



MUJERES Y FEMINISMOS

EN LAS CRÓNICAS Y COLECCIONES
DE CARLOS MONSIVÁIS

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Women and Feminism in the Chronicles and Collections of Carlos Monsiváis

In Mexico, women are at a complex and contradictory stage in their sociopolitical progress. They are engaged in many struggles as new horizons open up within a remarkably dramatic and terrifying context of feminicides, kidnappings, rapes, disappearances, and abuses of all kinds. On the one hand, persistent gender violence and sexism continue to plague a changing Mexican society. On the other, the resistance and bravery shown by thousands of women activists across the country is disrupting the patriarchal, racist, and heteronormative system.

Fortunately, there is no turning back now.

This exhibition takes us back in time, since memories of the past feed into conversations today and tomorrow. Throughout his life, Carlos Monsiváis assembled a vast number of objects, images, and writings that document Mexico's social and political history. The Estanquillo Museum's culturally important collection touches on a wide range of issues, and this diverse selection of images offers many perspectives on women.

And this is only natural. Monsiváis was a key ally in women's struggles: he put his pen and his talent at the service of the feminist cause, standing shoulder to shoulder with women at marches and rallies, and making characteristically astute remarks at conferences and debates.

The Estanquillo's previous exhibitions have featured numerous images of women and their many struggles. Here we have made a large and fascinating selection of items from the Monsiváis collection alongside some extracts of his writings, to combine his collector's eye with his work as a public intellectual and comrade-in-arms.

The broad spectrum of women's struggles in Mexico, in all their variety and complexity, is beyond the scope of this exhibition, which is restricted to items from the Monsiváis collection. Our tour of Monsiváis's legacy as a collector, activist, and writer includes thought-provoking images and ideas that contribute to the "revolution of conscience" that seeks to overturn the macho culture that still prevails in Mexico.

Childhood

In our deeply unequal country, girls' childhoods are determined by an economic and social system marked by an alarming concentration of wealth.

From a young age, society forces girls to follow certain paths. Those born into wealthy families reach a higher level of educational and cultural attainments than most. Meanwhile, the daughters of laborers, campesinos, and other poorly paid workers lack many things; they start working as children, and some are even sold or forced into marriage. But despite these contrasts, girls from both types of background share the same “mandate of femininity” or set of expectations about what is considered proper for women.

Even daughters of rich families are prisoners of fixed ideas and stereotypes about their role, how they should behave, what they can aspire to. Their destiny is predetermined: obedient daughter, demure girlfriend, grateful wife, selfless mother, all dependent on male authority. Regardless of their social and economic status, from a young age girls receive this cultural mandate the outset, forcing them into traditional roles.

Many women remain trapped in their assigned social position; others are increasingly choosing to rebel, questioning their externally imposed destiny and initiating a new, autonomous, and courageous womanhood.

Social and family expectations about the mandate of femininity are changing, but the process is slow. As part of the revolution of conscience we need to focus on the new visions of those mothers and fathers whose ideas about their daughters' roles on reaching adulthood have evolved. Many families now realize that their daughters are fighting for a fairer world for everyone, reflecting a growing concern for gender equality in society, a goal that requires the liberation of women from age-old patterns of subordination.

Indigenous Women

In our unequal, classist, racist, and patriarchal society, women are generally undervalued or treated as subordinates, and indigenous or campesino women face even greater social oppression. Women in rural environments have fewer opportunities to fully develop their intellectual and creative potential. From a young age, they are subjected to archaic forms of subservience and exploited for their labor, as if it was “natural” for them to provide unlimited service to their families and partners. Indigenous women are usually the slaves of the exploited, and their new-found autonomous political organization—demanding many of the same things as feminists in regard to the freedom to decide on their bodies and their lives—is a source of hope.

Campesino and indigenous women are central to economic and social reproduction; they are pillars of their communities, supporting not only their families but also their villages. Bearers of ancestral traditions and knowledge, these women are an integral part of our culture. After a long history as anonymous, unsung heroines, many now have a voice and are leaders within their communities and in various areas of national politics.

However, our society’s claims to admire women’s cultural heritage and traditions are hollow; the very people who embody that heritage and those traditions remain unrecognized. Mexico’s indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities face a wall of racism and contempt while at the same time society raves about their cultural contributions and handcrafts. A contradiction wrapped in a paradox. On the one hand, they are recognized and valued for being the heart of our country, but on the other, there are no policies that could genuinely improve their social and economic lives. Thus, women are therefore taken to be the true vessels of cultural wealth and traditions while remaining marginalized from policies that could make a positive impact on their quality of life. Mexican society owes an enormous debt of gratitude to indigenous and rural women.

Carlos Monsiváis stressed the importance of public debates on these issues, where a gulf exists between words and actions. One example is how indigenous women’s textiles, with their wonderful representations of myths and fables, were appreciated in the twentieth century; their ancestral items of clothing were displayed in public and private spaces; their traditional dishes were included in high-end menus; and the visual arts represented them as symbols of our culture. And yet these achievements have been cut off from a policy that coherently address the needs and desire of these women as human beings.

Bourgeois Women

Throughout Mexico's history, only a minority of women have been financially well-off. As members of the elite, they have benefited from resources unavailable to other women—an important distinction that altered their individual lives and their collective situation.

Although their bourgeois existence placed these women in a privileged minority in a society marked by poverty and social struggles, their essential female subordination often persisted. Many continue to be dependent, and even experience marital violence, suffering the same vulnerability as women from other social classes. Their lives have mostly revolved around the home and the family. Until recently these women, and others from the middle and upper-middle classes, were not allowed to work without their husband's permission. They were also forbidden to be with a man or to go out in public on their own, or even to make friends with other women. In the twentieth century, bourgeois women began to enroll at schools and other centers of education, but many of these institutions were women-only and often chosen by the father. Their privileged access to private universities increased their independence and many were able to enjoy professional careers and thus financial independence.

For many daughters of businessmen and politicians, marriage was their father's way of cementing political or economic alliances. Such arranged marriages have led to lives centered on social connections; wives become the window display of husbands' power, with no chance of a professional career of their own. They have had to tolerate their husband's infidelities, shoulder all the family and social responsibilities, and to some extent remain trapped in classist systems that limit their autonomy. Occasionally, such women's economic status has been secondary to their condition as women, forcing them to fulfill the cultural mandate of femininity.

Repression and dominance

Over the years, theocratic regimes have sometimes dictated how people should conduct their personal and intimate lives, aside from people's legal responsibilities as individuals and members of communities. Some countries still have a repressive apparatus (a "morality police") that monitors and sets rules on intimate behaviors, and imposes punishments for those who disobey them.

This is particularly worrying if we consider that, historically, control and discipline have been directed mainly at women, and also at those who rebel sexually and in their identity: lesbians, gays, and transgender persons.

In Mexico's case, Catholicism has been instrumental in the exercise of sexual repression, which has reinforced and perpetuated double standards on sexual behavior: women are prohibited from doing the same things men are allowed to do. Female virginity is a specific example of this unequal discipline on sexual behavior established by the Catholic Church.

The myth that Jesus' mother was conceived "without sin" (in other words, without having sex) conveys the idea that a woman's highest achievement is to be a virgin and a mother at the same time. Equating sex with sin communicates the notion that women's value lies in their purity: firstly their virginity and then their faithfulness and modesty. This theological belief, which has held sway for centuries, is interconnected to our culture and has increased women's sexual repression under the mandate of repressing their sexual appetites outside of marriage. And within a marital union, only to procreate. Men are not subject to the same cultural norm, or at least not with the same level of obligation, as part of a double standard for sexual behavior.

The cultural requirement for virginity is used to sexually control women. This differentiated morality, the "double standard," further entrenches women's subordinate status by requiring them to protect their "reputation" in a society dominated by macho values.

Virginity is expressed mainly through the white color of wedding dresses. To approach the altar dressed in white is to arrive in a "pure" state, with "honor" intact.

In this context, the myth of romantic love in the collective imaginary is no coincidence. Women are "predestined" for a single man (Monsiváis pointed out the lack of lesbians in this social narrative) who, after breaking their seal of purity, must maintain them, even though this system generates all kinds of violence, ranging from the psychological to the physical. With this mandate, women have been ensnared in a web of cultural mystifications, in which the requirement for purity (virginity) and "decency", together with the expectation of love, has caught them in a trap of toxic, sometimes violent relations, affecting every aspect of their lives. Sexuality, instead of being a source of pleasure and enjoyment, has become a form of manipulation and subjugation.



Feminist struggles have protested and fought against this myth of romantic love offered to many women as a “justification” for them to endure relationships and marriages in which they are victims of overt or covert acts of aggression and subordination, and which also prevent them from enjoying the pleasure of a full sex life. This mandate’s power is so brutally affective that this sexual repression can be found even in relationships with a good partner.

Social and Economic Participation

In a macho society such as Mexico's, women's traditional occupations are largely overlooked, and, even when they do receive due recognition, not fully valued.

Traditional gendered divisions of labor (women in the home, men in the public sphere) places a higher value to men's jobs both economically and politically. By contrast, women's roles as caregivers and in raising children is seen as less important, as if such occupations were a "natural" part of womanhood, and hence they are denigrated and, frankly, overlooked.

Feminism has shown that women's work has always been essential for economic and social reproduction. The most notable type of women's work in the house consists of an infinite number of "domestic" chores ranging from buying and preparing food, to cleaning (sweeping, washing, ironing, etc.), and to caring for family members needing help (children, the elderly, the sick, those with some kind of disability). This work, which is the bedrock of society and essential for family life, is "invisible" labor, unpaid and without benefits. Clearly these activities are the very foundations on which all other institutions and activities of society are built.

Moreover, many women's financial needs require them to contribute to the family income by working outside the home. This also applies to women who are "heads of family," single mothers, or abandoned wives. Many have sought additional income as domestic workers in other people's homes or by preparing food to sell on the street. Therefore, they work double shifts in domestic duties.

It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that women began to work outside the home, such as in factories and offices. Although women's enrollment in formal education has broadened their economic and social participation, they are still far from being able to enjoy full careers in all fields. As Monsiváis pointed out, education is a lever for achieving social equality and financial independence.

Although society has opened up many spaces, obstructions to women's participation also derive from the power of the mandate of femininity in their own attitudes, which affects their decisions about careers.

In addition to acknowledging the various feminist struggles that have opened up women's access to new types of employment with equal pay and rights, we must also recognize and respect the work that so many housewives and domestic workers do around the home.

Historical and Political Participation

Women have always been at the heart of Mexico's social processes and major transformations. However, few of their names are recorded in the history books and, until recently, little has been written about them. Thanks to the work of various feminist academics, researchers, and historians, these women are now more visible.

Since the War of Independence, thousands of women—especially from the indigenous and disadvantaged sectors of society—have fought alongside the men, not as mere “companions”, as some have claimed, but for their own political motivations. Women took part in every battle, every fratricidal struggle, through the country's formative years in the nineteenth century. In addition to famous figures such as the legendarily courageous and politically committed Leona Vicario, there were also women of lesser renown, such as those who collaborated with the Liberal Party in the early twentieth century, who stood by the side the Flores Magón brothers, who were present at the outset of the Revolution, or who took part in the revolutionary fighting, sometimes even leading groups of armed men.

We should also remember and honor those pioneering women who enrolled at schools and colleges, despite male opposition; who organized the first feminist conferences; who fought for the right to vote; who beat the path for other women to be active in political parties; who applied pressure on the public administration to include them; who participated in student protests; who took up arms in the guerrilla movements; who fought for the legal and social recognition of the right to a free and safe abortion; and who actively participated in social emancipation projects.

Although often overlooked, women have fought long and hard for all of Mexico's major causes. Today's feminist struggles are visible, supporting and honoring the forerunners who were at the forefront of our country's historic movements. And the history books are finally beginning to recognize and include them.

Twentieth Century: Changes and Continuities

The increasingly powerful forces of capitalist production in the nineteenth century affected people's lives on many levels that previously had seemed unchangeable. This profoundly altered women's position in society in the following century.

The world wars and financial crises of the twentieth century accelerated the opening up of new spaces and activities for women. Many entered productive employment, abandoning their traditional duties, with a knock-on effect on the contexts in which these activities were carried out, while also triggering changes in their role in society and the economy.

The twentieth century also brought far-reaching changes, such as the legitimacy of women's suffrage, which gave women citizens greater scope for civic and political participation. And, in a different area, the invention of the birth control pill gave women a measure of sexual freedom for the first time. Soon afterward, feminist struggles began to secure the legal, political, and social right to abortion. Monsiváis was a staunch ally of this cause, which sought to give people freedom to control the sexual and reproduction processes of their own bodies.

This freer use of the body extended to include new ways of dressing, making certain parts of the body publicly visible for the first time. Businesses reappropriated these new fashions, and found ways to continue dictating women's appearance. That has been another feminist cause: to question the commercial objectification of the woman's body and to denounce the mechanisms of certain companies in the world of showbusiness and entertainment, which not only fetishize the woman's body but also sexually abuse models and artists.

The twentieth century opened new horizons for women and their struggles, bringing some victories but also defeats, and forging new mentalities. With unprecedented visibility, young feminists have protested against the persistence of patriarchy, which continues to resist relinquishing control, and fails to recognize that many sectors of society are already on the brink of a new era.

The patriarchal system will not survive the twenty-first century's feminist struggles, as more and more people (including men) are convinced that greater gender equality is worthwhile. This creates a frontal assault on macho culture, not only by furthering the demands but also by publicly debating the challenges we face to free ourselves from oppression and subordination. The core issue—as Monsiváis himself said—is to fight for an emancipation that could transform society as a whole. Recent feminist protests and unprecedented collective actions are already heralding this change.

Women Creators in Culture and the Arts

The place of women in culture and the arts has also been historically influenced by patriarchy. Women have had to confront sexist prejudices requiring them to take a passive role; they are preferred as muses rather than creators.

In this section, we see women who demonstrated artistic talent in their respective disciplines (the performing arts, dance, music, literature, visual arts, photography). However, those with families needed to work twice as hard at their chosen professions, as their role as caregivers meant they had to work a double shift: everyone else comes before them. Men, on the other hand, can devote all their time to their careers and professions, because they have always had a woman (wife, lover, mother, sister) to take care of their basic needs for food and clean clothes. This is one of the reasons why in museum collections around the world, even those that display contemporary art, most of the names belong to male creators.

Art education for women has long been unequal. In the seventeenth century, Juan de Asbaje (better known as Sor Juana) eschewed marriage in favor of life in a convent—not so much for a religious calling but as an opportunity to study and gain access to knowledge.

In art academies, women were not allowed in the classroom until 1888. In Mexico, it was not until 1898 that women were allowed to enroll in one of the most fundamental classes for a visual artist: nude drawing. A special group was opened for them so that they would not have to study with men. As director of the San Carlos Academy (1903–1912), Antonio Rivas Mercado tried to merge the two groups, but the students' parents petitioned the president of Mexico to keep the classes separate. Mixed classes were only implemented after the 1968 student movement.

Several of these artists were eclipsed by their female friends who shared the same profession. This section pays tribute to the women who paved the way and followed their vocation, and whose hard work and rebelliousness gave today's female creators wider horizons.

In recent years, many young women have begun working in artistic and cultural activities in different fields, innovating and revolutionizing their aesthetic languages. They are already fulfilling the dreams and ambitions of our illustrious Sor Juana.