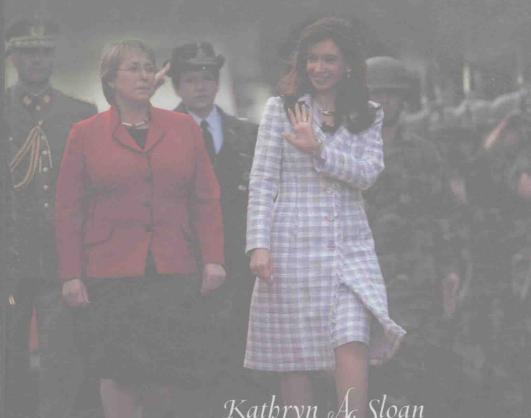
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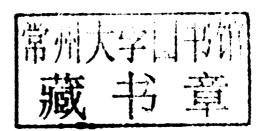
Women's Roles in LATIN AMERICA CARIBBEAN



Kathryn A. Sloan

WOMEN'S ROLES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Kathryn A. Sloan



Women's Roles through History



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Series Foreword

Women's history is still being reclaimed. The geographical and chronological scope of the Women's Roles through History series contributes to our understanding of the many facets of women's lives. Indeed, with this series, a content-rich survey of women's lives through history and around the world is available for the first time for everyone from high school students to the general public.

The impetus for the series came from the success of Greenwood's 1999 reference *Women's Roles in Ancient Civilizations*, edited by Bella Vivante. Librarians noted the need for new treatments of women's history, and women's roles are an important part of the history curriculum in every era. Thus, this series intensely covers women's roles in Europe and the United States, with volumes by the century or by era, and one volume each is devoted to the major populated areas of the globe—Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Each volume provides essay chapters on major topics such as

- · Family Life
- · Marriage and Childbearing
- Religion
- · Public Life
- · Lives of Ordinary Women
- · Women and the Economy
- · Political Status
- Legal Status
- · Arts

Country and regional differences are discussed as necessary. Other elements include

- Introduction, providing historical context
- · chronology
- glossary
- · bibliography
- · period illustrations

The volumes, written by historians, offer sound scholarship in an accessible manner. A wealth of disparate material is conveniently synthesized in one source. As well, the insight provided into daily life, which readers find intriguing, further helps to bring knowledge of women's struggles, duties, contributions, pleasures, and more to a wide audience.

Introduction

Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean island nations present the scholar with a formidable task in surveying the history of their women. Diverse in geography, culture, and politics Latin American and Caribbean women pose as many differences as similarities. However, there are general patterns and trends that unite women across seas, mountain ranges, and historical trajectories. Divided by class, race, and ethnicity, Latin American and Caribbean women share a common history of subordination, initiative, and agency. Though their gender relegated them to the endnotes of official history, women in this region, time and time again, pushed back the limitations on their rights, autonomy, and ability to voice their opinion. Sometimes they conformed to what society expected of them; sometimes they rebelled. More commonly they acted out somewhere between conformity and rebellion. In the end, Latin American women played instrumental roles in the development of their societies.

Women defined themselves first by gender and secondarily by race and/ or class. Other factors such as marital status, occupation, age, and religion distinguished one woman from another. Most Latin American women were Catholic, some nominally so, but many practiced a syncretic form of popular Catholicism that blended rituals and beliefs from indigenous or African spiritualism with Christian practices. In other words, Maya women of highland Guatemala might attend mass and eagerly participate in holy Catholic celebrations, but they also left offerings of corn and tobacco on the altar. Catholic women in Brazil might dutifully attend Catholic mass on Saturday but also participate in Umbanda or Candomblé observances on Friday. Other women concealed their religious identity in the colonial

climate of religious intolerance. In colonial Latin America, crypto-Jews maintained a public Catholic identity but continued Jewish religious practices in private. Regardless of their spiritual preferences, religion figured prominently in the lives of women in Latin America and the Caribbean. It marked the signposts of their lives and the lives of their children. Where a woman stood in her life course also impacted her roles in society. Rules of appropriate behavior differed if she was young, middle-aged, or old. Marital status played a role as well, as there were different behavioral expectations for widows than for single virgins.

PRIMARY SOURCES ON LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN WOMEN

Texts written by Latin American women are relatively scarce. Elite women may have left a trail of memoirs, diaries, travel accounts, and creative works, but sources written by women of lower status are few and far between. A handful of women were literate before the 20th century and while scholars can enjoy the writings of the colonial nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, hardly any women documented their lives in that era. Historians and scholars instead must make creative and unorthodox use of documents to tease out women's voices, motivations, or information about their daily lives. Since the 1960s and 1970s, social historians have built a bountiful literature that documents the lives of women across the region, though scholars have mostly written about women in Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, and Argentina, where sources seem to be more plentiful.

Women did leave written traces in the historical record. Religious autobiographies (vidas), usually written in the waning years of a nun's life, provide some of the most intimate details of quotidian life in colonial Latin American society. Vidas follow an internal grammar or structure. The nun recounted her spiritual awakening and devotion to Christ, even describing visions she experienced as a girl. However the vidas also comment on daily life in the cities, countryside, and among family members, slaves, and servants. Women may have written vidas but like any memoir they must be read with a critical eye. Indeed scholars understand that bias and intended audience always shaped the recording of events, feelings, or a life. Elite women wrote letters to lovers, friends, and family members and recorded not only their emotions but also accounts of their daily chores, struggles, and personal news. The lover of Simón Bolívar, Manuela Sáenz, penned several letters to prominent men from her exile in Peru, offering political advice and weighing in on the current events of the day. Wills are another important source for historians gleaning insights into women's lives. A will may be read as a list of items to be left to heirs, but last testaments also reveal what a woman cherished, what she viewed as valuable, and her economic status as a woman in society. Sometimes women freed slaves in their wills or passed on religious objects to favored children. Other women left property to the church or cash to the local priest to say prayers for their souls. Travel accounts written by women are another important source for scholars. Elite women traveled and reported on social customs, market-places, bullfights, and high society balls.

Personal correspondence, spiritual autobiographies, travel accounts, and last will and testaments provide important starting places for the inquisitive scholar. However historians must look to additional sources to write the history of women. Lower-class women did not leave written documents; hence scholars sleuth out knowledge about their lives in unusual places. Male-authored documents such as newspaper articles, letters, speeches, or religious treatises offer some glimpses, but they cannot be accepted at face value. On the other hand, judicial records provide rich information about women's lives. From the beginning of the colonial era, women appeared in religious and secular courts as plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, and more rarely, as experts. Notaries or court secretaries recorded their testimonies, and these documents sitting in archives across the region have been a goldmine for legal and social historians. Court officials played a hand in shaping female testimony by asking specific questions or choosing what and what not to write down. Nonetheless with careful analysis, scholars have uncovered fascinating details about the lives of working-class women.

Other types of legal documents such as land sales and titles reveal the fact that women actively participated in economic activities in the region. They owned and sold land, managed haciendas, sold and bought cattle, and bought and leased property. Census materials have also been a valuable source for demographers. Through careful evaluation of censuses, historians have shown that women headed households in large cities in Brazil and Mexico, upsetting traditional understandings of family formation and patriarchal structures.

AN OVERVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN

A woman launched the forging of a region called Latin America today. Queen Isabella I of the Kingdom of Castile financed the sailing of one Christopher Columbus, and the rest, as they say, is history. A powerful sovereign in her own right, Isabella, with her husband King Ferdinand II of Aragon, succeeded in uniting their kingdoms and setting the groundwork to transform Spain into the first trans-Atlantic empire. Fresh off the final defeat and expulsion of the Moors (Muslim Berbers) from the Iberian

Peninsula, Isabella and Ferdinand, stood emboldened to spread Christianity, seek out new sources of wealth, and consolidate their authority as the most powerful European kingdom. Their vision and financial backing paid off when Columbus landed in the New World in October 1492.

Columbus would sail back and forth between Europe and the Americas four times, but it would be news and evidence from his first trip that inspired many a Spanish man to join the ranks of conquistadors, colonists, and explorers who left the port of Seville for a life of unknowable adventure. Columbus and other explorers brought samples of fruit, plants, flowers, and even Taino human specimens to the Spanish court. Spaniards with artistic abilities drew what they witnessed, and their drawings spiked interest in the veritable Eden across the sea. Men would be the early colonists, but Spanish women would follow in the mid-1500s to join loved ones or hope to make a life or marriage for themselves in the New World.

The first Spanish settlements were established among the Taino peoples on the island of Hispaniola. By most accounts, the indigenous people tolerated the arrival of the Spaniards, assisted them at first, but grew angry with their incessant demands and their theft and abuse of Taino women. Indeed Spanish men looked on women as ripe for the taking and sexually violated them, considering them the spoils of conquest. Some Spaniards may have entered into consensual, and maybe even loving, relationships with indigenous women, but these liaisons were rarely formalized in marriage. The Spanish colonization of Hispaniola and eventually Cuba proved devastating for the once-thriving indigenous groups. European disease and abuse by the Spanish settlers decimated their populations; within 30 years of European contact, their numbers had decreased almost 90 percent. Their decline worried the Spanish Crown and the friars that preached among them. The Crown responded with a series of laws meant to protect their new subjects, which included prohibitions on their enslavement.

After Hispaniola and Cuba had been colonized and grants of Indian labor (*encomiendas*) were divvied out to its conquerors, the Spanish turned their sights on the mainland. A series of Spanish sailors had reconnoitered the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico and reported back to the governor of Cuba on their findings. One of the intrepid men was Hernán Córtes, who would go on to lead the conquest of the Aztec Empire in the Valley of Mexico. The Spanish skirmished with indigenous groups along the coast but also managed to trade and learn of a great inland civilization. The governor of Cuba granted Córtes permission to take ships, arms, and soldiers to Mexico and to make the trek inland with men, horses, and cannons to the fabled city. At the last minute, the governor retracted his permission, but Córtes set sail anyway and became a renegade of the Crown. He skirted along the mainland coast of the Yucatán Peninsula and received from Tabascan Indians a gift of several slave women. Among the women

was Malintzin, who would be rechristened Doña Marina when she became Córtes's mistress and interpreter. Malintzin had the gift of languages and rapidly learned Spanish. She also possessed keen knowledge of the inner workings and worldview of the Aztec rulers and would be Córtes's greatest source of intelligence. Malintzin, alternatively known as La Malinche or traitor, figures prominently in the codices produced after the conquest. As she was often drawn large and placed more centrally than Córtes, it was clear that the indigenous peoples recognized her important role as interpreter and representative of the Spanish monarchs. Córtes barely mentioned her in his letters to the king, but one of his soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, wrote of her instrumental role in the successful conquest of the Aztecs. The Aztec emperor Moctezuma attempted to bribe the Spanish into retreating, but when they arrived at the causeways of Tenochtitlán, the shining city on the lake, he welcomed them as god-kings. The Aztec people rose up and drove out their foreign guests after Pedro de Alvarado initiated a massacre of unarmed religious celebrants in an event known as La Noche Triste (The Sad Night). The Spaniards would return one final time with thousands of Tlaxcalan allies, and the great civilization would fall after a prolonged siege and an epidemic of smallpox that killed and weakened the island city's defenders.

The Aztec Empire fell in 1521, and the conquests would continue through southern Mexico and into Central America. From the Spanish settlement on the Isthmus of Panama, conquistadors set their sights on the second great civilization in Latin America, the Inca Empire. The Inca were in the midst of a civil war over succession as the emperor had died of smallpox and two half-brothers, Atahualpa and Huascar, claimed the throne. The Spaniards arrived during the succession war and played the conflict to their advantage. The Inca Empire fell in 1532 although a shadow empire existed in the Andean mountains until 1572. Conquests of other parts of South America followed. Certainly by the end of the 16th century, the Spanish had subjugated millions of indigenous people to church and crown. Under the Spanish system, indigenous women would lose most of the political and religious authority they had possessed.

As indigenous laborers built Hispanic-style cities literally on top of ruins of past civilizations, colonists sailed from Spain to forge lives for themselves in the new colony. Among the settlers were artisans, nobles sent to take up political or religious positions, slaves, and a few women. Wives joined husbands; mothers joined children; sisters joined brothers. Some Spanish wives arrived to find that their conquistador husbands had indigenous concubines. The number of female Spanish settlers increased during the 17th century. As the single Spanish female population increased, marriages between Spanish men and noble indigenous women declined. During the early years after conquest, daughters of emperors were given

to Spanish conquistadors. Moctezuma's daughter married one of Córtes's officers, after Córtes first bedded her, and Atahualpa gifted his sister Quispe Sisa to Francisco Pizarro, the conquistador that would ransom then execute the doomed Inca leader. Sisa bore two children with Pizarro, and then he married her off to another Spanish soldier. This was the more likely pattern for the alliances made between the indigenous nobility and the early Spanish conquerors. Women were plied as gifts and to cement alliances between powerful families. This practice all but ceased with the availability of Spanish women, but Spanish men would continue to take indigenous women for concubines and mistresses.

The offspring of these mixed relationships created a racial structure that inspired fear and curiosity in the minds of the Spanish elite. The 17th century enjoyed a population recovery after an era of demographic collapse among the indigenous peoples who lacked immunity to European-borne diseases. Indigenous populations rose, Spanish numbers increased, and more Spaniards immigrated to the New World and set about making families. African slaves also arrived in large numbers, suffering from an inhumane middle passage on sail from the west coast of the African continent to Brazil and the West Indies. However, the most notable surge in numbers was among the mixed-race (casta) groups. The largest casta group was the children of Indian and European descent (mestizo in Mexico, ladino in Central and South America), and in regions of large slave populations, the mulato or person of African and European heritage dominated. The New World presented Europeans with a social structure of unprecedented racial diversity, and race would become a determining factor of the social hierarchy. The Spanish prided themselves for their blood purity (limpieza de sangre), and anyone who possessed a phenotype that indicated indigenous or African blood was by definition a social inferior, at least in theory. Darker skin, wiry hair, wide nose, flat face, short stature, and full lips were all physical characteristics that marked a person as mixed race and thus, lacking honor or status in colonial Latin American society. As Enlightenmentera values and ideas infused Spanish society, painters took up the task of painting a series of casta paintings that depicted the genetic outcomes of miscegenation. The scenes depict a husband and wife and their child in a domestic scene. Notably as well, their dress and surroundings reflected their social status. Captions explained the racial mixture, and the Spanish assigned racial categories to the children. For example, a caption might read "De español y india sale mestizo" (Spaniard and Indian begets mestizo) or "De negro y india sale lobo" (African and Indian begets lobo). The Spanish devised more than 16 categories of race mixing, and casta paintings were collected as souvenirs and art to be displayed or given as gifts. When one examines the paintings, two themes emerge. First, when Indians and their mixed-race offspring mix with Spaniards, they eventually become Spanish and lose their racial taint. Second, mixing with persons of African blood always had negative consequences for social status.

Practice often diverges from theory, and this was no less apparent than with race in colonial society. Race is certainly a social construction rather than a genetic fact, and Spanish society could be quite fluid in its evaluation of race. Money certainly whitened a person's racial standing, and wealthy individuals could clean their family tree and origins with cash. In fact, the Crown evaluated petitions, called cédulas de gracias al sacar, which asked for an official document to remove impediments to their social mobility. In other words, a person of indigenous or African descent could buy royal dispensation that gave him or her de facto whiteness. Legal documentation of whiteness likely allowed the person to attend university, take public office, or find a niche in the religious hierarchy. Another petitioner might ask that he or she be established as legitimately born. However the fact that the cash-strapped Crown issued dispensations to bestow respect and status to its colonial subjects proves how flexible society was at allowing passing into the ranks of the respectable. Even individuals who did not seek a royal document to prove their worthiness could pass in honorable society by their level of wealth, style of dress, lifestyle, and public comportment.

As evidenced by the increased sale of dispensations the Crown faced severe revenue setbacks and social tensions in the 18th century. At constant war with various European powers and struggling to defend its vast colonial possessions, the Crown faced difficulties at home and in the colonies. At the same time its colonial subjects resisted the grip of increased regulation and the meddling of outsiders in their affairs. Indeed Indian and slave revolts escalated throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and the spectacle of the slave revolt turned revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) was not lost on Spanish observers. Indigenous women took a prominent role in riots as the issues that drove them to revolt revolved around the moral economy of village life. Women picked up kitchen knives and rocks to chase out Spanish officials who came to survey boundaries or demonstrated vociferously against a hike in prices for basic foodstuffs. Slave women were active in revolts on plantations as well. Many ran away to maroon (cimarron) communities and lived outside white society for years.

Spain maintained an absolute monarchy longer than the English and French royals, and it failed to stay a course of industrialization and diversification of its economic base. However the Enlightenment had its impact on Spain. The casta paintings were just one example of Spain's desire to catalog, understand, and evaluate its environs. The Crown funded expeditions into remote parts of the colonies to collect specimens of flora and fauna and chart the course of the extensive rivers systems, the Amazon

and the Orinoco. Enlightenment thought also promoted education, and many intellectuals took up the task of advocating changes in the condition of women. They questioned their social utility and ability to inculcate moral values in their children. Leaders initiated educational reforms for women although most subjects were practical rather than abstract. In other words, a woman ought to be educated to be a better wife, mother, and manager of a household. Upper-class women were targeted; it would be later under liberal reforms that politicians would address the need to educate the poor to be better workers.

Whereas women had been educated in the home in early colonial society, all-girls schools emerged throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Many were religious but more and more secular schools opened during the same period. The curriculums varied but most emphasized the domestic arts including embroidery, lacemaking, mending, spinning, Christian doctrine, and some reading and simple arithmetic. Education was seen as a panacea for female idleness and their propensity for gossip and frivolity. Elite women with a formal education were also thought to be better marriage partners. Of course many women broke out of the parameters of their limited formal education and became self-taught in science, literature, and philosophy. These same women held *tertulias* (literary salons) in their homes to discuss with men and women the latest intellectual readings of the day, including books banned by Spain.

The creole elite (Spaniards born in the New World) also bristled against new regulations brought on by the Bourbon kings of the 1700s. Charles III (1759–1788) hoped to streamline the process of tax collection, revitalize mining, and place well-qualified officials in key administrative positions in the colonial bureaucracy. He favored Spaniards born in Spain (peninsular) for the choicest, most powerful positions, and the creoles felt unfairly disparaged. Many Spaniards believed that creoles, because they were born in the colonies, lacked the temperament, intellect, and necessary loyalty to be efficient administrators with the Crown's best interests foremost in mind. The injustice handed to creoles sparked the idea of revolt, and many became enthralled by the writings of the Enlightenment.

After the death of Charles III in 1788, the Spanish throne transferred to a weak and inept king, Charles IV. Royal society held mixed reviews of the new king. More fond of hunting than ruling, many believed that the queen, María Luisa, ruled in his stead with her lover Manuel de Godoy. In fact Godoy was a favorite of the queen and rose from palace guard to prime minister, a fact that was not lost on a society that respected noble lineage and inheritance. When France executed King Louis XIV in 1793, Spain bristled and France declared war on Spain. A series of intrigues and alliances followed, and the crown prince Ferdinand broke from his father and advocated a close relationship with their historical foe, Great Britain.

Ferdinand also spoke against Godoy to Napoleon, and Charles IV sided with the prime minister, now reviled by all sectors of Spanish society. The population rose in revolt, and Charles abdicated the throne in favor of Ferdinand and sought refuge in France. However by this time, Napoleon had amassed thousands of French troops in Spanish territory and distrusting Ferdinand, he arrested Charles in France and forced him to re-abdicate the throne in favor of Napoleon who then named his own brother king of Spain. Joseph ruled Spain from 1808 to 1813, and Spain's American colonies seized the opportunity for free trade and autonomy.

Charles III had already loosened restrictions on trade, allowing limited trade with different Spanish ports and among viceroyalties. However when Spain was busy fighting England or France or distracted by actions of its royals, colonists experienced a taste of self-rule. Why wouldn't they ask if they could indeed govern themselves? When Napoleon placed his own brother Joseph on the Spanish throne, some creoles rallied around the rightful heir Ferdinand while others imagined their independence. Indeed Venezuela was the first nation to declare its independence in 1810, and Mexico's wars for independence began the same year. The creole elite who led these movements for independence did not seek a social revolution but a political revolution to sever ties to the mother country. Fierce battles for independence broke out throughout Latin America. The Spanish Caribbean was under tighter control with the island colonies governed by a small Spanish elite who kept a large population of slaves under brutal authority. In fact, while most of mainland Spanish America earned independence by the 1820s, Cuba and Puerto Rico remained under Spanish colonial control until 1898.

Women participated in many ways in the independence movements. They served as symbols of liberty—through images of Lady Liberty or the Virgin of Guadalupe who would became the symbol of Mexican independence in 1810. Women hosted tertulias from which conspirators strategized plans to build armies of peasants and throw off the yoke of colonialism. Other women took up arms or followed their men to battle, serving as spies, soldiers, or tending wounds and providing food. However, women then, as today, suffered the brunt of war. Forced from their homes, sexually assaulted, and abused, to be a woman in a war zone was dangerous. In fact, war brought soldiers into villages and towns, and the obligation of providing food, cleaning uniforms, and tending to wounds fell to women. Parents hid their daughters, fearful that they would be kidnapped or raped by the strange men. Women suffered in other ways as well. Wives lost husbands, brothers, and sons and sharply felt the pain and sadness. Some had no choice but to leave their ancestral village and migrate to the city to escape the violence of war but also to seek work as laundresses or maids in order to feed their children.

Independence meant writing constitutions, enacting new laws, and distancing new nations from their colonial origins. However, leaders of new nations found the process of building new institutions more difficult than they imagined. They clashed over the form governments should take and to what extent the church, military, and landed elite should maintain power and prestige. Indeed leaders sought to break from their colonial past but for several decades, a system of colonial law and norms remained especially as conservatives controlled most national governments. The new statesmen succeeded in removing race and honorific titles from legal documents, but the honor code persisted long into the 19th century. Special privileges (fueros) continued after independence for clerical and military personnel. Likewise the process of converting society into citizens would be difficult. People tended to identify with their region before nation; in fact, a concept of national identity would be illusive for decades. Peasants thought of themselves as members of villages first, and region, second. An idea of a nation was incomprehensible. Although they took up arms with the fighters for independence, they did so to achieve local goals or please a regional strongman. Over time, most Latin American nations developed liberal republics that promoted the ideals of equality before the law, male suffrage, individualism, separation of church and state, and bicameral legislative bodies. The new constitutions enshrined liberal and republican ideals, but many were suspended, abrogated, and violated over and over again during the political instability of the 19th century.

Scholars have long debated whether women were better off in terms of rights and authority before or after independence. Like indigenous subjects of the Crown, women had some protections, especially through ecclesiastical law. Although medieval and colonial era law continued to govern most aspects of family order, when liberal leaders drafted and enacted civil codes women found some increased inheritance and property rights. Civil codes defined the patriarch as the primary authority of wife, children, and dependents or servants that resided in their home. Indeed the civil codes sanctified the male head of household and promoted the nuclear family. A wife had to seek her husband's permission to enter into a contractual obligation or occupation. The husband controlled family finances and the decisions and activities of minor children. A son had to seek a father's blessing in choice of career, and a single daughter had to seek permission to marry until age 21 or to move out of the house as a single woman until the age of 30. However women gained property rights under the series of civil codes promulgated in Latin America during the 19th century.

Women fared better under liberal civil codes than under medieval and colonial era laws that governed family and private property. Women enjoyed greater property rights than their non-Luso-Hispanic sisters during the colonial period. Writers of civil codes in independent Latin American