



Women in Latin America

Edited from guide by Lisa Zimmerman

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These materials can be found on the online searchable catalog:
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This guide presents only some of the information relating to women in Latin America in the LARC collection. Additional resources can be identified on the LARC website. This guide provides some background information on women in Latin America as well as resources relating to women.



Latin American Resource Center Resources Focusing on Women in Latin America

The contributions that Latin American women have made to the development of Latin America have traditionally been overlooked. Historians of Latin America have tended to focus on the exploits of the *conquistadores*, leaders of the independence movements, dictators, and revolutionaries, the large majority of whom have been male. Likewise, there has been a tendency within other disciplines, such as political science and economics, to dismiss gender issues in analyses of the region's underdevelopment and instability. With the growing interest in women's studies brought about by the women's liberation movement, however, many Latin Americanists began to apply a gendered perspective to their research.

Despite the amount of research that has been done on Latin American women in recent years, incorporating the discussion of gender issues into Latin American studies courses is often quite difficult. There may be a tendency to include such discussion only in those portions of the course that focus on the family and *machismo* in Latin America, while neglecting to consider the female perspective in teaching about the history, politics, and economic development of the region.

While integrating a Latin American women's perspective into Latin America and women's studies classes may be problematic, it is by no means impossible. Numerous resources, both audiovisual materials and written texts, have been created with this specific goal. This guide will suggest many resources that may prove useful to instructors.

Introductory Materials

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges that instructors face in introducing a discussion of Latin American women's issues into the classroom is getting their students to look beyond the stereotypes and assumptions that they may have about the region and the roles that women play in developing nations. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has put together several self-contained curriculum units designed to encourage students to question their perceptions about gender roles.

Contemporary Issues for Women in Latin America (SI LA 11) focuses specifically on gender issues in Latin America and explores the impact that Latin American culture and social attitudes have had on women's status and opportunities. *Conversations with Women from the Third World* (DEV 22) is an instructional unit produced by USAID for teachers of advanced high school and undergraduate classes. This unit addresses the issue of women and work and family in developing nations, while also focusing on different strategies that women have employed to empower themselves politically and economically. This video emphasizes that women's experiences may differ depending on their social class, economic situation, and the religious and cultural values to which they ascribe.

Women in Latin American History

Throughout the past five centuries, there have been a number of prominent female figures that have played a part in shaping the course of Latin American history. For instance, an indigenous woman, known as Doña Marina, or La Malinche, served as the guide and interpreter for the conquistador Hernán Cortés and is believed to have played a crucial role in the conquest of Mexico. Another example is Eva Perón, the wife of Argentine president Juan Perón (1946-1955; 1973-1974), who became a heroine to the working class and garnered political support for Juan Perón. There are a multitude of other Latin American women who have been agents of change in the region.

Restoring Women to History (H LA 24) is a teaching packet to be used by instructors who wish to incorporate women's history into courses on Latin America. The packet provides a general overview of Latin American women's history and discusses the challenges of teaching history from a female perspective. *Women in Latin America: from Pre-Columbian Times to the Twentieth Century* (H LA 22) is a comprehensive introduction to Latin American women's history, appropriate for advanced high school students and undergraduates. The text examines the contributions of Latin American women to politics, religion, education, professional life, and family; it also considers the effect of significant historical events on women's lives. Special emphasis is given to the impact of the conquest and subsequent imposition of Iberian cultural values on the status of women in Latin America. *Women in Latin America: The Twentieth Century* (HC LA 13) is the continuation of the previous book. This volume focusses on suffrage, women,



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and education as well as more contemporary issues such as female political activism and women and revolution. This text addresses the experience of women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Women in Latin America (SI LA 1) provides a general overview of Latin American women's history in video form. This documentary explores the various roles that women have played in different periods of Latin American history including wife, mother, slave, priestess, midwife, activist, author, and politician. The presentation takes into account differences between the lives of upper and lower class women.

Women and the Arts

Any discussion of Latin American women's contributions to the development of Latin America must address the cultural achievements of women. As far back as the seventeenth century, women have distinguished themselves as outstanding poets, novelists, painters, and musicians. Juana Inés de la Cruz (Sor Juana) was a well-known poet in Mexico in the mid-1600s. In many cases, female artists have gained both national and international recognition for their work. For instance, the Chilean novelist Gabriela Mistral was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1945, the first Latin American writer to be honored by the Nobel Committee. Other internationally renowned women writers include Isabel Allende, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Laura Esquivel, Silvina Ocampo, Christina Peri Rossi, and Elena Poniatowska as well as many others.

LARC has several resources for introducing students to Latin American women's literature. Recordings of interviews with female writers and readings of their work are available: *Gabriela Mistral* (LM CHI 2), *Clarice Lispector: The Poetry of Silence* (LM LA 2), and *Faces, Mirrors, and Masks – Elena Poniatowska: The Voice of the Powerless* (LM MEX 5). In the video *Female Poets* (LM NIC 1), Nicaraguan poets Daisy Zamora, Gioconda Belli, and Vida Luz read poems written in support of the Revolution. These resources are most useful when accompanied by a discussion of the poetry and texts written by the authors.

Images from visual artists are also available. Some of these images are available for free download from the LARC website, while others are still only available for short term loan. We are working to make all images available for download. Examples of images relating to female artists include: *Latin America: The Art of Amelia Pelaez* (AM CUB 1), *Latin America: The Art of Frida Kahlo* (AM MEX 4), *María Luisa Pacheco* (AM BOL 1), and *Latin American Women Artists I and II* (AM LA 3). Each group of images allows students to examine the work of prominent female artists.

Musical compositions by Latin American artists are available for loan as well. Many of these songs can also be found on the internet, either for free download or purchase. A common trend in the collections available at LARC is music related to the New Song movement, where singers use traditional music forms to express socio-political ideas. Resources include *Mercedes Sosa en Argentina* (MU ARG 2), *Violeta Parra: Un río de sangre* (MU CHI 4), and *Si buscabas* (MU NIC 2) by Guardabarranco. These resources can be used to introduce students to women's music and the New Song movement.

Machismo and Marianismo

In Latin America, gender roles and societal expectations of men and women have been shaped largely by cultural-specific values and beliefs. The terms *machismo* and *marianismo* describe the set of ideal attributes of males and females (respectively) that has developed in the region. *Machismo* is defined as the cult of male virility, in which the ideal man is bold, intransigent, and sexually aggressive. On the other hand, *marianismo* refers to the cult of feminine moral superiority, which defines the ideal woman as selfless, submissive, and possessing great spiritual strength. The Virgin Mary is widely viewed as the epitome of femininity, and is held up as a model to which Latin American women should aspire.

Machismo and *Marianismo* not only outline the expectations of men and women in Latin America, they also serve to establish and reinforce the sexual division of labor. Because women are expected to be nurturing and morally superior to men, they have been assigned to duties associated with the family, in particular the rearing and education of children. In short, they have been relegated to the private sphere.



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However, it must be noted that within this sphere, female power and influence can be quite extensive. Men, by virtue of their supposed strength and assertiveness, are given exclusive domain over the public sphere (i.e. politics, the economy, international affairs, etc.). As a result, they are dismissed from any responsibility in the home.

The effects that *machismo* and *marianismo* have had on gender relations and the status of women in Latin America have been explored in a number of videos. *Controversia* (SI LA 5) treats the issue in a novel and humorous form. The structure of this 14 minute film is taken from a popular music form, the *controversia*, in which two singers engage in heated debate. In this case, the debate focuses on the widely held attitude that housework and child rearing are exclusively women's work, even when the woman holds a job outside the home. Interviews reveal men's complacency and women's frustration with this arrangement.

A Man, when he is a Man (SI LA 9) addresses the subject of *machismo* as it relates to sexuality. The double standards that characterize society's expectations of men and women are emphasized. Though this documentary provides a great deal of insight into *machismo* it contains frank and explicit discussions and should be previewed before classroom viewing.

Whereas Latin American religious and cultural values have defined the feminine ideal as passive, selfless, and pure; popular culture and the mass media have defined the perfect woman in terms of physical appearance. Consequently, the number of expectations imposed on women have increased. *Simplemente Jenny* (SI LA 3) is an excellent documentary that exposes the hypocrisy of these expectations, as well as the fact that this feminine ideal is largely unattainable for most women. This film illustrates that many women contend with problems such as homelessness, hunger, violence, and rape.

Another film that analyzes the contradictions between the Latin American feminine ideal and the reality of the region is *Miss Universe in Peru* (SI PER 1). This video reveals the stark contrasts between the contestants of the 1982 pageant and the average women of Peru. Indigenous women are absent from the pageant. The beauty contest is presented as a financial venture in which women are objectified and commercialized.

The video *Heritage: The Status of Latina Women* (SI HISP 2) features a segment (the second of four) in which a sociologist explains *Machismo* and *marianismo*. This video features interviews with two Latina activists working in the United States, Rosie Castro and Choco Mesa, who talk about their activism in terms of societal roles for women.

Women and the Family

Family has traditionally been an important institution in Latin America. Women play a central role in the organization and maintenance of family life and traditions. In discussing the Latin American family, it is essential to emphasize that families come in a wide range of forms and sizes, and that the North American 'nuclear family' is only one of many variations that exist.

The book *Families at the Close of the Twentieth Century: The Americas and the Caribbean* (EC 37) is an excellent resource on family life. The daily lives of one or more families from each nation in the hemisphere are described. These descriptions are accompanied by geographical and social statistics on the country which helps illustrate the effect of socio-economic conditions on family life.

In addition to documentary resources about families, a number of novels may be useful tools for instructors. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits* are two well-known novels that recount the histories of traditional, extended families. These novels are excellent examples of the literature style magical realism as well. Both novels, while excellent resources, can be difficult texts for students to read and are both quite long. They would be best for advanced high school or college students. Domitila Barrios de Chungara's *Let me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* relates the experience of a working class woman and her family.



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Women and Politics

Political activism is an increasingly common role for women in Latin America. Women participated in suffrage battles in the nineteenth century to obtain the right to vote. In most Latin American nations women won the right to vote in the 1940s and 50s. Many women have since run for political office in countries throughout Latin America. Isabel Martínez de Perón was the first female president of a country in the Americas when she was elevated from Vice President to President of Argentina with the death of her husband, Juan Perón. She governed Argentina from 1974-1976 when the democratically elected government was overthrown by a military coup. Argentina continues to have active women politicians and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner was elected to the presidency in 2007.

Many other Latin American countries have had female leaders including Chile, where Michelle Bachelet served as president from 2006-2010; Brazil where Dilma Rousseff was elected president in 2011; and Costa Rica where Laura Chinchillu was elected president in 2010.

Political activism in Latin America has not been confined to political office. Women have engaged in protests, work stoppages, hunger strikes, and in some countries armed insurgencies. In recent decades, women have taken a leading role in grassroots political movements aimed at achieving social and economic justice in the region.

Many Latin American women see absolutely no contradiction between their political commitments and their duties as wives and mothers. To be sure, women commonly viewed their political activism as an extension of their traditional gender roles. In those cases where the political and/or economic situation of their country threatens the well-being of their families, women often see themselves as having an obligation to become politically involved. Women are able to move outside tradition boundaries without subverting traditional divisions of labor. This phenomenon is referred to as 'social motherhood' as women's activism in the public sphere is motivated by their dedication to their families and other culturally defined feminine concerns.

Social motherhood has been illustrated in South America during the military regimes of the 1970s and 80s. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay were ruled by military regimes which employed violent tactics against their citizens to achieve social order and economic progress. Individuals suspected of engaging in subversive activities were kidnapped (or 'disappeared'), tortured, or assassinated by the military and right wing paramilitary groups. Women mobilized in large numbers in efforts to demand that the government provide them with information about their missing husbands and children.

Numerous documentaries have been made that recount these women's struggles for social justice. *Las madres de la plaza de mayo* (SI ARG 1) tells the story of the internationally-renowned Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an organization of Argentine women that marched each week in the capital's main plaza to protest their spouses and children. This group gained support from numerous international actors, and is therefore credited with playing a role in bringing about the decline of the military regime. This film combines moving interviews with members of the organization with historical background on the period of military rule, popularly referred to as the "Dirty War." The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo still exist today. The group has become increasingly radicalized, moving politically toward the right, while continuing to fight for recognition of the crimes which occurred during the military dictatorship. In 1986 the group splintered and La Linea Fundadora de los Madres de la Plaza de Mayo was founded. This group feels as though the original organization was behaving in a way which was harmful to the healing of the nation; instead, La Linea Fundadora aims to work through the current political system while still obtaining recognition for the crimes of the dictatorship.

Similar movements emerged in Chile in response to the Pinochet dictatorship. *Dance of Hope* (SI CHI 1) is a documentary that explores the lives of women of the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared, an organization much like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Not only does this film illustrate the strategies employed by women in order to achieve justice, it also presents a female perspective on the political situation in Chile in the late 1980s. In a similar vein, *Canto a la vida* (SI CHI 3) presents seven prominent Chilean women reflecting on their experiences under the Pinochet regime and the dislocation they faced in exile.



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Somos Más (HC CHI 6) documents a 1985 demonstration staged by Chilean women demanding democracy and justice from the Pinochet regime. This short video attests to the women's courage and conviction by showing their willingness to stand up to harassment and threats by the military. *In Women's Hands: The Changing Role of Women* (I LA 22), also deals with women's political activism in Chile. The film explores the manifestations of 'social motherhood' under three different governments: that of Salvador Allende, Pinochet, and Patricio Aylwin. Special focus is given to the effect of Pinochet's economic policies on women's lives.

Perhaps the best known Latin American woman is Guatemalan, Rigoberta Menchú. Her story was first chronicled on an international scale in the autobiographical work *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, compiled and edited by Elizabeth de Burgos. Menchú was awarded the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her role in bringing the atrocities committed against Native peoples of Guatemala by the military dictatorship to international attention. Menchú's activism is credited with bringing international criticism to the crisis in Guatemala, which helped lead to the peace process.

The video *Rigoberta Menchú: Broken Silence* features the activist talking about the Guatemalan situation (through an interpreter or with subtitles), as well as film of protest marches and political rallies. A Pan-American meeting of indigenous peoples shows Menchú and other Indian representatives talking of the need to unite their communities in their struggle for a human and just society. Menchú deals not only with the political system but also with the fight for indigenous peoples to demand recognition of their values and cultural systems.

While women's protests against authoritarian regimes have been the most visible examples of 'social motherhood,' there have been instances where activism has been motivated by familial concern. *Amazon Sisters* (SI SA 1) traces the effort of a group of Brazilian women to stop the development of the Amazon by foreign companies to preserve their land and a quality of life for their families. These women staged demonstrations to protest the medical problems and evictions resulting from the destruction of the rain forest and the exploitation of workers.

Ecological concerns were part of the political platform of Benedita de Silva, a Brazilian politician and the subject of the film *Benedita de Silva* (SI BRA 3). A slum dweller herself, de Silva was elected to the Brazilian congress in 1986 and 1990. The first minority woman to be elected, she emphasized the plight of the working poor in Rio de Janeiro's slums. Her 1990 campaign focused on environmental issues, relating to workers, living conditions, and abuse of children. The film touches on issues of feminism, racism, ageism, politics, and poverty in general.

Latin American activists have also played a prominent role in the international women's movement. *Marcha e la mujer por sus derechos* (SI 6) documents one example of the initiative that Latin American women have taken in the movement. The film features interviews with women from different countries showing strong solidarity among feminists which has developed across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Women and Economic Development

Latin America has historically suffered from issues of socioeconomic inequality which continue into the present. Women are often more affected by unequal economic conditions. Around the world, women represent 70 % of those living in poverty (www.unifem.org). Women's poverty is exacerbated by the wage gap between women and men; in 2008 the global average was 18 % (www.unifem.org). Various campaigns, through the United Nations (UN), World Bank, and other NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) have been introduced to attempt to address the economic gap experienced by women. In Bolivia, UN Women has assisted existing women's organizations in introducing gender conscious budgeting decisions on the local level. Gender conscious budgeting encourages the allocation of public funds in manners which benefit men and women equally (www.unifem.org).

Worldwide, progress has been made toward closing the gender gap in recent years. In terms of education, the gender gap has closed significantly for most women, but progress has been slow for women in poverty and ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, there are still 35 million girls in developing



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countries worldwide who do not attend school (www.imf.org). And while women today represent about 40% of the workforce, the wage gap, as mentioned above, is still an issue which has not been addressed. In Latin America, 83.9% of males participate in the labor market, are employed or activity looking for a job, as compared with only 57.7% of women (data.worldbank.org/news). While this gap in economic participation is great, women's economic participation increased 18 percent between 1990 and 2010. This gap demonstrates the inequality among males and females in economic conditions. Gender equality, particularly in terms of economic employment, can have important impacts on a countries economic development including increasing overall productivity of an economy, increasing spending in ways which benefit children – particularly education and food, and changing policy toward a more inclusive representation (www.imf.org).

Several resources in the LARC collection address the role of women in economic development. *Women and Development in Three World Areas* (DEV 23) is an instructional unit that can be used to introduce students to a female prospective on economic development in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. This unit encourages students to reexamine their concept of 'work.' Along similar lines, the film *Women and Work in Latin America* (SI LA 11) provides a general overview of different activities which are 'women's work' and the way these activities contribute to family income.

The Double Day (SI LA 4) can be used to discuss the relationship between *machismo* and *marianismo* and women's economic subordination. The documentary is an excellent analysis of the effects that Latin America's economic and social systems have on women's lives. It also explores the interrelationship between the discrimination that women face in the home and the discrimination they face in the workplace. *Love, Women, and Flowers* (GE COL 2) provides an example of exploitation in the labor market focusing on female workers in Colombia's flower industry. These women have severe health problems caused by the pesticides and fungicides used on the flowers but the women are unable to find employment elsewhere. *The Global Assembly Line* (DEV MEX 10) focuses on the dangerous conditions in factory assembly lines, focusing on women workers.

Latin American women have often devised creative solutions to economic problems. Collectives or cooperative economic organizations are increasingly common and many are assisted by NGOs or other non-local organizations. *The Women's Construction Collective of Jamaica* (DEV CARIB 1) is a video about a collective, which has been successful and was sponsored by the Inter-American Foundation. This video discusses the benefits of collectives and the benefits they bring to the communities where they are located.

Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

Women's lives and experiences differ according to the ethnicity of the woman; women of different ethnicities may face various types of discrimination. Women of indigenous and African heritage suffer from 'double marginalization,' as they are both minorities and females.

The lives of indigenous women are general distinct from that of non-indigenous women in the same countries. Because the indigenous communities of Latin America have retained a great deal of their traditional customs and values, women often have roles and responsibilities not shared by women of Hispanic descent. *Daughters of Ixchel: Maya Threads of Change* (FA GUA 1) examines the tradition of weaving among Maya women. Not only does this activity generate income for the women's families, it also serves to maintain their communities' cultural identity. *Mayordomía: Ritual, Gender, and Cultural Identity in a Zapotec Community* (SI MEX 4) explores the ways in which women preserve their indigenous culture, focusing specifically on gender roles in the *mayordomía* the annual festival honoring a town's patron saint. *Mujer Guaymí* (IND COS 1) is a brief cinematic essay portraying the daily activities of an indigenous woman on the Southern Atlantic coast of Costa Rica. Although the film is in Spanish with no subtitles there is little dialogue and could possibly be used with students who do not speak Spanish.

The lives of Afro-Latin American women have also been shaped by a unique set of cultural values and historical circumstances. The Afro-Caribbean population has fought to maintain the culture of their forefathers (and mothers); they continue to speak English and practice Protestantism. The video *Mujer*



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negra habla (AFLA COS 1), an episode of the Costa Rican television show, “conociéndonos,” contains interviews with several Afro-Caribbean women of the country’s Atlantic region. These interviews address a wide variety of topics, including racism and sexism, their African cultural heritage, and the history of their people. As is the case in the indigenous population, Afro-Caribbean women are seen as responsible for preserving their community’s cultural identity – a task that has become increasingly difficult in today’s changing world.

Latin Americans in the United States

Women of Latin American heritage in the United States face many problems. Changes in economic roles within the family may encounter resistance. Additionally, women may encounter racism from people outside their community. *Heritage: That Status of Latina Women* (SI HISP 2) is a good introduction to these issues. The first segment, “Special Orders” focuses on Puerto Rican women and their jobs in the garment industry making suits. The second segment “Machismo,” is a brief look at what the term means and how it translates into U.S. society. This is followed by interviews with activists Rosie Castro and Choco Mesa. Castro helped form the Raza Unida Party, which she says made it difficult to find a job. Mesa is the executive director of Partnership for Hope, a non-profit community action agency.

LARC has several films which portray the immigrant experience in the United States. *Miles from the Border* (HISP 60) is a documentary-style; 15 minute film about how one Mexican-American family perceives and struggles with the racism of their small agricultural community, focusing on the treatment they received in school and how they fought against discrimination through hard work and education. *The Two Worlds of Angelita* (HISP 61) is a 72 minute drama about a Puerto Rican family that moves to New York City to try to improve its economic situation. The film begins in Puerto Rico where we see the economic conditions and the expectations for gender roles. Angelita (about 12 years old) is seen playing in Puerto Rico, interacting with family, and then struggling to adjust to an English-only classroom and life in the streets. *Maricela* (HISP 58) brings together two major issues: the effects of civil war on the family, particularly children; and interactions between immigrant communities. This 58 minute film is set in Los Angeles and designed for a junior high audience. Maricela’s mother was a mathematics teacher in El Salvador before civil war drove them to immigrate to the United States, leaving behind a dead younger brother and the father. The mother ends up working as a live-in maid for a family with a daughter Maricela’s age. The drama underscores the concerns each child has: Stacy is worried about concerts and volleyball matches while Maricela suffers flashbacks to her brother’s death, worries about being grabbed by the authorities, and struggles with being an outsider. *La Misma Luna* (FF MEX 78) is a film about Carlitos, a nine year old boy, who journeys to the United States to meet up with his Mother, an undocumented worker, after his grandmother’s death leaves him orphaned. This film shows the danger of crossing into the United States and the situation in which many immigrants find themselves.

Several novels in the LARC collection are also excellent resources on the experience of Latin American women in the United States. *Sylvia and Aki* (HISP US 05) by Winifred Conklin describes the discrimination faced by Sylvia in school. The court case her father brought against the school district led to the desegregation of California schools. *Under the Mesquite* (HISP US 06) by Guadalupe García McCall discusses the life of Lupita, a Mexican-American living in Texas. These novels present a picture of young women growing up in the United States.

For more information on immigration and Latin Americans living in the United States, see the LARC guide to resources concerning immigration.

Conclusion

The Latin American Resource Center (LARC) has a collection rich in resources focusing on the roles of Latin American society. The films described in this guide range from documentaries about Native peoples of Latin America to discussions of Latin Americans in the United States. The resources described here emphasize the complexity of describing women’s lives in Latin America and the multiplicity of situations in which women find themselves.