomized Mexican femininity at the time, maintaining their roles as wives and mothers in the harsh conditions of the battlefield, while also complicating these perceptions through their work as soldiers. The *New York Times* published an article in 1920 by Blasco Ibanez which examined the unique makeup of the Mexican military as a result of these *soldaderas*. His article delves into the benefits of having nurses and cooks readily available, attributing much of the military's success to these women: "Many Mexican Generals have thought of abolishing her, but in the end they have had to compromise with her and finally seek her support. What else can be done in an army destitute of a supply and sanitary corps? The sick cannot be abandoned to chance. The 'soldierette' makes up for more than one deficiency in the Mexican military system."¹² While the life of an army medic presents a number of dangers on its own, Ibanez continues on to explain how many women would fight in their husbands' place in the event that he died in battle, working "stratagems in

battle worthy of the heroines of antiquity."¹³ The willingness to take up arms in place of their husbands demonstrates a remarkable sense of bravery, while simultaneously illustrating how many women adapted to the steep demands of the revolution. Further, their proficiency in all areas of service in the military bolstered the fight of equality by claiming for themselves a space in the public sphere.

As the education debate continued, the work of the *soldaderas* in redefining gender roles through their participation in the revolution had to be considered. Previous ideas regarding educating women for a life in the home no longer held the same validity after years of women taking up arms in the military; however, there remained a desire to maintain patriarchal control which manifested itself in post revolutionary educational policy. The life of a *soldadera* presented unthinkable challenges between enduring in difficult environments and stomaching abuse from soldiers to remain with the army.¹⁴ However, through these obstacles, *soldaderas* persevered, often through a dedication to the cause. In her book *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940*, Mary Kay Vaughan explored how educational legislation attempted to capitalize on this same patriotism to reinforce patriarchal ideations: "In the case of Mexico, rural educational policy in the 1930s envisioned a modernization of patriarchy. It aimed at destroying regional patriarchal

networks of power and provisioning in favor of national, horizontal networks. It sought to remake the family—men, women, and children—in the interests of nation-building and development."¹⁵ Mexico implemented a number of measures, including education, to try and reestablish a social order resembling one before the revolution, in which women were confined to the private sphere and men the public, but by employing the new ideals and values of post-revolutionary Mexico. Vaughan's quote showcases how Mexico attempted to modernize the patriarchy by specifically mentioning how nation-building dominated educational policy at the time; the *soldaderas* left their house to build their nation, so they must now be willing to return to it for the same objective.

The impetus on preserving the family unit provided an avenue through which to address another social issue, briefly referenced in the above quote from Smith: the growing popularity of prostitution. The issue of prostitution found itself at the center of numerous feminist debates ranging from issues of public health to issues of morality, as with the education debate. Alvarado's opinion of prostitution presented one of the most prominent sides of the prostitution debate; his quotes demonstrated the public opinion of prostitutes as "mentally deranged," resulting in the public often regarding prostitutes with "repugnance."¹⁶ This mindset painted prostitutes as the social evil—the thing preventing good societies from emerging. An article written

¹²Blasco Ibanez, "MEXICO'S ARMY A RAGGED HORDE OF BOTH SEXES: FATALISM OF THE SOLDIERS AND 'SOLDIERETTES' OF THE REVOLUTION. WHY DEATH MEANS NOTHING LIFE SO HARD AND HOPELESS THAT ITS ENDING REALLY DOESN'T MATTER," *New York Times* (1857-1922), Jun. 4, 1920, 1.

¹³ Ibanez, "MEXICO'S ARMY," 2.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 75.

¹⁵ Vaughan, "Cultural Politics in Revolution," 11.

¹⁶Stephanie J. Smith, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution: Yucatán Women and the Realities of Patriarchy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 154.

anonymously in *Tierra*, the official magazine of the Lige Central de Resistencia del Partido Socialista del Sureste, represented the opposing side to the debate:

Prostitutes had little choice but to enter the trade since their lack of education and financial resources, coupled with an exposure to drugs, gave them few alternatives. They contended that if a person took the time to talk to prostitutes he or she would discover poorly educated mothers who sold their bodies simply to feed their young children.¹⁷

By calling out the adverse societal conditions that drove many to prostitution, this piece shifted the blame from the sex workers themselves, to the system that forced them into the trade. This stance was uncommon at the time, as frank conversations regarding women's sexuality remained taboo; as such, this position on the issue highlights another way activists used education to open dialogues that contributed to the shifting understanding of femininity. Explicitly linking the prostitutes' involvement in the profession to a lack of schooling provided an avenue to reinforce education's role in social advancement. Establishing a connection between prostitution and a lack of education further strengthened the argument in support of women's education because it introduced the potential to decrease prostitution.

¹⁷ Smith, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution*, 171.

While supporters of this idea argued that general education would curb the growing rates of prostitution, more radical feminists argued for more drastic measures. As the campaigns against prostitution would imply, early twentieth century Mexico held conservative views regarding sex and women's sexuality. In 1916, the capital city of the Yucatán, Mérida, hosted the First Feminist Congress in an effort by Governor Alvarado to hear the concerns of major players in the feminist movement. One significant figure in the Yucatán's feminist movements of this period, Hermila Galindo, was not present, but wrote a statement to be read in her absence. An inflammatory speech, "La Mujer en el Porvenir" called for sex education by quoting socialist and politician Augusto Bebel: "A misunderstood modesty and old concerns deprive women of knowledge that is not only useful, but indispensable..."¹⁸ While Galindo argued for a different kind of education, she argued for education nonetheless, explaining that the information most often held from women is the most useful to have. Bebel's quote pushed for sex education, however, as a means to prevent sexual promiscuity in women, stating that this information "would be a shield from the natural demands of sex."¹⁹ Galindo countered this idea by instead arguing "It is that the sexual instinct prevails in such a way in women and with such irresistible springs, that no hypocritical artifice is capable of destroying, modifying or restraining."²⁰ She opposed the long-held notion

¹⁸ Hermila Galindo, "La Mujer en el Porvenir," transcript of speech delivered at the First Feminist Congress at Mérida, January 16, 1916, <https://speakingwhilefemale.co/virtue-galindo/>.

¹⁹ Galindo, "La Mujer."

²⁰ Galindo, "La Mujer."

of women as nonsexual beings by arguing instead that women's sexuality equaled that of men. In doing so, she proposed sex education as another opening through which women could improve their position in society by reclaiming an aspect of their humanity—their sexuality.

These discussions of reordering society to accommodate growing social stations of women and combating prostitution with education remained most prevalent in the Yucatán, but mirrored similar debates happening throughout Mexico. Regardless of the motivations behind promoting education, this tumultuous period nonetheless saw the expansion of public schooling. The 1917 constitution epitomized many of the revolutionary ideals of the time, replacing the 1857 constitution to specifically enforce new education reform, labor reform, and land reform. A book by author Hilarion Noel Branch from 1917 placed the 1857 constitution alongside the new constitution to compare the substantial differences between the two. By juxtaposing these documents, Branch highlighted the operative phrase that demonstrates the application of revolutionary values: "It shall be the duty of every Mexican: to compel the attendance at either private or public schools of their children or wards, when under fifteen years of age, in order that they may receive primary instruction..."²¹ This statement, pulled from Article 31, did not exist in the 1857 constitution. Previously, Article 31 compelled military service, calling on

²¹ Hilarion Noel Branch, *The Mexican Constitution of 1917 Compared with the Constitution of 1857* (Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1917), 28-29.

calling on every Mexican citizen to “defend the independence, the territory, the honor, and the rights and interest of his country.”²² The 1917 constitution kept this phrase; however, it is now secondary to ensuring adolescents receive education. Shifting civic duty away from purely militant undertakings and onto education represented the hard-fought battle by revolutionaries to expand educational rights.

Understanding the role of education during the Mexican revolution reveals the shifting positions of women in Mexican society, a facet of the much larger social restructuring that accompanied the struggle. During a period with such violent upheavals of long standing traditions, understanding how women capitalized on this maelstrom to push for equality aids in contextualizing modern Mexican feminist scholarship. The employment of the traditional roles of wife and mother demonstrates their importance to Mexican society, as well as how those roles were morphed to accommodate the emerging post-revolutionary society. The discussion of the Catholic Church’s relationship to women was only briefly touched on in this paper, but the Church’s position in the Mexican Revolution bears further study. The complicated position of the Catholic Church to Mexican society positions their struggle as uniquely complex, making the feminist debates as they pertain to the Church complex. Definitions and discussions of what makes a good wife and mother, what roles women should have in the

public sphere, and how women should conceptualize their own sexuality often derived, if not directly from the Church, then from social arguments that were often influenced by the Catholic dogma as a result of its prominence in Mexico. The position of the Church in each of the other perceptions of femininity discussed in this paper situates the Church in a specific place of interest to better understand the role they played in changing the perceptions of Mexican women’s femininity. Women played crucial roles in the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent restructuring of Mexican society; their hard-fought battle for social equality paved the way for a new generation of educated women to carry on their fight for liberation, and their efforts deserve recognition.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to thank Dr. Christine Ehrick for guiding me through this project and Abigail Stanger for editing it. Your support and suggestions were invaluable.

²² Branch, *The Mexican Constitution*, 28.