

Female Social and Cultural Roles Concerning Syphilis in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1910-1940

Crystal Del Aranda

Female Social and Cultural Roles Concerning Syphilis in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1910-1940

In 1933, Mexico City officials published and circulated a book entitled *Sex Education in the Mexican School: A Book for Parents and Teachers*.¹ Within this volume of just over 300 pages, Mexican officials advised parents and teachers on the best way to warn their students of moral danger, loose women and above all else falling prey to venereal disease. Ninety pages alone warn of the dangers concerning prostitution, the harmful nature of venereal disease. The book also pays close attention to the repercussions venereal disease could bring into the reader's personal life and relationships. The manual closely examined French doctor and politician Leon Bizard's work on venereal disease, and his words were fittingly chosen to begin the chapter addressing venereal disease and prostitution in Mexico. Boldly, the Mexico City government quotes Bizard, "Ignorance of vice has never constituted virtue."² At the time that the Mexican government released this manual, Mexico was in the midst of a series of serious venereal disease epidemics, this timing, lends boldness to Bizard's statement. This quote signaled a significant change in the Mexican government's understanding of venereal disease and education in relation to public health. Herein, I argue that Mexico's change in attitude towards venereal disease, was a direct result of how severely venereal disease and in particular, syphilis was felt in the general population. The severity of Mexico's bout with syphilis is a direct correlation to the lenient and accommodating attitude of the Mexican government, military and religious institutions, as well as its cultural and social communities toward syphilis . Each of these organizations fostered an environment that not only encouraged, but expected cases of venereal disease

1 Juan L. Soto. *La Educación Sexual en la Escuela Mexicana: Libro Para Los Padres y Maestros*. (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Patria, S.A., 1933) 144.

2 IBID. Personal translation from chapter 4. "La ignorancia del vicio nunca ha constituido la virtud." León Bizard.

and prostitution. Contributions from each of these spheres of influence in post-revolutionary Mexico and in particular Mexico City from 1910-1940 proved to be important catalysts in the Mexican government's loss of control over sexual health, education and hygiene. Expected gender roles and social spheres, concerning women, men and sexuality undermined the modernization of Mexico's medical, educational and social institutions, and as a result allowed for a rise in syphilis throughout Mexico.

My exploration of Mexican society will show that prevailing notions about gender roles created an environment conducive to the rampant spread of syphilis and the inadequate implementation of sexual education and public health in Mexico City, 1910 and 1940. Concurrently, I explore formal and informal roles of urban communities' sway over sexual health in Mexico, I also intend to understand the significance as to how these Mexican institutions viewed and understood the role of women. By fully understanding the assigned gender roles and characteristics of the Mexican female, a better understanding about how political, religious and social organizations understood and to a degree blamed, "female nature" for the rampant spread of syphilis and the institutionalization of prostitution throughout the country. This essay does not analyze health reform in Mexico, in response to venereal disease as an isolated subject, but rather views syphilis as interconnected with the assigned roles and preconceived stereotypes of Mexican women. The importance of this is that syphilis in Mexico, 1910-1940 is better understood.

Geographically, this work focuses primarily on Mexico City; as the capital of Mexico, in 1910-1940 Mexico City was, and still remains to this day the center of Mexican political governance and health reforms. Reforms and laws were first instituted in Mexico City and as a result were more strictly enforced in the capital city. Additionally, the densely populated urban environment of Mexico City provided a more diverse populace lending significance to this study in that a more complete analysis of

the Mexican population concerning syphilis was conducted.. By understanding health reform, prostitution and venereal disease in Mexico as an interrelated subject, I analyze three threads of inquiry beginning with the assigned and preconceived stereotypes of women, how multiple groups in Mexican society approached sexual health and reform, and the geographic distribution of syphilis within Mexico City. Study of these interrelated factors will provide effective framework for a more complete understanding of how health reform reestablished and challenged expected gender roles and social norms in Mexico, 1910 and 1940.

These changes that pushed Mexico beyond its accepted and comfortable “social norms” concerning sexuality, gender equality and health education decidedly occurred during the Revolutionary decades the years that followed. It was during these years that government officials, elites and the general public truly realized the seriousness of its nation's fight with syphilis and prostitution. To proceed, an understanding of the the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the years immediately following the Revolution pertinent to comprehending the climate that fostered a series of syphilis epidemics; these epidemics called a country's social and cultural conscience into question. It is also important to observe the circumstances that led to the Revolution, as during these years, ironically, a modernizing society was first created and presented to the global community. Under the long lived presidency of Porfirio Díaz, 1884-1911, Mexico underwent an industrial and economic restructuring in an effort to reconcile the tremendous national debt, especially foreign debt. In *National Debt of Mexico: History and Present Status*, of 1919, Thomas R. Lill calculated that approximately 40 percent of Mexico's national debt was owed to foreign countries.³ Rather than search for a nationally sustainable solution, Díaz opted for a “quick fix”. During his presidency, Díaz authorized the selling of millions of acres to foreign companies and investors. Consequently, Mexico's dependency upon foreign

³ Lill, Thomas R. *National Debt in Mexico: Past and Present Status*. (Searle, Nicholson, & Lill, C. P. A, New York, 1919) pg. 59.

money resulted in a weak market entirely and wholly dependent to the whims of the global economy. Though Díaz's actions created a weak economy structurally, it is important to note that to outsiders, the Mexican economy and market appeared anything but debilitated. Díaz's strength lay within his ability to present a modernizing, stable and peaceful picture of Mexico to the world. Lill's report of Mexico during Díaz's presidency shows the misconceptions that many foreigners had at this time. Lill argues that Mexico, under Díaz, "made her greatest advance in material prosperity, and also enjoyed the longest period of peace in her history."⁴ While Lill praised the modernizing efforts of Díaz in Mexico, he made no mention of how these actions affected the Mexican population. Because Díaz's plan concerning his country was not executed with the welfare of his people in mind, a changing country that offered the indigenous and poor no place negatively affected the population. Mexico's most valuable allure to foreign companies lay within its mining industry and the potential to develop and expand, the railway system in Mexico. Between 1880 and 1910, foreign companies laid over 24,000 kilometers of railroad tracks, and though the companies provided the resources and labor necessary to develop the railway, they obtained ownership of the lands surrounding the tracks.⁵ This loss of land displaced countless Mexicans throughout the country as their pueblos and farms were taken from them and appropriated into foreign hands. An example of this can be observed when over 3 million acres of land in the state of Chihuahua were given to F.S. Pearson as payment for railroad work. As Díaz knowingly displaced his own people for the sake of economic gain and global recognition, the climate for revolution was set in place. Disgruntled Mexicans enraged over the loss of ancestral lands to foreigners lashed out at the government, and it was in these days preceding the Revolution that syphilis found its most significant moment in Mexican history.

Syphilis' moment in Mexico was not a sudden occurrence that unexpectedly swept through

4 IBID.

5 Gonzales, Michael J. *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002) pg, 21.

Mexican society; instead, it was the result of several centuries of repression concerning sexual education, health and women's role in society. Syphilis' presence had been known and intimately felt in Mexican society and history since Spanish colonization between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While it is uncertain if the disease naturally originated in pre-colonial Mesoamerica or if it was introduced from Europe, it is certain that colonial Mexico was well acquainted with syphilis. An example of this recognition can be found in Friar Juan de Zumarraga's founding of the San Juan de Dios Hospital⁶ in 1534, which exclusively dealt with the treatment of venereal disease. This was extremely important in documenting a case of congenital syphilis dated to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Proof of syphilis' presence in colonial Mexico, while significant, should be analyzed in the context of the society, in which it occurred, and in consideration of the influence of the Catholic Church. The significance of considering the Catholic Church in relation to syphilis' presence in Mexico is that religion in Mexico's history has proven to be a powerfully influential factor in pre-colonial Mesoamerica, colonial Mexico and post-revolutionary Mexico.

Within Mexican culture, to elite and peasant alike the Church had enjoyed a predominant and highly influential role. From even Mexico's pre-Columbian days have the respective deities and religion of the ruling society closely shaped the history and customs of the people. In light of this it is only normal to observe that well past Mexico's colonial conquest of the sixteenth century and revolution of the early twentieth century, this powerfully intimate institution of religion has exercised a considerable amount of influence over Mexican life. However, before Mexico's post-revolutionary years may be examined concerning health reform with influence from the church, its pre-colonial and pre-revolutionary years must first be examined. During these pre-Columbian years the Mexican indigenous population created and laid the foundations for the role of women, femininity, and sexual

6 Calderon, Conde-Glez, Juarez-Figueroa and Mauricio Hernandez-Avila. Historical Account of Venereal Disease in Mexico. *GentourinMed* 1993,69: 462-466. (accessed November 12, 2010)

behavior. These ideals were enforced as part of modernizing campaigns in the twentieth century Mexico.

Although European influence did notably influence gender roles within Mexico both before and after the conquest a focus upon pre-Columbian influence provides some clues as to when gender roles were first assigned in Mexico. A telling example of this lies in Aztec culture and the establishment of gender roles and rules throughout Mesoamerica. In pre-colonial Mesoamerica, the Aztecs dominated and ruled the Valley of Mexico before Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century. Gender roles in Mesoamerica are best understood not only by analyzing Aztec culture as it was the dominate civilization, but also by examining the geographic location of the Aztec culture. Aztec culture of the sixteenth century was based in the Valley of Mexico, this is where modern day Mexico City is located. Mexico City's location in comparison to Aztec culture provides reasonable evidence to conclude that Aztec ideas concerning femininity were retained and readily accepted within the Valley of Mexico long after the decline of Aztec civilization. In particular, women's roles within Aztec culture contained some of the same ideas regarding femininity that has endured within Mexican culture well into the twentieth century. Aztec women were expected to conform to the modest, maternal and demure role which restricted them to the confines of the home including, housework and childrearing. Any deviation from these duties or any expression of individuality was not tolerated and to be avoided by Aztec women. Julia Tuñón Pablos refers to this attitude of conformity in her book, *Women in Mexico: A History Unveiled*, writing, “[Aztec] women refined an image that would not arouse the curiosity of others: the highest praise a person could receive was the silence provoked by neutral attitudes.”⁷ In 1547, the Spanish Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún began to record the history and customs of the indigenous people that he encountered, and later compiled this information into the

⁷ Julia Tuñón Pablos. *Women in Mexico: A History Unveiled*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) 7.

Florentine Codex or the History of the things of New Spain (Historia de las Cosas de Nueva España).

Sahagún's definitive history successfully provided an in-depth understanding of how the Aztec society functioned; within this book Sahagún recorded important advice that was passed onto the young daughters of the Aztec people. Sahagún's account included advice about how a respectable woman was expected to look and act in society. "Be sure that your dresses are modest and appropriate; be sure that you do not dress up with strange and overly worked things, because this signifies fantasy and a lack of brains, and madness."⁸ Aztec society demanded a demure and controlled life from its women in appearance and conduct, because of this it is logical that the same controlled attitude was expected concerning the sexual practices of reputable and respectable Aztec women. Evidence of this is found in Sahagún's writings where compared Aztec views of immoral or "carnal women."⁹ These so called carnal women were viewed as rebellious, sexually active outside of marriage or due to circumstance such as in the case of the stars they were born under, were assigned to the role of prostitute.¹⁰ Aztec wisdom plainly identifies and outlines the expected behavior of these women as prostitutes by stating, "[A] whore is a public woman and she has the following: she goes about selling her body...she gives herself to any man and sells him her body, because she is very lustful, dirty and shameless, gossipy, and very debauched in the carnal act."¹¹ This early view on prostitution and the women associated with this profession in Mesoamerican society ultimately influenced how women were viewed in future generations, principally in one of two ways. Either she was modest, controlled and housebound or she was the very opposite, a woman consumed only with satisfying her own "lustful and dirty" desires that

8 Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1956), 133. As quoted in Julia Tuñón Pablos. *Women in Mexico: A History Unveiled*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999). [page from Pablos?]

9 IBID

10 Julia Tuñón Pablos. *Women in Mexico: A History Unveiled*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999)

See pages (insert page numbers) for Pablos' explanation that Sahagún writes that women born under the deity Xochiquetzal were either forced by birth to become prostitutes or pursue useful roles such as weavers.

11 Ibid.

she was predisposed to by her very nature. This assimilation of local culture and customs by the colonizing Europeans can be explained by the cooperation it afforded them with the indigenous population. Though the natives of Mesoamerica were in no position to seriously oppose the European take over, they did provide resistance to the Europeans when their cultural customs were threatened. The Catholic Church realized this and adapted social norms already in place in order to gain the loyalties of the indigenous population, and in doing so the Church secured their place within Mexican society. Ultimately, this adoption of social norms by the Catholic Church perpetuated the stereotype of woman's sinful nature during the decades following the colonization of Mesoamerica and carried over into its post-revolutionary years, predominately the years of 1920 through 1940

Throughout Mexican society, the Catholic Church has looked to women to uphold family values and traditions, and above all as a source of maternal comfort by the diligent attention to her home, husband and children. Women who exemplified these prized traits were referred to as an *Abnegada*--selflessness, self-sacrificing and overall "the negation of one's outward existence."¹² It is to be noted that despite these seemingly positive and respected characteristics the Church and, by way of influence, many devotees assigned the Mexican female such traits. The ideas that had been formed in pre-colonial Mesoamerica by the Aztecs found a home within the Catholic Church and these overpowering notions of femininity and woman's sinfulness effectively permeated and shaped what society expected from women, not to mention how women understood themselves. Therefore, this attitude of reverence and contempt that was shared by many communities was accepted and reinforced by the Mexican elites and government.

The duplicitous view of women shared by Mexican elites and peasants alike not only demanded

¹² Jocelyn Olcott. *Revolutionary Women in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005) 16.

self-sacrifice from Mexican women, but also expected to an extent that a number of women would not completely conform to the role of *Abnegación*. These “fallen women” in some way rejected the demure and silent characteristics that were expected of them, and were known as, *Malincheras* – “fascinated, violated, or seduced”.¹³ Though during Mexico's revolutionary period, 1910-1920, in many cases it was not a woman simply engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage or engaged in “deviant” behavior that garnered such a label, In this time of revolutionary zeal, even women who enthusiastically supported the Revolution earned the title of *Malinchera*. A prime example of this can be observed through Mexican women's involvement in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. It was during the revolutionary years that women readily assumed the role of protector and joined the men of their country on the front lines of the war as *soldaderas*.¹⁴ *Soldaderas* enjoyed a degree of freedom never before experienced by Mexican women, but at the same time, these same women were also at the mercy of the men they followed, led and served beside. A negative reaction was solicited from the Mexican elite and media when women from all over Mexico joined the revolutionary armed front. In her book, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City*, Katherine Bliss argues the Mexican elite and media portrayed these *soldaderas* as glorified prostitutes who offered sex in exchange for the necessities of life.¹⁵ Upon first impression, this involvement was viewed as a direct attack on the chaste and fragile qualities of femininity. Mexican society negatively viewed Mexican women who assumed the role of the aggressor, because these women challenged and destroyed the traditional maternal role of women. This disapproval reinforced the fragility and consequences of the Mexican woman's status within society, should she deviate from

13 Jocelyn Olcott. *Revolutionary Women in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) pg. 15.

14 Soldaderas- During the revolution these were women who followed behind the men to each encampment, cooking, carrying supplies, ect. They performed these tasks in order to keep the revolutionary army running.

Soldaderas are women who engaged in direct-armed combat, commanded units and heavy artillery.

15 Katherine Elaine Bliss. *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001) pg. 71-72.

her assigned role as nurturer. Due to the media's portrayal of Mexico's revolutionary women as prostitutes, much of traditional Mexican society perceived the *soldaderas* as promiscuous and of loose morals. Media's sensationalization of *soldaderas* within the revolutionary armies resulted in very little available support for the women from the public or private sectors. Because of this lack of assistance, these revolutionary women were almost entirely dependent on the protection male soldiers provided to women. With their fates intertwined with the men they followed throughout battle, the perils of war were much harder on these women than on regular soldiers. If a man died, the men around him felt his loss as nothing more than the loss of a brother in arms; they would still, regardless of his death be able to provide for and protect themselves. Women were not so fortunate.

Upon the death of a soldier, the future of the woman associated with this man would become precarious. In many cases, if another soldier did not choose to assume the role of provider and protector of the *soldadera*, she would most often come close to succumbing to starvation, unwanted sexual advances and overall poor living conditions. Bliss brings attention to this by pointing to the observations of American journalist, John Reed, who traveled with the Villistas, the soldiers and followers of the revolutionary general, Francisco Villa, and recorded the day-to-day life with the army in 1914. Unarguably though Reed was a well-known Communist activist and yellow journalist, whose own agenda influenced what Reed documented of Mexico's Revolution, there is still something to be learned from his writings concerning the revolution. During his time in Mexico, Reed viewed the Villista army favorably and spoke out against American intervention in Mexico. These opinions were key to gaining the trust of the Villistas and resulted in his being welcomed whole-heartedly into the everyday life of the revolutionary army. Because of this development, Reed was able to observe the role of the revolutionary female from a much closer vantage point; rather than looking in from the sidelines, Reed was intimately knowledgeable of the women and the conditions they endured. Without

fail the Villistas provided more than enough events for Reed's pen, as they traveled and fought extensively throughout northern Mexico and across the U.S-Mexico border from 1910-1920. Among these eventful days Reed immortalizes the *soldadera*, Elizabetta, as a prime example of the tentativeness of a woman's survival in the army. Reed's story of Elizabetta recounts that within minutes of her lover's death Elizabetta was already claimed by another soldier, in particular a soldier that Elizabetta had not chosen herself. Bliss notes that while "Elizabetta begged Reed to let her stay with him for the night so that she might avoid the other man's amorous overtures."¹⁶ She was found the very next morning by Reed "cheerfully preparing"¹⁷ breakfast for the soldier who had previously claimed her. Elizabetta's complete change in behavior concerning the soldier illustrates the fate of a woman brought on by a need to survive. With no other avenues of assistance, Elizabetta surrendered to the soldier in order to survive in a culture that did not respect or encourage independence for women.. Elizabetta's story is of great importance in understanding the Mexican female and the rigid gender roles to which they were forced to conform simply to survive. Moreover, at the center of these dire situations lies, in part, an explanation for Mexico's problem concerning prostitution and the spread of syphilis. It was these women, these former *soldaderas* and *soldaderas*, who Mexican elites and a vast percentage of the general public, blamed for Mexico's syphilis outbreaks. Despite the image circulated and perpetuated by the media that these women openly, freely and excessively engaged in "vice," it was only because of having no other option that countless women contributed to their country's fight with disease, and this is precisely why the history and role of Mexican women is significant to comprehending syphilis and prostitution in Mexico.

Like any rampant disease, syphilis occupied a unique place within Mexican culture. To a vast majority of the public, syphilis was a result of sexual vice and immorality. This theme of immorality

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

warranting disease is not a new or occurrence unique to Mexican society: a familiar parallel can be found by examining cholera epidemics in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. Charles E. Rosenberg examines how American society initially interpreted the spread of cholera spread in his book, *The Cholera Years*.¹⁸ Rosenberg identifies morality as a key element to understanding how a society can interpret the presence of disease with the following, “to many ordinary householders, it was a consequence of sin; man had infringed upon the laws of God, and cholera was an inevitable and inescapable judgment.”¹⁹ Rosenberg's observations concerning the cholera epidemic in the U.S. accurately capture the shared sentiment and climate of syphilitic Mexico.

Syphilis' severity in Mexico resulted from a culture in the midst of moral change and instability. From this environment, syphilis was able to secure its place within Mexican society as a severe and widely feared disease. This is especially true since the effects of syphilis were not simply limited to what could be outwardly observed and diagnosed, but also the unseen. Syphilis simultaneously managed to affect not only the victim's physical health, but also their mental health. Syphilis manifested in Mexico in not one, but two forms: either by contraction through sexual intercourse or through inheritance from mothers to their children during birth. Another factor adding to the danger of syphilis was that the disease was often indistinguishable from other diseases. This contributed to the already difficult task of the Mexican government and government health institutions' efforts to combat and educate the public about the disease. As a result, syphilis was commonly referred to as the “great imitator.”²⁰ In general, syphilis contraction in adults can be observed in three stages: Primary, Secondary and Late. It is during the Primary stage that syphilis' “imitator” trait makes itself known; this initial time frame can span anywhere from one month to six months. As a result of this “imitator” trait,

18 Charles E. Rosenberg. *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

19 IBID. 40.

20 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Sexually Transmitted Diseases” Syphilis- CDC Fact Sheet. Accessed October 22, 2010. <http://www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm> (accessed October 22nd 2010)

during these initial months syphilis presents not one single characteristic to help decipher whether the contracted disease is in fact syphilis. The United States' Center for Disease Control and Prevention pinpoints the primary stage on average as the initial twenty-one days from contraction, though in some instances can take up to 180 days for the disease to manifest. After this average time of twenty-one days, a chancre or sore forms at the site of infection; the chancre is painless and spontaneously heals without treatment.²¹ At this time during the painless primary stage, the afflicted individual is highly contagious, making it very easy for the syphilitic patient to spread the disease to their sexual partners. . . Next, the secondary stage includes the transformation of the syphilitic chancre into a painless sore that causes no discomfort to the infected and lasts up to three to six weeks. Curiously, though this information is from the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention in 2010 has been the same body of knowledge which was known to the Mexican government between, 1910 and 1940. Evidence of this can be observed in the 1926 address from Mexico's Department of Health, Dr. Bernardo Gastélum to the First Pan-American Conference of Directors of Public Health in Washington, D.C., In 1926, Gastélum informed the the gathered audience in D.C., of the actions the Mexican government had taken in its fight against syphilis, “We [Mexican government] have solved the problem which directly affects the individual—following Calmet's intelligent idea—by means of dispensaries.”²² In addition to Mexico's use of dispensaries, Gastélum next describes the educational efforts of the government and medical institutions, “...we are endeavoring to turn each patient into a negative factor in the transmission of disease by instructing him or her about all the phases of syphilis. We aspire to count upon every one of our patients as an agent who will take upon him or herself the task of preventing the

21 Faith Fitzgerald. The Great Imitator, Syphilis---Medical Staff Conference, University of California, San Francisco. West J Med 134: 424-432. May 1981. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1272769/pdf/westjmed00225-0048.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2010)

22 Dr. Bernardo J. Gastélum. *La presecucion de la sifilis desde el punto de vista de la garantia social. (Mexico, D.F.: Departamento de Salubridad Publica., 1926. 55)*

propagation of the disease.”²³ Gastélum also endeavors to write specifically on the individual phases of syphilis, describing the phases as, “secondary and tertiary periods ...[and] the most frequent vehicles of contamination”²⁴,as well as, “...those ailments of the viscera and the nervous system”.²⁵ All of this Gastélum expresses in a fashion that closely mirrors the language of the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention more than eighty years later. Based on this shared knowledge, the role of social norms and gender roles is called into question concerning the severe challenges Mexico experienced and posed to the education, treatment and containment efforts to combat syphilis among the public. Despite these obstacles, great effort was taken by the government to bring public attention to venereal diseases' presence in Mexico. Mexico's government sought to raise awareness by launching public educational programs; these programs addressed the problems and circumstances in Mexican society that allowed venereal disease to thrive. One such action by the Mexican government was the printing and circulation in 1933, of, *Sex Education in the Mexican School: A book for Parents and Teachers*. This manual sought to bring rational understanding to the spread of venereal disease and give Mexican parents and teachers a tool to educate Mexican youth on the dangers and risks associated with prostitutes and poor sexual health. The use and promotion of such a manual marks an important change within Mexican society concerning sexual health, education and disease prevention.

Within the pages of, *Sex Education in the Mexican School: A book for Parents and Teachers* , in addition to addressing each syphilitic stage, emphasis on a painless transmission is discussed at length. This attitude of open discussion concerning venereal disease further supports the conclusion of a change in Mexican society concerning disease prevention and sexual health education. Following this description, a pointed warning is given addressing the expected attitudes of silence from syphilitic prostitutes. Officials warned “there is no cause to have ever confirmed a professional conscience of

23 IBID

24 IBID

25 IBID

the prostitute; for example, many are ignorant that they are sick [syphilitic]: in particular, venereal disease which is situated in the genitalia, and does not cause pain [syphilis] in women result in women [prostitutes] not caring or submitting themselves to an examination or medical treatment and even less [women] abandon or suspend their activities [prostitution].”²⁶ This warning undoubtedly singles out the female prostitutes of Mexico City as untrustworthy and deceitful, but does not make such an accusation about the men who frequented brothels. Rather than address male and female citizens equally for remaining silent upon contracting syphilis, females were held to a different standard. Because of this separate standard, Mexican officials reasoned that female prostitutes were the primary reason for the silence that aided syphilis' spread, rather than study both Mexican male and females equally. Mexico's 1933 circulation of *Sex Education in the Mexican School: A book for Parents and Teachers*, by the government to parents and teachers, attributes the problem of disease to a loose morale conscience. With the publication of the manual in 1933, Mexico's government reinforced the preconceived notions of women's nature and effectively associated the negative connection of venereal disease and moral conscience with the Mexican female. Syphilis' second form of congenital syphilis also served to provide the Mexican public grounds for holding to these conclusions pertaining to the moral conscience of the Mexican female. Women were seen as the carriers and embodiment of syphilis when children suffered from congenital syphilis, it mattered not whether they were viewed negatively as syphilitic mothers or the prostitutes who facilitated the spread of the disease into the family.

Within the Mexican population, congenital syphilis was more acutely felt and observed, making it the deadlier manifestation of the two in Mexico. Congenital syphilis passed from infected mothers to

26 Juan L. Soto. *La Educación Sexual en la Escuela Mexicana: Libro Para Los Padres y Maestros*. (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Patria, S.A., 1933) 149. This section was a personal translation with help from Dr. Heather McCrea of the following: No hay nunca en la “consciencia profesional” de la prostituta; en primer lugar muchas ignoran que están enfermas: los accidentes venéreos, en particular los que están situados en los órganos genitales, no son dolorosos en la mujer y puesto que no les ocasionan ninjuna molestia, no creen tener motivos para someterse a tratamientos médicos ni mucho menos para abandonar o suspender su oficio.

their offspring in one of two ways, either during fetal development or as the child passes through the canal. Earlier contact with syphilis in the mother's womb proved to be a far deadlier consequence to the fetus than if the mother contracted syphilis later in the pregnancy. According to the U.S. National Library of Science, nearly half of all children that contract syphilis while in the womb are either stillborn or die shortly after birth.²⁷ For an earlier exposure to the disease to occur, the mother most often became syphilitic at the time of conception. In seemingly monogamous marriages, it was the husband, not the wife that introduced syphilis into the family. Because of accepted social norms that allowed for male promiscuity and condoned the patronage of prostitutes, it sadly became a common occurrence for married women to suffer the disease and pass congenital syphilis to their children. Such occurrences were acutely felt in a rebuilding Mexico following the end of the Revolution in 1917, during which time Mexico experienced at least a 5 percent drop in the national population, due to effects of war. This trend of lower populations was felt throughout Mexico, except for one location: Mexico City. Though Mexico City also suffered losses and casualties due to the Revolution of 1910, a drop in population was offset by a larger influx of Mexicans from the rural areas surrounding the city. Mexican migration and population to the capital during and after the Revolution are key to understanding why Mexico City is important geographically to analyzing the creation of health reforms and syphilis' spread throughout Mexico. This migration and population phenomena can be understood by observing the time period between 1890 and-1940. It was During these decades the population in the Federal District, where Mexico City was located, nearly tripled. In 1895, the total population of the district was 474, 850, but by 1940, the population had exploded to 1,757, 530.²⁸ To give perspective on this population boon,in comparison to the Federal District, Mexico City, respectively accounted for,

27 Medline Plus. "Congenital Syphilis." Last modified August 19, 2010.

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001344.htm>. (accessed 10/12/2010)

28 Antecedents Historicos. Claudia Montserrat Martínez Stone.

<http://www.economia.unam.mx/secss/docs/tesisfe/MartinezSCM/anteced.pdf>. (accessed October, 25, 2010).

471,000 in 1910 and 1,560,000 in 1940²⁹. This trend of a high concentration of people in the Mexico City area, as opposed to the neighboring rural areas, is an indicator of many people's decision to migrate to urban areas in Mexico. This preference of an urban environment and specifically, Mexico City can be explained by the lack of work and ability to sustain a living in the rural areas in the wake of the Revolution of 1910. Many Mexicans abandoned their rural pueblos in hopes of finding a means of supporting themselves and their families, and the potential within Mexico City was a powerful factor for migration. Mexicans' preference for an urban environment created the spike of the city's population during 1910-1920. While a majority of the country experienced a significant population decline as a side effect of the revolutionary war, Mexico City underwent a surge. Mexico City was arguably not equipped or ready for the population influx of 19 percent between 1910 and 1920. How could it be equipped to handle the amount of citizens that flooded the streets of Mexico, when prior to the revolution in 1901, for every 12,000 inhabitants there was only one public bathroom?³⁰ It can easily be imagined how this instability of the revolution resulted in a weak medical institution proving itself inept at managing cases of syphilis and congenital syphilis. Congenital syphilis' success at capturing the attention of all Mexican citizens was made possible because of the time it occurred in.

Had these epidemics of syphilis not happened in such a tumultuous time in Mexican history, it might not have had the affects it did on health standards and the changing role of women in relation to syphilis transmission. As the Revolution slowed throughout Mexico and eventually came to an end in 1917, Mexico and Mexicans began to rebuild their lives and society within a world of new possibility. Though this world of opportunity and included optimism, the Mexican female's fragile status within Mexican life worsened. It was during these initial post-revolutionary years that a shift occurred within

29 IBID.

30 La situación de salud pública en México (1870-1960). [Rivera-Tapia, José Antonio. Hospital General "Dr. Manuel Gea González"](#), 2003, 6, 1, 40-44. (accessed 10/15/2010).

the government and medical institution concerning venereal disease and prostitution. Whereas previously, the nature of women, while viewed narrowly and understood as a natural predisposition, was ultimately not in violation of the revolutionary laws of Mexico, this socially accepted attitude concerning women's role within prostitution and the spread of venereal disease would not endure. It was during the post-revolutionary state and society building years that a shift occurred in how the Mexican elite, government, and health officials interpreted sexual vice and venereal disease, especially syphilis. Christina Rivera-Garza's essay, *The Criminalization of the Syphilitic Body: Prostitutes, Health Crimes and Society in Mexico City, 1867-1930*, addresses this shift as a result of the state assuming direct control and administration of public health in Mexico.³¹ This change in the Mexican state concerning syphilis effectively turned the disease into a legitimate enemy of the state. No longer did Mexican officials observe syphilis and its spread throughout the public without preference for one sex over another. Instead, the disease underwent an anthropomorphism³² causing doctors, the government and the public to view the venereal disease as an intelligent and calculating entity. Garza refers to the change in Mexican perceptions with the law of 1929 that revised the Penal Code for the District and Federal Territories.³³ In the 1929 revision of the Penal Code, Garza asserts that, "the introduction of the *delitos de contamination intersexual* (crimes of contaminated sexual relations)...was without a doubt, a sound victory for public health doctors and postrevolutionary medicine."³⁴ It was then that the "syphilitic body"³⁵ was seen as a crime and deemed punishable. To be afflicted by syphilis or any venereal disease was no longer considered a private matter, instead it was seen as a crime against

31 Ricardo Salvatore. *Crime and Punishment in Latin America*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) See Part II: The Social and Cultural Construction of Crime, pg. 147-174.

32 Anthropomorphism- When human characteristics are attributed to inanimate objects or natural phenomena.

33 Código Penal para el Distrito y Territorios Federales (Mexico: Talleres Graficos de la Nación, 1929)

34 Ricardo Salvatore. *Crime and Punishment in Latin America*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) See Part II: The Social and Cultural Construction of Crime, 169.

35 Ricardo Salvatore. *Crime and Punishment in Latin America*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) See Part II: The Social and Cultural Construction of Crime, pg. 147-174.

society, and so was against the law. This level of criminalization towards venereal disease occurred because of all the efforts of the government and medical institutions to educate and encourage the public concerning sexual health to take preventative actions against contracting venereal diseases. With this collaborative revision between government officials and medical experts, the population of Mexicans suffering from syphilis was harboring a wanted fugitive. A result of this new decree, when combined with pre-existing notions and stereotypes of prostitutes as the reason for syphilis's rampancy, was the criminalization of a large portion of women in Mexico City. Because Mexican elites and indigenous peasants alike were satisfied with this socially and culturally acceptable viewpoint, blame was not placed on the men who frequented brothels, it was their very culture that argued it was within men's nature. How then could the women be judged more severely for actions that were also within their "nature"? This curious double standard concerning men stems in part from the culture of *machismo*—bravado or overly masculine. *Machismo* allowed men to enjoy a more free expression of their supposed overly active sexual appetites. To be seen as truly manly in the eyes of Mexican society at this time, a man was expected to enjoy the multiple embraces of different women. Jocelyn Olcott's book, *Revolutionary Women in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*, " touches on this culture of machismo by referring to Hermila Galindo de Topete's own personal observations concerning the subject. Olcott sums up the quest of Mexican males to be viewed as sexually virile, upon gaining this the male gained the approval of his peers, while the women with whom he partnered with enjoyed no such approval. These women were seen as women of "vice" and promiscuity, and were ostracized for their participation in the sex trade. Jocelyn Olcott's cites Hermila Galindo de Topete's 1916 address to the First Feminist Conference in Merida in, "*Revolutionary Women in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*," Topete's address supports this observation of *machismo* culture's contribution to syphilis' spread in

Mexico. Galindo was an outspoken activist and editor of the feminist magazine *La Mujer Moderna*.³⁶ Galindo writes that men are free to speak of their sexual exploits, “with majestic tone used by a revolutionary leader relating the capture of a plaza”³⁷, while their partners were “dragged into desperation, misery, insanity and suicide.”³⁸ These Mexican women were undoubtedly prostitutes and non-prostitutes alike, and because of Machismo found themselves most often destitute, pregnant, and commonly syphilitic.³⁹ These conditions concerning women resulted in not only a class of women that were shunned by society, but also a large number of children suffering from congenital syphilis. In light of the drastic consequences taken by the government to outlaw venereal disease, congenital syphilis had undoubtedly contributed to the 5 percent decline within the Mexican population; this decline of healthy children only served to further intensify the impact of syphilis' on Mexico, especially as overcrowding within Mexico City from 1910 to 1940 resulted in the tripling of the capital's population..

As Mexico City's population rose at a significant rate, so did the presence of syphilis, causing the government to open its first anti-venereal dispensary in 1921.⁴⁰ Medical information collected by Mexico's anti-venereal dispensaries proved contrary to what was socially acceptable to believe concerning syphilis and women. A study conducted between seven dispensaries found that the amount of syphilis present in the male population versus the female population was astronomically disproportionate in favor of syphilitic males. Indeed it was the men of Mexico City that contributed most significantly to syphilis' spread. As recorded between 1921 and 1925, for every 100,000 males there were 18,819 confirmed cases of syphilis, as well as 22,952 confirmed cases of gonorrhea.

According to the 1993 study published by the medical journal *GentourinMed* entitled, “*Historical*

36 *La Mujer Moderna*-- Feminist Newspaper founded during the Mexican Revolution in San Antonio, Tx.

37 Jocelyn Olcott. *Revolutionary Women in Post-revolutionary Mexico*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005)

31.

38 IBID

39 IBID.

40 Calderon, Conde-Glez, Juarez-Figueroa and Mauricio Hernandez-Avila. *Historical Account of Venereal Disease in Mexico*. *GentourinMed* 1993,69: 462-466

Account of Venereal Disease in Mexico”⁴¹ Mexican anti-venereal dispensaries also respectively examined documented cases of gonorrhea and syphilis for women in the city; respectively they were significantly less, at 896 cases of gonorrhea for every 100,000 females and 2,203 cases of syphilis.⁴² Why is it then that women were viewed as the suspicious temptresses that lured men into their beds spreading syphilis through civilized Mexican society? Could it have been that prevailing stereotypes of women were far stronger within the general public than the compelling medical evidence presented to the Mexican elites and laymen alike? It is indeed a perplexing instance that despite conclusive medical evidence, social and cultural notions superseded a reality that manifested itself in Mexico City between, 1910 and 1940, embedded within the bodies of Mexico's father, brothers and sons. It was these males, who in the roles of doctors, elites and government officials in Mexican society justified and backed their own preconceived notions concerning the relationship between a “woman's true nature” and the spread of venereal disease throughout their own country that allowed for the misconceptions of women, prostitution and venereal disease to survive despite the medical evidence.

A disease epidemic has very rarely, if ever, been solely met with a rational and logical response from society. Each time a disease threatens to overwhelm a society and undermine the safety and security of public health, the respective disease undergoes a certain amount of demonization. Attributes and motives are assigned to the disease and, more importantly, an association with a specific segment of the population happens. This association most often occurs with a marginalized or periphery group of society, the “undesirables” of civilization, who curiously enough seem to embody the very characteristics of the disease. Mexico City's encounter with syphilis, coupled with preconceived notions about gender roles, led social elites, medical, clergy and government officials, as well as everyday citizens to permanently link the Mexican female to syphilis. Mexican women found

41 IBID.

42 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1195153/pdf/genitmed00030-0052.pdf> (accessed 10/12/2010).

themselves the subject to the scrutiny within their own nation. Despite that fact that syphilis could only be passed by means of sexual penetration, all blame fell upon the shoulders of women: an unchallenged double standard aided in perpetuating this unbalanced accusation of society. Socially acceptable, preordained gender roles were set in place by pre-colonial Mesoamerican views of male and female, which doomed women to be either feminine or “other”. The appearance of syphilis' appearance and its impact upon Mexico City between 1910 and 1940 provided concrete evidence that the Mexican female's identity due to centuries old ideas and customs was not liberated or freed though a revolution had occurred recently. The freedom promised by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was not as freely won by Mexico's women, as the men of the government, medical, and religious institutions by a culture of double-standard reasoned the Mexican female as the cause for syphilis' hold upon Mexican society.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Erauso, Catalina de. 1592. *Lieutenant nun: Memoir of a basque transvestite in the new world*. Trans. Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto, eds. Michele Stepto, Gabriel Stepto. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Syphilis- CDC fact sheet. in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [database online]. 2007 [cited October 22nd 2010]. Available from <http://www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm>.

Gastelum, Dr Bernardo J. 1926. *La presecucion de la sifilis desde el punto de vista de la garantia social*. Mexico, D.F.: Departamento de Salubridad Publica, .

Heduan de Rueda, Dolores. 1938. *A la mujer mexicana digo*. Mexico City: Union de Revolucionarios Agraristas del Sur.

Lara y Pardo, Luis. 1908. *La prostitución en México*. Paris: Librería de la vda de C. Bouret.

Medline Plus. Congenital syphilis. in U.S. National Library of Medicine [database online]. Bethesda, MD, 2010 [cited 10/12 2010]. Available from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001344.htm> (accessed 10/12/2010).

Mraz, John. 1996. *Mexican photography*. History of photography. 3rd ed. Vol. 20. London: Taylor & Francis.

Romney, Westcott Caroline. 1893. Four months in old Mexico. *The Congress of Women*: 579-85.

Soto, Juan, and Atenógenes Perez y Soto. 1933. *La educacion sexual en la escuela mexicana: Libro para los padres y los maestros*. México, D.F: Editorial Patria, s.a.

Codigo Penal Para El Distrito y Territorios Federales, (1929): (accessed 10/22/2010).

Secondary Sources

Bliss, Katherine. 1999. The science of redemption: Syphilis, sexual promiscuity, and reformism in Mexico City. *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1) (Feb., 1999): 1-40.

———. 1968. *Compromised positions: Prostitution, public health, and gender politics in revolutionary*

mexico city. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Caistor, Nick. 2000. *Mexico city: A cultural and literary companion*. Oxford: Signal Books Limited

Calderon, Conde-Glez, Juarez-Figueroa and Mauricio Hernandez-Avila. Historical Account of Venereal Disease in Mexico. *GentourinMed* 1993,69: 462-466. (accessed November 12, 2010)

Crahan, Margaret E. 1992. *Americas: New imperative essays*, ed. Alfred Stapan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

French, John D., and Daniel James. 1997. *The gendered worlds of latin american women workers: From household and factory to the union hall and ballot box*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Garcia, S. G., E. A. Yam, and M. Firestone. 2006. "No party hat, no party": Successful condom use in sex work in mexico and the dominican republic. *Reproductive Health Matters* 14 (28) (Nov): 53-62.

Goldenberg, S. M., M. Gallardo Cruz, S. A. Strathdee, L. Nguyen, S. J. Semple, and T. L. Patterson. 2010. Correlates of unprotected sex with female sex workers among male clients in Tijuana, mexico. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 37 (5) (May): 319-24.

Gonzales, Michael. 2002. *The mexican revolution: 1910-1940*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Lill, Thomas R. 1919. *National debt in mexico: History and present status*. New York: Searle, Nicholson, & Lill, C. P. A.

Macías, Anna. 1982. *Against all odds: The feminist movement in mexico to 1940*. London: Greenwood Press.

Macies, Anne. 1980. Women and the mexican revolution, 1910-1920. *The Americas* 37 (1).

Mansilla, J., and C. M. Pijoan. 1995. Brief communication: A case of congenital syphilis during the colonial period in mexico city. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 97 (2) (Jun): 187-95.

McLaren, Angus. 1997. *The trials of masculinity: Policing sexual boundaries, 1840-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Olcott, Jocelyn. 2005. *Revolutionary women in post-revolutionary mexico*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.
- Pablos, Julia Tuñón. 1999. *Women in mexico: A past unveiled* [Mujeres en Mexico: Una historia olvidada.]. Trans. Alan Hynds. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Rivera-Garza, Christina. 2001. The criminalization of the syphilitic body: Prostitutes, health crimes, and society in mexico city, 1867-1930. In *Crime and punishment in latin america: Law and society since late colonial times.*, ed. Ricardo D. Salvatore, Carlos Aguirre, and Gilbert M. Joseph, 147-180. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rivera-Tapia, José Antonio. 2003. La situación de salud pública en México (1870-1960). *Hospital General "Dr. Manuel Gea González"* 6 (1) (January- April 2003): 40-44, Hospital General "Dr. Manuel Gea González" (accessed 10/15/2010).
- Rosenberg, Charles E. 1987. *The cholera years: The united states in 1832, 1848, and 1866*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rubenstein, Anne. 2006. *Sex in revolution: Gender, politics, and power in modern mexico*, ed. Olcott, Jocelynn, Mary Kay Vaughn and Gabriella Cano. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Stern, Alexandra Minna. 1999. Buildings, boundaries and blood: Medicalization and nation-building on the U.S-mexico border, 1910-1930. *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1) (Feb., 1999): 41-81, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2518217> (accessed 10/19/2010).