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# **Feminism and the Mexican Revolution**

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## Abstract

This paper explores the positive and negative impacts of the Mexican Revolution on the freedoms, opportunities, and rights of women both during and after the war. The instability caused by the revolution allowed for the upheaval of social structures and the emergence of new, more egalitarian ideologies. Women earned influential positions in prominent fields and built powerful, public careers, thus challenging societal gender roles. In contrast, many women faced oppression, violence, and abuse throughout the war. The transient nature of both the rebel and Federal militaries, as well as their dependency on the support of women, gave rise to the *soldadera*: a contradictory position consisting of freedoms from and adherence to gender norms of female domesticity. The accomplishments of women were threatened by minimization and dismissal from media representation and political policies created in the initial aftermath of the revolution. However, these attempts to silence the progress of women's rights proved ineffective in the long run. The ideas vocalized during the revolution gave rise to a post-revolutionary feminist movement, with international implications, that succeeded in achieving women's suffrage. This paper argues that despite the hardships and setbacks, the Mexican Revolution ultimately provided the opportunity for advancement in women's rights.

## Introduction

The Mexican Revolution, while violent and destructive, created conditions that allowed for significant social change in the realms of feminism and women's rights. Spanning a decade from 1910 to 1920, the revolution was a long and devastating struggle for political, economic, and social reform. The instability of the war allowed many women to break free of traditional gender roles through opportunities in journalism, politics, medicine, and military service. For other women, however, the war created hardships that limited their opportunities and freedoms. Inaccurate representation in media and entertainment sought to minimize the contributions of women, and many political leaders pushed back against the progress made by women during the war. However, the Mexican Revolution allowed for the advancement of feminism through securing labor rights and inspiring the post-revolutionary movement that led to women's political rights. The ideas of women's rights promoted during the Mexican Revolution gave rise to a feminist movement, creating significant advances for women. In her article "Women and the Mexican Revolution," Anna Macias (1980) explores the experiences and contributions of a broad range of women during the Mexican Revolution, discussing both individuals and groups of women with common experiences. This paper will expand on her work by exploring how those experiences and women contribute to and exhibit the progress of feminism over the course of the war and after. Kevin Kilroy (2019) explores how gender roles changed over the course of the French and Mexican Revolutions in his thesis *Trading Spaces: An Analysis of Gendered Spaces Before, During, and After the French Revolution of 1789 and the Mexican Revolution of 1910*. This paper will address how these changes throughout the Mexican Revolution tie into the Mexican feminist movement and how the changes were perceived by others. Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes (2009) provide an account of the historical events and outcomes of the Mexican Revolution in the chapter "Forging a New Nation" from their book *A History of Latin America*. This paper aims to analyze what caused the political outcomes that affected women's rights and how these outcomes fit into the narrative of Mexican women's fight for equality. Finally, in her article "From Soldadera to Adelita: The Depiction of Women in the Mexican Revolution," Delia Fernández (2009) explores how the image of the *soldadera* was altered over time to minimize the contribution of women. This paper will expand on this idea by addressing the many setbacks Mexican women faced in their search for equality.

## Significant Female Figures

Throughout the Mexican Revolution, women revealed their strength, bravery, intelligence, and leadership abilities in many positions made possible by the war. Juana Belén Gutiérrez was a particularly influential journalist who built her career on supporting the

Mexican Revolution and, later, addressing the harmful impacts of the war. In 1901, Gutiérrez started a newspaper, called *Vesper*, that spoke out against injustice and tyranny caused by *Porfirio* (President) Diaz's administration (Macias, 1980). She was imprisoned several times because of her work but continued to publish despite the danger. Even after the presidential election of the revolutionist Francisco Madero in 1911 and into the later part of the revolution, Gutiérrez continued to critique politicians and provide information on the struggles of the people (Macias, 1980). The revolution gave Gutiérrez the opportunity to become an influential voice and contributor to journalism. She exhibited great bravery and insight throughout the revolution and her career, proving to all who heard of her that women were capable of much more than previously thought.

The revolution offered women significant opportunities in politics. Hermila Galindo earned a place as the secretary of President Venustiano Carranza, a political reformist who gained his power through military action, because of her speaking and writing skills and her work as an activist and feminist. She represented him internationally and wrote propaganda in his support (Macias, 1980). Her work and connection to a prominent revolutionary leader allowed her to create a strong career outside of the home, until Carranza's downfall.

The schoolteacher and feminist journalist Dolores Jiménez y Muro was similarly able to advance her career through activism and politics during the Mexican Revolution. Jiménez became a key factor in the revolution through her involvement in the *Complot de Tacubaya* (the Conspiracy of Tacubaya). The *Complot de Tacubaya* was a rebellion meant to help Madero overthrow the tyrannical Diaz administration. Jiménez wrote The Social and Political Plan, a document that justified the rebellion and explained the goals of the revolutionists, adding her own thoughts on necessary reforms (Macias, 1980). After seeing her plan, the revolutionist general, Emiliano Zapata, invited her to join his military in a leadership capacity (Macias, 1980). In addition to careers in journalism and politics, Mexican women were able to advance socially through the military. One woman, Maria de la Luz Espinosa Barrera of Yautepec, reached the rank of colonel through her battle skills and exhibition of bravery (Macias, 1980).

Gutiérrez, Galindo, Jiménez, and Barrera all created strong and meaningful careers for themselves through the opportunities created by the instability of the revolution. Their high-ranking positions and public careers show a break from traditional gender roles. Their careers also gave them the ability to support themselves financially and gain independence. Their accomplishments indicate that many women found freedom, autonomy, and authority during the Mexican Revolution. Overall, the revolution provided an opportunity for some women to advance in traditionally masculine careers and to prove their immense capability to a patriarchal society.

## Living Conditions

Not all women were so lucky, though; the Mexican Revolution also produced much hardship, vulnerability, and violence for women. As armies fought all over Mexico, women often became the victims. The rape and murder of civilian women were commonplace (Macias, 1980). Disease and starvation caused additional loss of life (Macias, 1980). A lack of food led to rising levels of prostitution as women struggled to survive. Macias estimates that during the war, approximately 12% of women in Mexico City aged 15-30 were prostitutes (Macias, 1980). As has always been common, these women faced stigma and disgust, rather than compassion and support (Macias, 1980). The high rates of death and sexual abuse showed a persistent lack of respect and equality for women. Counter to the experiences of women who were able to advance professionally via the disruption of revolution, many women did not have these opportunities. These occurrences of hardship were the products of a society that was still deeply entrenched in misogyny.

## The *Soldadera*

The *soldaderas* of the Mexican Revolution are representative of the complex relationship, created by the instability of the war, between newly found autonomy and vulnerability to violence and abuse. *Soldaderas* were women who travelled with and supported the soldiers in the armies of the revolution. Under the lens of patriarchal interpretation, the role of the *soldadera* was entirely one of domesticity and loyalty to a man in return for protection, not much different than the position and constraints of women before the war. Many women were carrying out domestic duties such as providing food, setting up camps, tending to men, and providing sexual services. American journalist John Reed provides an account of the struggles he witnessed among the *soldaderas*, both as a result of their living conditions and at the hands of men. He writes of a conversation with a woman who lost her baby when she had to give birth in a desert with no access to water as she followed the army (Reed, 1914). He describes the abuse and injustice men inflicted on the *soldadera* women. A woman tells him, “when we go so far and suffer so much for our men, we are cruelly treated by the stupid animals of Generals” (Reed, 1914, p. 198). He writes about the vulnerability and desperation of the *soldaderas*, including an Indigenous woman acting as the *soldadera* to a Captain Diaz: “He had found her wandering aimlessly in the hacienda, apparently out of her mind; and that, needing a woman, he had ordered her to follow him. Which she did, unquestioningly, after the custom of her sex and country” (Reed, 1914, p. 104). Reed’s description shows a desperate woman in need of a man’s protection. However, given Reed’s identity as a white man from the United States and his tendency to express sexism, racism, and ignorance throughout his narrative, as seen in the final line of this quote, his depiction of *soldaderas* must be explored critically. The prevailing narrative of the motivations for *soldadera* women is loyalty to the men in their lives

or security for survival, factors that further contribute to traditional gender roles. This narrative, however, is a narrow understanding of the choices and experiences of the *soldaderas*. Their lifestyle, while dangerous and difficult, provided them an unprecedented amount of freedom and choice. Under the Constitution of 1857, women were not considered citizens (Fernández, 2009). Therefore, they were under the control of the men in their lives. Women played a specific role and were limited to domestic duties and the will of others; being a *soldadera* allowed them to escape this role. Fernández explains:

Even if a *soldadera* took care of the troops, she had left her home, where society wanted and expected her to remain. *Soldaderas* received payment for their work, but more importantly, they were released from the house and the attachment to a man. If she wanted to work for a particular soldier, she could; if she wanted to move onto another for any reason, she could also do that. (Fernández, 2009, p. 57)

As a *soldadera*, a woman was able to make many decisions for herself, including who she worked for, supported, or had a relationship with, and even which army she followed. She was able to explore a sphere beyond domesticity. Despite the hardship, danger, and frequent necessity to be tied to a man, the opportunities for women had changed. The system of patriarchal oppression, though not dissolved, was shaken. This gave many women autonomy for the first time. The *soldadera* was no longer defined solely as a daughter, sister, or wife as she had been in her home, but as her own woman free to make decisions for herself.

## **International Impacts**

The bravery of women during the Mexican Revolution not only inspired change within Mexico, but internationally, as well. *The Washington Herald*, a newspaper out of the United States capitol, published an article in 1911 with the title “Mexican Rebels Have Girl Leader” (See Figure 1). The short article describes a battle between Zapatistas and Federals. It reports the success of the rebel army led by Margarita Neri, describing her as “The Mexican ‘Joan of Arc.’” The article even notes that she fought in the front lines and received a slight injury in the battle. The author describes her with respect and awe, reporting on her successes and strength as a leader and a soldier. This article suggests American acknowledgment of the accomplishments of Mexican women during the height of the United States’ own movement for women’s suffrage, indicating the possible influence of Mexican women on the international feminist movement.

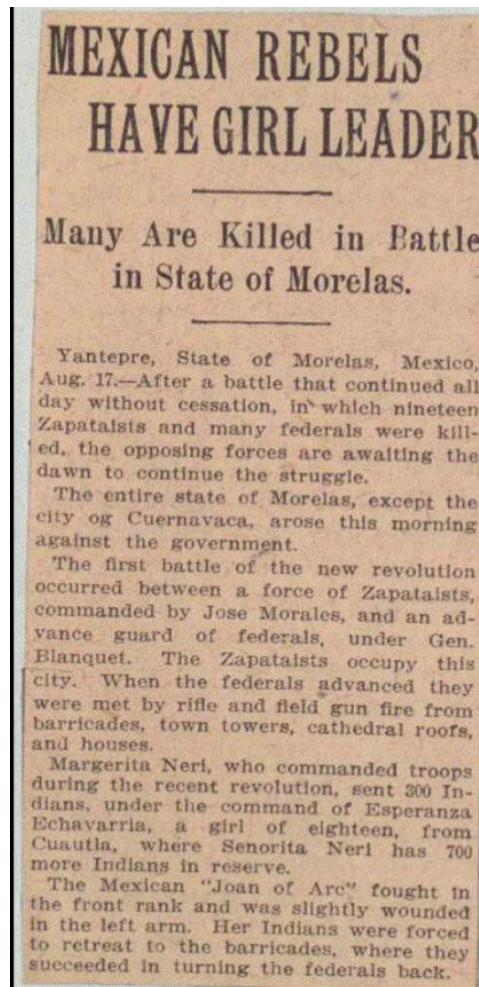


Figure 1 "Mexican Rebels Have Girl Leader"  
(1911, August 18). *Washington Herald*.

## Political and Social Setbacks

Despite the many accomplishments of women during the revolution, feminism received many setbacks towards the end of the war in the late 1910s, as men were ready for a return to normalcy and the status quo. Decisions made by politicians and the post-revolutionary government aimed to revert the achievements of women and return them to the domestic sphere. Women were largely pushed aside during the draft of the Constitution of 1917. Following in the footsteps of the Constitution of 1857, this new constitution continued to deny women both the right to vote and citizenship. This decision, which was part of an anti-Catholicism policy, was a significant loss for the feminist movement of Mexico; it was made in order to prevent the large number of women who were Catholic from having a voice in government (Keen, 2009). In addition, the government attempted to erase the participation of women in the military, along with their significant accomplishments and contributions, through an order given by the Minister of War in 1916. The order stated, "All military



appointments given to married or single women, whatever be the services that they have given, are declared null and void” (Kilroy, 2019, p. 72). This meant that all women who served in the military during the revolution would be denied veteran status and pensions (Kilroy, 2019). Denying women’s suffrage was not simply a strategic anti-Catholic measure, but a desire of the government to remove women from their historical role and force their return to domestic life. In his thesis, Kilroy attributes this lack of willingness, on the part of the government, to accept and endorse change to a culture of fragile masculinity. He states, “This insecurity shows a continuation of previous generations of *machismo*, revealing that not all aspects of society had changed after the victory of the Constitutionalists” (Kilroy, 2019, p. 72). The post-revolutionary government neglected the needs and rights of women, despite their significant contributions to the war effort and their continuing proof of strength, capability, and intelligence. After profound advancements in the station and achievements of women, authorities pushed back to return women to pre-revolutionary restrictions.

In addition to regressive political policy, the long-term impact of feats of women on feminism’s persistence is also marked by the interpretation of the general public and those in power. After the revolution, there was much attempt to curtail the impacts and importance of women through inaccurate representations. The image of *soldaderas* who fought in the revolution was sexualized and romanticized, diminishing their impact by telling their stories only in relation to men. In her article, Fernández explains how representation in the media of film and *corridos*, or ballads, contributed to the minimization of the impacts of women. She gives an example of the well-known *corrido*, “La Adelita,” about an unnamed *soldadera*. The lyrics in English include the lines:

And a young woman who valiantly followed  
Madly in love with the sergeant  
Popular among the troops was Adelita  
The woman the sergeant adored. (as cited in Fernández, 2009, p. 59)

Because she was not only valiant but beautiful (Fernández, 2009, p. 59), Fernández notes that the *corrido* describes the *soldadera* in terms of her relationships to men and her desirability. The line “because she was not only valiant but beautiful” establishes bravery as a baseline but extends the criterion of a woman who was “popular among the troops” and therefore worthy of a *corrido* in her honor, to include a desirable physical appearance. Thus, through this popular representation of the *soldadera*, women are portrayed and remembered not for their contributions to the war or their deeds of strength and bravery, but for their beauty and sexuality. In this way, men can keep control of the narrative and protect their ideals of masculinity. Similar occurrences appear in the representation of Mexican women in both

American and Mexican film. Fernández describes the stereotype of the strong independent *soldadera* being subdued to embody traditional feminine qualities after falling in love with the masculine hero, as seen in the 1930s films *La Adelita* and *La Valentina* (Fernández, 2009). In addition, modern films act to sexualize the *soldaderas* with films such as *Bandidas* (2006) and *Desperado* (1995), in which the women are shown in revealing clothing rather than practical military attire (Fernández, 2009). These films continue the minimization of the accomplishments of women during the revolution.

Furthermore, many of the most famous images of *soldaderas*, including those used in historical and academic contexts, provide only limited representation. For example, an exhibition in the United States Library of Congress, “Viewpoints on Women in the Revolution,” uses the image of women in full-length dresses holding rifles to depict the *soldadera* (See Figure 2). While some women did wear dresses in battle, many higher-ranking women, such as Maria de la Luz Espinosa Barrera and La Negra Angustias, wore traditionally male clothing (Macias, 1980). The primary photographic representation focuses on women who chose to wear traditional feminine clothing and largely ignores women who chose less traditional or masculine clothing. While both styles represent femininity, as the *soldaderas* chose to define themselves, the image that sparks the most fascination and recognition is that of women wearing traditional female clothing, indicating that the focus of *soldaderas* remains on their femininity and beauty rather than their actions or deeds. Inaccurate representation in various forms of media, served to reduce the impact and progress made by women during the Mexican Revolution.



*Women Revolutionists*

**Figure 2** Women revolutionists Mexican Revolution; group of women and children wearing cartridge belts and pointing rifles (ca. 1911). (Library of Congress)

## Achievements

Despite the setbacks created by the post-revolutionary government, the revolution did advance women's rights, spread awareness, and spark a feminist movement in Mexico. Women who made advancements in their careers during the revolution were able to use their positions as platforms to discuss and promote gender equality. The journalist Dolores Jiménez y Muro took women into account in her Social and Political Plan, the document justifying the *Complot de Tacubaya*. She included a need for the wages of both men and women to be raised, a proposition that had not been in the forethought of many revolutionary leaders (Macias, 1980). Jiménez understood that many more women were working in various capacities than were often recognized or reported, and that these women needed representation and support as well (Macias, 1980). The job she earned as the writer of the rebellion plan allowed her to put forward the needs and rights of women, raise awareness, and gain consideration of revolutionary leaders. Her work seems to have paid off, too. While the Constitution of 1917 largely ignored women's political rights, it did advance workers' rights for women. Article 123 of the new constitution addressed labor rights, with several laws that supported the ability of women to hold careers, including the requirements of paid maternity leave and on-site childcare at all companies that employed fifty or more women (Keen, 2009). Motherhood is frequently an obstacle for women's careers. Without practices in place to ensure assistance for working mothers, many women are forced to leave their careers when their first child is born. These laws show the commitment of the Mexican government to support women outside of the home; they are acknowledging that a woman's place is not just in the home, a huge step for gender equality.

Hermila Galindo was also able to gain traction for women's rights through access to a large audience as Carranza's secretary and representative. Throughout her career, she was the editor of a feminist journal, *Mujer Moderna*, that worked to promote feminism and support for Carranza by tying the ideas of women's rights to the political campaign of a president (Macias, 1980). Galindo's feminism was very radical and revolutionary for 1915. Many moderates were not ready for her ideas on divorce, sexuality, and prostitution, but Macias suggests Galindo played a role in inspiring further generations of feminism, asserting "a number of the ideas she championed were endorsed by prominent feminists in the 1920s and 1930s" (1980, p. 64). While much of her work in feminism may not have been immediately fruitful, Galindo helped to inspire the feminist movement that followed the war.

The post-war feminist movement led to significant victories for women's political rights. In the late 1930s, pressure from a unified feminist movement led by hundreds of women's organizations and tens of thousands of members forced President Cárdenas to support constitutional women's rights reform (Keen, 2009). In 1937, despite the laws against women running for office, the movement helped one of their leaders, "Cuca" Garcia, to win

a primary race for a position in the Chamber of Deputies (Keen, 2009). In 1939, the feminist movement also won approval in the legislature for an amendment securing women's suffrage. Though, because of a renewed fear of power for Catholic women, the promise was unfulfilled until 1954 (Keen, 2009). The Cárdenas feminist campaign for women's rights was built on the momentum of the revolutionary change and the work of strong female leaders of the Mexican Revolution.

## Conclusion

The Mexican Revolution was a horrible and violent time, especially for many women, resulting in the abuse and death of many women, and despite the revolutionary atmosphere, the patriarchy was resistant to change. However, despite all these obstacles and hardships, the Mexican Revolution led to positive change for women. Opportunities for career advancements and the disruption of societal expectations of women belonging solely in domestic spheres led to labor reforms and career opportunities after the revolution. The most prominent outcome of the Mexican Revolution for women's rights was its inspiration of a feminist movement that would lead to advances in political power and eventually to women's suffrage.

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