

THE WOMEN OF  
COLONIAL  
LATIN AMERICA

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 CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

WHY WOMEN?

Gender is crucial to individual identity and, in all societies, to the roles individuals will play and the experiences they will have. The position of men and women in any society is a social construct, not a natural state. Each society and every social group has a culture that defines the roles and rules of masculinity and femininity; by conforming to these definitions an individual becomes a "legitimate" man or woman.

The goal of this book is to examine these roles and rules and thus understand the variety and limitations of the female experience in colonial Latin America. One overarching limitation in both Spanish and Portuguese America was the existence of a patriarchal social organization. In the New World as in the Old, a clear sexual hierarchy placed women below men. By law and by tradition, men held the lion's share of power in government, religion, and society. Furthermore, a man, particularly a father, was supreme within his family. Legally, all those living within the household were required to obey him.

In this society women were defined first and foremost by their sex and only secondarily by their race or social class. In many colonial documents the lack of attention to women's race and class suggests that these attributes were malleable. Sex was not. Indeed it can be argued that sex was the most important factor in determining a person's status in society. Nonetheless gender alone does not explain the various experiences of women in colonial Latin America. We must also keep in mind the importance of race, class, demography, life course, spatial variations, local economy, norm and reality, and change over time.

Latin America was a unique region. Here, beginning in the sixteenth century, three peoples and their cultures were brought in close proximity with one another. Indigenous Americans, Africans, and European

Iberians were not on an equal footing, for by conquering America and importing African slaves, Europeans represented the dominant culture, the culture of the conquerors. Nonetheless, in Latin American colonial societies the histories of three major groups of people were intertwined. But race in colonial Latin America was even more complex than these three major racial groups. Over time, new and socially distinct racial categories were created – mestizo, mulatto, zambo, and their multiple variants – each with its individual social role and societal expectations. These expectations or stereotypes would at times provide women with both differing opportunities and limitations.

Colonial Latin America was also a society of clearly delimited social hierarchies. These hierarchies constantly affected the lives women led, whether at the top, middle, or bottom of the social scale. Acceptable behavior for a poor woman, daughter of a lamplighter or a weaver, was quite different from that for the daughter of a titled nobleman or a powerful miner.

Gender, race, and class functioned together. These overlapping categories produced situations in which a person's position in society could be both complex and contradictory. Because several elements determined what a woman could or could not do, one cannot simply consider one of these variables alone without keeping in mind other important factors. Perhaps foremost among these additional variables was demography. The number of females and males living at any one time and place was of primary importance. The ratio of men to women (differential sex ratio) could enhance or limit women's choices. In societies with a surplus of men, for example, women were a relatively scarce commodity and tended to have a greater field from which to select marriage partners. The relative number of males to females also varied by age and was usually the result of death rates and patterns of immigration. Regions that supplied migrants to developing zones often had an acute shortage of young men of marriageable age.

Life course also affected women, for their experiences changed as they moved through childhood, courtship, marriage or spinsterhood, motherhood, widowhood, and old age. Moreover a woman's responsibilities and power might vary greatly depending on her position within a household or family. For example, the wife of the head of a household probably had a far greater role in the running of her home than did a spinster aunt or an orphaned niece who lived under the same roof. A woman's role also changed when she became the head of a household or family.

Although all of the regions under study belonged to either the Spanish or Portuguese crown, important spatial variations also affected women's experiences. Regions differed in importance: Mexico and Peru from the earliest days of Spanish settlement were the centers of the empire, whereas Chile and the Río de la Plata tended to be more isolated. With respect to racial composition, some areas, such as the Andean highlands, maintained a relatively large indigenous population throughout the colonial period, whereas other zones, often along the coast, developed a large African American population. Women's lives were also influenced by the type of space they inhabited – whether they lived in cities, in rural zones, or along the fringes of the empire.

The local economy also had an impact on women's roles and women's relative power. The overall prosperity or poverty of a region could make a difference in women's lives. Elite women in seventeenth-century Mexico City, for example, lived lives of far greater opulence and diversion than did elite women in poorer regions, such as Santo Domingo. The nature of the local economy – agricultural, mining, or proto-industrial – as well as the specific goods produced often affected women, especially those forced to work for a living.

In these societies, there was often a gap between the social ideal, the model to which the society theoretically aspired, and the female-lived reality. To some degree, all women were subject to an ideal standard for female behavior. While this standard reflected social and racial variations, it was always clearly different from the standard for male behavior. But although both the law and cultural norms set standards, the experience of any one woman or group of women might vary significantly from the stated ideal. We can also ask how and when women were able to violate these standards and examine to what degree, and under what conditions, women challenged these culture ideals.

Women's experiences in colonial Latin America changed over time. As the region moved from a society of conquest to one of stable institutions and Counter-Reformation Catholicism, and then to a society of modest enlightened reforms, both the female ideal and the female reality shifted.

My goal is not to present colonial women as either empowered or victimized by their culture. All people live in their culture and usually act in accord with the prevailing values of their time. Most women, and men, do not think of themselves as victims of those values or as rebels defying social norms. Instead of seeking heroines or victims, this book hopes to understand women in their time and their society,

without judging them by the standards of our political or social agendas. Only thus can we penetrate colonial society while illuminating questions of gender, power, and race.

This book begins by examining the role of women in the three societies that later would be joined by the Iberian voyages of discovery — European, African, and American. Chapter 1 reviews the legal and religious gender ideologies as well as the social realities that shaped the lives of women in the Iberian Peninsula. The position of women in the indigenous societies that would eventually come under the political domination of Spain and Portugal, as well as the role of women in traditional African societies, is reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 analyzes the experiences of indigenous women within the New World through conquest and colonization. In Chapter 4 we follow the migration of European women to America, examining their experience and the effect of their arrival. Chapter 5 concentrates on the role of women within marriage and the family. An analysis of the position and power of elite women within colonial society follows in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 examines the religious roles of colonial women and considers those who were tied to the church, both formally and informally. Next Chapter 8 considers the economic roles of women, concentrating especially on the female presence in the colonial work force. Slave women, an involuntary labor force, are the focus of Chapter 9. The book then considers women who deviated from socially acceptable patterns in Chapter 10 and concludes by examining the gradual changes produced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment reforms in Chapter 11.