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Gender Ideals and Determinant Factors for Marriage in Contemporary Mexico

by

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During the colonial era in Latin America, individuals' social status and reputation played a major role in determining their prospective marriage partners. It was common for marriages between two individuals of distinct social status to be looked down upon among society. By the late colonial era, fathers could make attempts to stop marriages from occurring by making pleas to a court in order to maintain the family's good reputation. However, these circumstances were hardly common among contemporary Latin America as society became more open-minded. It is now widely accepted for individuals of separate classes and/or races to marry. In addition, perspectives have even expanded to not only see marriage as a commitment between a man and a woman, but also between those of the same sex. The perceptions shared by modern society contrast greatly from the mindset that was shared amongst citizens during colonial times, although some gender ideals are still present. This essay will examine marital practices in contemporary Latin America, specifically Mexico. Through the review of a variety of sources including a monograph, research articles, blog posts, a news report, and newspaper articles, this essay will examine determinant factors for marriage.

During the colonial era, women possessed a multitude of rights such as the ability to own property, have custody over children, and the ability to sue. However, over time women began facing more limited freedoms as they were expected to please their husbands' wishes. In Noel F. McGinn's study, the author makes use of limited sources available by utilizing published reports and material that is not yet publicly available. McGinn also uses personal observations, which are prominently focused on Mexico City and Guadalajara, in order to argue that culturally defined standards of gender roles in relationships had an impact on marriages during the 1960s in Mexico.¹ Mexican culture places high value on manliness, McGinn argued, which is displayed through the ability of men to provide financial security

¹ Noel F. McGinn, "Marriage and Family in Middle-Class Mexico," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 28, no. 3 (August 1966): 305.

to their future families before getting married.² On the other hand, McGinn added, society does not value education amongst women, but instead it is preferred that at a young age they begin preparing for marriage in order to become the ideal wife for their prospective husbands.³ Similar to the colonial era, McGinn found that a woman's chaste reputation was an important factor for marriage, while men were not held to similar standards.⁴ For example, sexual activity for women was looked down upon before marriage; nevertheless, it was more socially acceptable for men to engage in sexual activities with a prostitute as opposed to with their future wives.⁵ In addition, before marriage, the soon-to-be wife was to be treated with great respect. However, after marriage she adopted the role of a housewife, whose duties included pleasing her husband and children, and not holding an equivalent position to her husband.⁶ Though these traditional ideals have changed slowly, the industrialization of Mexico during the mid-twentieth century played a part in transforming women's roles in society. As a result of the establishment of factories near Mexico City, many lower class women began working. This called for assistance from husbands to maintain the household and, consequently, led to a more even-handed relationship between spouses. Through the author's research, it is probable that the state of marriages will remain stable due to existing barriers to divorce and high lenience towards men for extramarital relationships.⁷

While Noel McGinn makes valid points concerning marriage practices in modern Mexico, it should be taken into account that his research was completed over 30 years ago; therefore, his conclusions should carefully be considered. Since McGinn limits his research and observations to Mexico City and Guadalajara, the conclusions gathered through his research fail to consider various areas, and he overlooks regional differences.⁸ Additionally, his time spent living in Guadalajara, where he gathered personal observations, was limited to two years. This does not allow for sufficient time to gather

² Ibid., 306.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For more on marriage and sexual purity of colonial women, see Patricia Seed's "Marriage Promises and the Value of a Woman's Testimony in Colonial Mexico."

⁵ McGinn, "Marriage and Family in Middle-Class Mexico," 306.

⁶ Ibid., 307.

⁷ Ibid., 313.

⁸ Ibid., 305.

appropriate conclusions about the region since he does not address the entire population. Although McGinn utilizes several survey responses from both men and women of the middle class population in Mexico City and Guadalajara, the number of people that participated in the surveys is minimal because the regions are so highly populated. Lastly, the sources used to gather research are limited due to the fact that research on marriage and family life in Mexico was insufficient and incomplete during the time his article was being published. Nevertheless, because he is one of the first to do research concerning marriage in Mexico, he is making a major contribution and breaking ground.

In Emilio A. Parrado's research article, "International Migration and Men's Marriage in Western Mexico," he argued that there is a positive relationship between men's marriage in Western Mexico and their economic position, which is often built through migration to the United States with motives to seek work.⁹ His conclusions are gathered through the use of data that come from simple random samples collected in western states of Mexico during the winter months of 1987-1997 as part of the Mexican Migration Project. Migration to the United States provided men with work opportunities alongside higher wages that allowed them to eventually gain access to necessary capital and financial resources like property to start a family.¹⁰ Since men's capabilities to start an independent household is a dominant qualification for marriage, unstable adult economic roles, Parrado argued, negatively impacted the likelihood of marriage.¹¹ The gender ideal that it is a man's responsibility to provide financially for his family is also discussed in McGinn's study as a cultural attribute of masculinity in Mexico.

As a result of men being abroad, the quantity of each sex became unbalanced with a surplus of women residing in Mexico. This consequently could result in men being less motivated to commit to marriage and delay the fulfillment of matrimony due to less competition.¹² Although international migration will lower the chances of marriage for women because men are abroad, the effects of migration

⁹ Emilio A. Parrado, "International Migration and Men's Marriage in Western Mexico," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 53.

¹² Ibid., 55.

such as economic advantages that are essential for marriage, led to an increased potential for matrimony once the migrant returned to his home. This increased potential for marriage is displayed in the household survey data: 11% of non-migrating men remained single through age 40; whereas only 5% of men with migration experience remained single through age 40.¹³ Education was also a factor that contributed to the likelihood of marriage. Since education could lead to increased skills, which allowed for long-term labor, it was expected for men with higher levels of education to be more likely to marry.¹⁴ Another factor that influences the possibility of marriage is female employment. Alongside occupational opportunities for women comes economic independence which makes remaining unmarried a favorable alternative to marriage for women.¹⁵ However, a woman's economic input also increased the chances for marriage because it created increased financial stability by forming a dual-income family. This created a financial security blanket in case the husband endured a loss of job or income.¹⁶

For this analysis, surveys were conducted concerning educational, occupational, marital, and migration history characteristics of all members of randomly selected households in 43 communities of the western states of Mexico.¹⁷ These surveys represent a large variety of the population sizes, ethnic makeups, and economic roots, and are indicative of the fact that employment was a crucial qualification for marriage. Additionally, the surveys were conducted over a ten-year period during the months when most migrants returned to Mexico.¹⁸ The greater length of time spent performing these surveys and the range of regions in Mexico taken into consideration provide more reliable data than that gathered by McGinn's observations from 1960s Guadalajara. Parrado's work demonstrates that although migration had divergent effects on marriage, overall it increased the opportunity for marriage among men; it led to employment, which was a crucial prerequisite for marriage. According to demographic and sociological research, a positive relationship exists between marriage and men's economic position.

¹³ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In her book *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families*, Jennifer Hirsch conducts extensive life histories with Mexican immigrants and their families by building relationships with the women to argue that traditionally set ideas of marriage are no longer prominent among the contemporary era.¹⁹ In the book she describes how men have turned away from a traditional ideology of masculinity. They are now more involved in housework as well as childcare, and faithfulness in their marriage is now seen more valuably. Additionally, women were granted more liberties as they made education a priority, worked to support their families, engaged in more social activities, and had increased authority towards decisions that affected the family and/or relationship.²⁰ The change in ideals is strongly portrayed through the generational difference in how women dealt with unsatisfying marriages. Hirsch notes that of the older women interviewed, not a single one left her husband. On the other hand, it was found to be common among the younger generation of women to leave their husbands if they were experiencing marital misfortune.²¹ Additionally, a major difference in how women saw themselves was evident when the author conducted drawing exercises in which women of both age groups participated. Women of the older age group represented themselves through a picture of their house, while the younger age group portrayed themselves through their aspirations and milestones such as graduating from school and getting a first job.²² By interviewing women of both older and younger generations, Hirsch is able to effectively reveal a progressive transition in Mexican society's perspectives. Compared to the authors of the research articles, McGinn and Parrado, Hirsch's sources provide extensive information as she incorporates individuals from different generations into her study. Because she is able to gather information from individuals married at different time periods, while the research articles only examined couples of close generations, her study is able to appropriately show the change in views of marriage over time as couples now embrace more balanced roles in marriage.

¹⁹ Jennifer S. Hirsch, *A Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2003), 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

The newspaper article “With Little Fanfare, Mexican Supreme Court Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage” states that because Mexico’s Supreme Court has ruled that marriages limited to heterosexuals are discriminatory, gay marriage is now legalized in Mexico.²³ Though this does not mean that Mexico now has a law legalizing same-sex marriages, the ruling does enable gay couples the right to marry if they seek permission from district judges for marriage. While the Supreme Court may have become more open-minded, the same is not true for the Roman Catholic Church, which is greatly influential among the country and remains opposed to the concept of gay marriage. According to Olivia Marple’s post on the Council of Hemispheric Affairs blog, approximately 83% of Mexicans identify as Catholic.²⁴ As such, it seems that the court’s ruling demonstrates great progress, yet gay couples may still face a setback; in order to receive permission from the court to marry they must go through a lengthy and costly process.

In her post, “Mexico’s Supreme Court Tentatively Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage,” Olivia Marple also speaks of gay marriage and declares Mexico to be the fourth Latin American country to legalize same-sex marriage.²⁵ Although Mexico’s Supreme Court no longer discriminates against gay couples wishing to marry, these couples face economic discrimination as they must pay fines in order to legally appeal for their right to marry since Mexico’s laws still deny same-sex marriage. Marple notes that in 2013, 89% of Mexicans believed “homosexuals should be treated like anyone else.”²⁶ This high percentage highlights the progress Mexico has made in expanding their perspectives on marriage. Although a high percentage of Mexico’s population seems to be in favor of equality among homosexuals, the author notes that homophobia is still prevalent as hate crimes towards homosexuals have increased during the past century. The author states “between 2001 and 2009, there were nearly 60 killings a year

²³ Randal C. Archibold and Paulina Villegas, “With Little Fanfare, Mexican Supreme Court Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2015, accessed November 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/15/world/americas/with-little-fanfare-mexican-supreme-court-effectively-legalizes-same-sex-marriage.html?r=0>.

²⁴ Olivia Marple, “Mexico’s Supreme Court Tentatively Legalizes Same-Sex Marriage,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, June 16, 2015, accessed November 14, 2015, <http://www.coha.org/mexicos-supreme-court-tentatitley-legalizes-same-sex-marriage/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

motivated by homophobia, compared to just 30 killings a year between 1995 and 2000.”²⁷ While some progress is evident, it is still vital that Mexico make a law legalizing same-sex marriage to ensure increased equality for homosexuals.

In the article “Mexico City Plans ‘Renewable Marriage,’” the author mentions a new kind of marriage contract that was in hopes of being adopted by Mexico in order to minimize divorce rates.²⁸ This contract was supposed to allow for couples to experience living together before making a lifetime commitment. The contract was proposed as a way for couples to gain confidence of their decisions to commit to one another before actually doing so in order to reduce divorce rates.²⁹ This is relative to the colonial period where divorces and annulments were looked down upon, and hence rarely granted. Additionally, this proposed contract shows that although a grand majority of Mexico’s population identifies as Catholic, not all individuals necessarily actively practice Catholicism. This is because the idea of living together before marriage is looked down upon by the Catholic Church as it may lead to premarital sex which goes against the Catholic dogma.

The Mexperience blog keeps readers updated with news and opportunities about lifestyle and leisure activities available in Mexico. According to the blog, for two foreigners to marry in Mexico they must pay for a marriage license, have a passport, tourist and travel permit, complete chest x-rays, blood tests, and also have copies of birth certificates.³⁰ If one of the spouses is a widow, a death certificate is required. As well, most states require that if either spouse was previously married, they must provide proof of a divorce decree and wait at least a year before getting remarried.³¹ However, some states only require women to wait. Additionally, four witnesses are required to be present at the ceremony; similar to the witnesses that were required when a marriage promise was made during the colonial era. However, for

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Mexico City plans ‘renewable’ marriage,” *BBC News*, September 29, 2011, accessed November 14, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-15114406>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Guide to Getting Married in Mexico,” *Mexperience* (blog), accessed November 14, 2015, <http://www.mexperience.com/lifestyle/mexico-essentials/getting-married-in-mexico/>

³¹ Ibid.

a marriage involving a Mexican national, a specific permit is additionally required. The age requirement for marriage in Mexico is 18 without parental consent, but with parental consent, boys have to be at least 16 and girls 14.³² This information relates to the research article by McGinn because it shows the young age at which girls are able to marry and shows that it is accepted among society.

In his blog entry, “Marriages in Chile,” Greg Weeks notes that divorce was legalized in Chile in 2004, and in 2006 marriage rates increased substantially, whereas it steadily decreased in 1996.³³ This evident trend brings attention towards the belief that individuals are more willing to marry if they know there is an orderly way of dealing with the marriage and the division of their properties if they were to go through divorce. Likewise, although very rare, the church did grant divorces and annulments during colonial times. Additionally, when women married they were administered a dowry through their husbands that remained the wives’ private property, and received ten percent of the total worth of their husbands. Just like couples acquired property jointly through marriage, couples still do today, and are more likely to get married if they are aware of how their assets would be divided.³⁴

Today, Mexico’s current president, Enrique Pena Nieto, and the first lady, Angelica Rivera, are in the public eye. Since Nieto’s administration began, it was found that two million more Mexicans have fallen into poverty.³⁵ This high number proposes a major conflict between the president and his wife as she is well known among the public for spending money on lavish matters such as high-end clothing, trips to Europe, and the purchase of a mansion.³⁶ Her spending habits place the president in a difficult position as the family experienced much criticism for being hypocritical for encouraging the nation to spend less.³⁷ The spending crisis carried out by the first lady and criticism endured by the president show that a wife’s

³² Ibid.

³³ Greg Weeks, “Marriages in Chile.” *Two Weeks Notice* (blog), March 12, 2007, accessed November 14, 2015, <http://weeksnotice.blogspot.com/search?q=marriages+in+chile>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Carrie Kahn, “Allegations of Corruption Dog Mexico’s First Lady Angelica Rivera,” National Public Radio, August 3, 2015, accessed December 2, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/08/03428171924/allegations-of-corruption-dog-mexicos-first-lady-ang-lica-rivera>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

reputation and actions hold high influence over how the husband is also looked upon. This is because Nieto's credibility among the public is very low and likely to continue to diminish. According to a news report by Univision, Rivera declared that she paid for the mansion with her own money earned through her former acting career.³⁸ However, the public remains outraged even after she defends herself because they see through her lies. Her actions display a marriage in which the wife does not possess constrained abilities, but instead is granted much freedom as she is able to get away with such activities like immense spending.

The sources examined for this study, including a monograph, research articles, newspaper articles, blog posts, and a news report, delineate determinant factors for marriage in modern Mexico and how they have changed as individuals of different social status are able to marry, in addition to those of the same gender. Additionally, just as premarital chastity was a major contributing factor to the likelihood of marriage for women in the 1960s, a positive relationship between men's economic position and marriage also existed. In Jennifer Hirsch's study, she finds that the traditionally set ideas of marriage are no longer prominent among the contemporary era as women and men hold more even-handed roles in marriage. In McGinn's study, he argues that Mexican culture placed strong emphasis on manliness, which was displayed through a man's ability to provide financial security to his future family. Parrado argues that migration to the United States provided men economic stability by offering better work opportunities which in turn increased the likelihood of marriage for men. The newspaper articles discuss the concept of same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court's declaration that marriage restricted to heterosexuals is discriminatory, as well as the proposal of a renewable marriage contract. The blog posts used in this essay discuss requirements for marriage and the tendency for couples to be more willing to marry if they are aware of how their assets would be divided. Finally, the news report by Univision discusses the public's discontent with the current Mexican president's wife Angelica Rivera. This essay examined contributing

³⁸ "Denuncian mentiras en informe de Angelica Rivera." Youtube Video, 2:37. Posted by "Univision Noticias," November 22, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf5b-zxki2w>

factors for marriage in Mexico during the contemporary era and how gender ideals in the nation evolved over time. It found that after the colonial era, within marriages, women held the role of a housewife, and men held the role of the primary financial provider; however, over time gender roles progressed to become more even handed.

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