
UNRECOGNIZED PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MEXICAN REVOLUTION (1910-1920)

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Abstract: Mexican Revolution is perhaps one of the most important revolutions that have taken place in recent history because it was not a revolution led by factions battling for government control, or the bourgeoisie thinkers developing new ideas. Instead, it was a revolution led by simple men rising up and asserting their fundamental rights, and succeeding. It is considered to be the first successful third world revolutions. However, the other side of this revolution was that it proved itself to be a fight of male dominance which already existed in the country since its long back Aztec civilization. That's why even Mexican historians recognized and recorded only the participation of male fighters and soldiers by praising their machismo. It happened at the cost of non-acknowledgement of the participation of women in the struggle. Women participated in the revolution female soldiers, propagandists, intellectuals, writers and contributors to the economy. They fought not only against the authoritarian government but they also struggled for their female identity which finally let them realize about their rights.

Keywords: Mexican Revolution, Propagandists, Recognition, *Soldaderas*, Women Participation

Introduction: Mexico has long been a country where male dominance and female subordination command society. Machismo, strong male dominance, *hembrismo* and extreme female submissions have their roots in the Aztec culture and the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The Spanish colonial experience was greatly oppressive to native Mexican women. The disparity between the sexes that already existed was increased by differences in caste and race [6, page3].

This research paper is going to focus on Mexican revolution, which started after hundred years of Mexican independence, with its main motive to highlight the participation and situation of women during the crucial time of civil war (1910-20). This revolution was against Porfirio Diaz who was ruling Mexico since 1876. The tenure of Porfirio Diaz in Mexican history is known for modernization but it was at the expense of racism, xenophobia, starvation, repression and exploitation of masses [3, Page 143- 60]. Hence the revolution primarily insisted on the need for agrarian reform, maximum hours of work, improving wages and working conditions of rural and urban workers. Not only that, it was also the first of the great revolutions in the colonial and dependent world in which the laboring masses played a major part. Besides that, the revolution also called for educational reform, decentralization of education system, restoration of municipal autonomy, and protection of the indigenous race. Moreover, it also demanded a strong economic nationalism. Due to all these reasons, Mexican Revolution is considered significant.

Involvement of women in the Mexican revolution:

In the 10 years of civil war of the Mexican revolution, between 1910 and 1920, as many as 2 million people or one out of every eight Mexicans were killed. This revolution created new political structures and destroyed the old one. Privilege of the creole was abolished and Mexico was proclaimed as a mestizo nation. The revolution gave Mexicans a sense of national pride and a deeply held appreciation for their own culture, called *mexicanidad*. However, in this context,

recognition of the contribution of women in the revolution is still largely overlooked and not fully acknowledged in the Mexican history. Women in Mexican revolution played very significant role as nurse, propagandists and *soldaderas*. Following are the three sections giving details about the different role of women in the Mexican revolution.

Participation as *Soldaderas*: Here the term *soldaderas* do not mean women fighter; in fact, *soldaderas* is used for those women who left their homes in order to accompany their husbands in the fight. However, when the husbands of these *soldaderas* used to die then these *soldaderas* had to become other men's women [7, page 72] In fact, *Soldaderas* did not carry arms or participate in the actual combat rather they used to prepare food for soldiers, wash their clothes, tend their wounds, march with them and camp the place to have refreshment ready for their male soldiers. Overall, their main role was that of a helper and constructionists during the war.

However, very few women were also given chance to fight along with male companions who could prove their bravery during the war. For being considered a fighter the woman had to give up her femininity and needed to masculinize herself, dress like man and act like man. She had to prove that she was no more a *soldadera* but a soldier. One living example of a brave female fighter is Coronela Maria de la Luz Espinosa Barrera of Yautepeps who got recognition when feminist historians researched and proved her existence. The life of such female soldiers got some recognition through few literature works, one among these is the famous novel *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (Like water for chocolate, 1993) written by internationally recognized Mexican writer and author Laura Esquivel in which, Esquivel has portrayed one female character as a soldier who fights like her male counterparts. Another famous writer from Mexico, Mariano Azuela, has portrayed a female fighter named *Pintada* in his famous novel *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs, 1915). In the novel, *Pintada* always used to consider herself equal to male fighters of her guerilla

group but her voice was made silent because many revolutionary fighters in the group considered her a threat to their supremacy. It is important to see the attitude of different revolutionary leaders towards women participants. According to Carmen Ramos Escandon, revolutionary leader Pancho Villa had to tolerate the presence of female soldiers because his men would refuse to fight. Not only that, Emiliano Zapata who was in control of a very poor region in Southern Mexico, also recognized the importance of female revolutionaries because his soldiers were dependent upon peasant women for food" [8, page 90- 91].

Nonetheless, these works on *soldaderas* not only depicted the life of brave female fighters but also showed the life of *soldaderas* who were timid and submissive. *Camila* is one such character from Mariano Azuela's novel *Los de abajo* (The Underdogs, 1915) who helped revolutionaries through money, hard labour and dedication but in return she was tortured, cheated and humiliated by male revolutionaries. This was what happened with many *soldaderas* who were part of the revolution. Also, rape followed by murder of common women became as commonplace as the routine shooting of prisoners by authoritarian government during the revolution. Not only that even the two revolutionary groups led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata were accused of abducting and raping women of village. [5, Page 4). Due to which hundreds of thousands of women died in the gratuitous slaughter.

Participation as propagandists: Apart from *soldaderas*, there was a different class of women who fought in the revolution not through arms but through their revolutionary writings. Juana Belen Gutierrez de Mendoza was one such revolutionary writer who protested against Porfirio Diaz regime and its social injustice, political tyranny, economic injustice and religious obscurantism through her newspaper *Vesper*. For this she was also sent to jail. Mendoza always urged workers and peasants to participate in the electoral process. Yet except for the handful of Mexicans she has been forgotten, her exhortations are ignored by those who govern Mexico [7, page 57]. Another socialist revolutionary woman is Dolores Jimenez y Muro who is hardly known in Mexico. She contributed by writing many revolutionary articles and poems. She kept writing for social, political and economic reforms. She was the one who left her personal imprint by specifying that the daily wages of rural and urban workers of both sexes should be increased. Despite her contribution to the Mexican revolution, she has received very little attention. Next woman was Hermila Galindo who became prominent exponent of feminism at very young age during revolution because of her skills and abilities. She urged women to come forward in election process and break chains of religious norms. She promoted feminist ideas on divorce, sexuality, religion, prostitution, and politics through her journal *Mujer Moderna* (modern woman) which shocked the secular-oriented middle class women and men as well. However,

her feminism became a youthful fling which was diminished with her carrier but her strategies were later used to bring political equality in the country.

Participation as economically active population:

After going through the above two group of women who remained unrecognized during revolution, we now move on to a third group of women who were economically very active in the revolution but were intentionally excluded from the Mexican census during that time. It has been found that in the 1910 Mexican census only 8.8% of the females were shown economically active in the total population. The officials of this 1910 census did a clear-cut division of labor between the sexes in Mexico by imagining that men were the providers and women were the homemakers. In reality, census official excluded around 80% of the population which were largely unaffected by the modernization that took place between 1876 and 1910, and in Mexico, as in all other pre-industrial societies, women were also economic providers through the multitude of goods and services supplied by home industry [7, page 68]. Moreover, the 1910 census ignored the fact that in rural areas women spent most of their time outside the home, raising animals, fruits, vegetables and flowers for sale in town and village markets, or working as peons alongside the men when they were landless. The 1910 census takers also ignored the women living in the vicinity of railroad stations, who spent a large part of the day preparing food to sell to hungry passengers travelling on second and third class coaches on the nation's 15,000 kilometers of railroads. Other economically active women who escaped the attention of the census takers were women artisans, piece workers, street vendors, boarding house owners, and many other working women deemed "economically inactive" by short-sighted bureaucrats in Mexico City. This was observable that data collector and provider were male who were not willing to admit that their wives or daughters or sisters were active part of census. Hence they responded the census maker what they wanted them to hear. This situation largely explains that not only women as soldiers and propagandists were unrecognized but women who were part of active population were deliberately undermined by male population in order to prove that their society is male dominated.

The revolution also proves to be a time of inclusion of large number of women into prostitution due to drastic decline in food. These women were treated as criminals rather than victims by all but a handful of enlightened men and women. The problem of exceedingly large number of prostitute persisted in Mexico in successive decades and the need to recognize and deal with social malaise was emphasized much later only by leading feminist in the post-revolutionary era.

Toward the end of the war women were beginning to become more and more active in political arena. The revolution acted as a catalyst for the women's movement in Mexico which has been longed since the

independence of Mexico in 1810. In 1914, divorce and remarriage was authorized, right to receive alimony, to own property in 1917. Public schools, secular education and need for sex education were accepted. It is worth noticing that these rights were provided to women not in order to empower them but to cease support from women for the survival of government like that of Venustiano Carranza (1917-1920) and to counter the popularity of revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. And it was limited to upper class educated elite women. But till 1954 demand for woman suffrage was denied and majority was against their political involvement [2 Page 201].

Conclusion: Women, then, played a very important and varied role in the Mexican Revolution, on the front and behind the lines, in favor of or against one of the most significant social revolutions of the twentieth century. Yet, except for occasional references to *soldaderas* most historians of that epic struggle have ignored the active

role of Mexican women in the revolution as precursors, journalists, propagandists, political activists, and soldiers. Only artists and novelists have been given serious attention to the way the revolution victimized millions of women. In addition, till now very few historians have noticed that the Revolution also acted as a catalyst for giving momentum to the women movement in Mexico during and immediately after that struggle. This investigation has also encountered that by ignoring the active participation of millions of women in the Mexican Revolution, historians have helped to perpetuate the myth of Mexican women as weak, inert, passive and dependent human beings. The contrary which cannot be denied that in the course of the Mexican Revolution women, individually and in groups, demonstrated great courage, deep conviction, enormous resourcefulness, and a willingness to be actively involved in a cause in which they fervently believed.

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