

APPROXIMATIONS TO THE MULTIPLICITY OF MEANING  
THE PHRASE WOMEN'S RIGHTS CARRIES IN SPANISH AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of Women's Rights in Spanish America is extremely difficult to approach without first clarifying a few points. The main ones being, a misconception that rests on a common failure to acknowledge the imminent need to recognize some of the basic differences between Spanish America and American realities, (as for Britain, I would rather abstain from commenting, as I have not lived in this country and therefore, I cannot claim to know it.) And the second one being, the common misconception that Latin American women are, to some extent, innately incapable of taking care of themselves.

The first point should appear more clear through some comments regarding the extremely important role diversity, and a few of its repercussions, play in Hispanic America, although they cannot possibly be covered in their totality, in a single paper. Let us not forget, then, that we are speaking of 21 different countries and regions where the same number of economic, social and cultural areas and conditions exist and where many languages, other than Spanish, are spoken. Of these, I shall display a few, sometimes through history, others through literature and contemporary examples, in order to reach some conclusions that will make sense in our more familiar realities. For instance, it is much more difficult indeed, to speak of opportunities for women's equality in a stratified country than it is in a more homogeneous one, or in an area where there are not enough employment opportunities for men, the traditional bread winners.

If we are to accept that social stratification influences the opportunities available to their members, it is almost futile to say that the oligarchy of Argentina is very far from being comparable to the middle class from all countries, the poor of all countries, and the non Spanish-speaking poor of others; and that the population of all Latin American countries is also far from being the Hispanic population of the American Southwest, where other cultural and linguistic factors add to the problem of diversity. If Mexico has been defined as many Mexico's, all Spanish American regions can be equally defined.

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Another way in which Spanish-America is diverse, is racially. While it could be said that, for the most part, racial discrimination in this area of the world does not exist, it is important to point out that it does, as it is to recognize that discrimination happens for other reasons than the color of the skin. Last, but not least, one must not forget that, to this day, Latin American Spanish is still mistakenly considered substandard by some, compared to its Peninsular form. American and British English seem to share a similar situation, by the way, as I know that British secretaries in the entertainment industry of Los Angeles, are often preferred over American ones. If we add to this problem the fact that indigenous languages have subsisted in Latin America, especially in those areas with a numerous and isolated indigenous population, we find that the problem is increased by their inability to communicate in the dominant language.

After the previous attempt of defining the problem, we shall try to offer some examples on how women have dealt with the above circumstances and in some cases, how old and new realities encouraged, or discouraged, fairness towards women in the past, the present and possibly the future of the Spanish-speaking world. In order to reach our goal, let us avail ourselves of a couple of truths that will serve us as springboards: one of them being, that overlooking these social, cultural, political and economic factors would be a grave mistake. And the other, that if one assumes, as one should, that education is the answer, one must also acknowledge the fact that educating the vast population of these countries is not only extremely expensive, but in many cases unaffordable.

The responsibility must also rest on women themselves as, failing to recognize that, in order for any woman to succeed, she herself must arrive at the point of reaching out to education. She must recognize that this is a condition proportionately related to, not only a financial and professional remuneration, but to an improved self-image. This premises lead us to accept the fact that more and better opportunities for women to become educated are needed, and that, although better legislation is necessary, this is not, at this moment, the heart of the problem in the United States or Spanish America, where legislation favoring women does exist. The real problem is narrowing the gap between the written law and its implementation. And of course, this is indeed one of the main, if not the main reason, we gathered at this round table!

It should also be pointed out, that the discrepancy between the written law and its enforcement is greater in Latin America for at least a couple of reasons. One of them being that, as you know, the American and the French Constitutions were the source of inspiration of Spanish-American leaders and legislators who, in some instances, copied these documents, almost verbatim, with a degree of idealism that prevented them from taking into consideration whether they addressed the reality of their countries. And that at least to some extent, the same happened to the more contemporary legislation on Women's Rights which, as we know, was born mainly in foreign lands. This has rendered this legislation somewhat inadequate to the socio-economic reality of these countries and therefore it has encountered a certain amount of opposition,

not so much in being written or recognized, but by overlooking or not encouraging its enforcement.

Once we have established that the problem is of a different nature, it is important to recognize that there are other obstacles to the closing of this tremendous gap. The first one being that many Hispanic women do not know yet how to protect themselves and their place outside of the home, because they have not yet developed the degree of expertise or awareness necessary to, not only place but also keep themselves at the same level as men in the economic, financial and social ladders. This has been previously stated but it must also be recognized in this context that women's failure to seek an education presents an obstacle to their becoming financially and psychologically independent from men. And last, but not least, that it is absolutely necessary for men to recognize and respect this need and for both, men and women to fully accept the new role of true sharing of enjoyment and responsibilities.

In this regard, I would like to offer you an example of how I attempt to define this problem. As a teacher of Spanish, I must help my students differentiate between emphasis and accentuation. When explaining that a diphthong is the combination of two vowels, a weak and a strong one, I point out to them how, by placing an accent mark on the weak vowel we are making a weak vocalic sound strong and that, by virtue of this strength, that weak vowel becomes independent from the strong vowel. I take advantage of this opportunity to put in a "plug" for education by saying that "a weak vowel with an accent mark is the same as a woman with an education or, for that matter, as a weak person (man or woman) with an education". The weak accented vowel becomes independent from the strong and so does the weak person from the traditionally strong one who, in turn, also shines in his or her own glory, shared by both!

Let me reiterate that if Mexico has been defined as many Mexicos, all Spanish American regions can be equally defined. But these nations share many characteristics, one of them of extreme importance: that it was in their land that the Spanish form of Western Civilization was first planted on this continent.

And if we are to start offering those special examples of extraordinary women of the Hispanic world and how they have perceived their own rights, we must start with a Spanish example. I just read a fine little book, part of a collection of fictitious diaries of queens and princesses. And I was fascinated by the diary of Isabella of Castile, one of the most extraordinary feminine figures in world history. The author speculates on the incipient manifestation of the tendencies toward independence and freedom of this brave young woman, who also possessed sound judgment and an incredible sense of direction, as proven by her decisions in her more mature years. But this book speaks of a young Isabella who, with little help from destiny, chose her future husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, over some not so desirable candidates. Their marriage consolidated their kingdoms into the single kingdom of Spain. Their motto as Kings of Spain, (TANTO MONTA, MONTA TANTO, ISABEL

COMO FERNANDO), revealed the fact that the worth and the power of each of the Catholic Kings was exactly the same and yet, in many respects, she proved her superiority, as did her daughter Catherine of Aragon, truly loved by her British subjects, according to the great Spanish writer and scholar, Salvador de Madariaga, in his book *Mujeres españolas*.

The writer also considers the fact that Isabella's best friend was a convert Jewish duchess, but her liberality was defeated by the conservatism of the world of her times. Or even perhaps, by a world dominated by men such as her confessor, whom, perhaps, in spite of her education and high degree of sophistication, she was unable to contradict? Let us blame the times, and not men, for the decision of expelling from Spain those who did not profess Christianity! But we cannot close this comment without saying that Isabella's display of a tremendous vision and ability is not an isolated case in Spanish history and letters. Her personality represents, in fact, a culmination of a series of Spanish feminine personalities of strong political and historical influence.

And speaking of influence, if there has ever been a woman who knew how to seek and handle it was a New Spanish (Mexican) nun of the XVII Century, a woman of great genius, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Being herself an illegitimate child of a Spaniard and a Creole woman, she had to strive for a place in a closely tight society. Her writings and personality allow us to learn about her surroundings, by our careful thinking about what she fails to say and do. This reading method is recommended by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz in his extensive study of this fascinating woman, whose extraordinary awareness of her right to learn was stifled by the society in which she lived. And on this same note, I am happy to say that I am preparing a performance, at the theatre of my university, of a short play, "From Heart to Heart", by Graciela Orozco, a fine Mexican actress who by using the poetry of two extraordinary women (the genius nun from New Spain and her contemporary, Saint Teresa of Avila) has created a dramatic text that explores some of the most contemporary issues in women's rights.

But the indigenous people of the New World must not be overlooked. And we must think of Malintzi, a Maya noblewoman of Tabasco, whose reputation as a traitor to the Aztecs was sustained by Mexicans through the XX Century. Only to be rescued in 1915's, by the dean of Mexican scholars, don Alfonso Reyes in his famous essay *Vision of Anahuac*. And today, sixty years later, she is also being vindicated by Mexican men and women writers, such as Carmen Boullosa and others of considerable stature.

The land of the Maya has produced extraordinary women, and in 2002 we can speak with great pride of another Maya woman, Guatemalan Roberta Menchú who, being very well educated, has succeeded in voicing the needs of her people. Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico, were once a single region of the Mayas. They are next to each other and are divided by an arbitrary border created by those who knew little about the pre-Columbian world. And it is from there that Commander Marcos and his men are speaking in favor of the indigenous people of that region, the Chamulas. Several questions rise from all

this. One might ask how a woman of this region can speak in favor of women's rights, when nearly everyone in this area lives at the bare level of subsistence! In this case, the plea has to be for all, and it is so in the case of the inhabitants of the Chamula region of Chiapas. The plea cannot possibly concern itself with just women, it has to remain at the general level of Human Rights without gender distinction. But Roberta Menchú is a woman who speaks for all. And here we could attribute her initiative to a phenomenon of the matriarchal societies of some indigenous peoples and of course, to genius!

Let us continue to reaffirm some of the realities of Hispanic America by turning our eyes to the urban reality of our times. And by recognizing that, although there may be a correlation between economical marginalization, cultural identity and ethnicity, Lourdes Arizpe, Ph. D., a Mexican graduate from the London School of Economics, has established that sub-employment has nothing to do with any of these factors in Mexico City, but that they relate mainly to economic conditions. The work focuses on Mexican marginal populations, specifically on women known as "Marías", who walk the streets of the capital and who supplement the income of their families by working as street vendors. Ms. Arizpe has also determined that it is meaningless to speak of sex discrimination in marginal populations, since most of these women are married to men who are also unemployed or underemployed and therefore both, he and she, are affected. There is no doubt that it is necessary to make available to them better financial and educational opportunities.

From all of the above one must recognize that in spite of their ability, Hispanic women, oftentimes do not enjoy the protection provided to them by the law. And that the efforts of the Mexican government and of others, men and women, to alleviate their problems will be rendered almost insignificant, unless the circumstances become more propitious to law enforcement and to educate a large majority of the people. In other words, the efforts are insignificant compared to the existing need. An environment that will provide, men and women, with the necessary resources to live a dignified life that will make it viable for the majority to receive an education, in order to know what to expect and what is expected of them, within their respective societies, is of the essence. The need is recognized, and so are the tools. But the means are meager.

But a great deal has been accomplished with meager means! Let us speak about both, opportunity and education, as they are interdependent. And let us recognize the great efforts of those women, from all levels, who have succeeded against all odds! Let me offer one more example, from my own experience, which may clarify some common ideas about the so-called third-world countries. If it is true that they were late in opening their doors to the education of women, there is a tendency to conclude from this truth, the false belief that almost all women continue to be uneducated in this area of the world. This is as incorrect as it is true that in 1958, the University of Mexico had many more women studying in the School of Business Administration than did one of the better Schools of Business in the American Southwest, San

Diego State College. I was at both places. Does all this mean that this has always been the case in all Mexican or Latin American universities? Of course not! And what was the perception of these middle-class women with respect to Women's Rights at that time? They knew that there was a place in society for them to practice their profession. These women had a sense of pride and a deep commitment to becoming educated! But it also must be admitted that in the business world women often receive lower salaries than men, in spite of the fact that their performance is oftentimes much more sound than that of some men. Latin America also has the problem of having a large very young population. And this poses a very serious problem the scope of this paper will not allow us to discuss.

I was puzzled to learn, while living in the United States, that women somehow have taken longer to be elected to public office than in Spanish-America. And here, there are also some inconsistencies. We may be surprised, as I was, to learn that one of the smallest countries in Latin America, Ecuador, was the first to allow women to vote in 1926, but that Mexico one of the largest and more modern ones, did not take the same step until twenty five years later! On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, 1953, women received the right to vote. And in 1955, four million women and five million men voted in the first Mexican election in which women could take part. It is important to point out that the numerical disparity between male and female voters was not that great, and that President Adolfo López Mateos assigned women to important posts in his cabinet and approved labor laws for their protection .

All of the above was the result of many socio-political and economic struggles by men and women and the beginning was not easy! It may be said that in some cases, due to their quick ascent to important positions, their contribution might have not been or perceived as solid, as that of some of their American counterparts, because these pioneers were sometimes not taken as seriously by some, both men and women. Whether this is or is not justified, one must start somewhere! It is fitting to point out that the previous President of the P. R. I (the political party that has been, and probably is, the strongest party which has ruled the longest in Mexico after the Revolution, is a woman. Ms. Beatriz Paredes. Ms. Paredes wears an indigenous attire as a symbol of her identifying with that segment of the Mexican population. She has now moved forward in her political career, as have other prominent women in key positions, such as Alejandra Rangel (Department of Public Education) and Rosario Green (Secretariat of Foreign Relations) and we can rest assured that in 2002 and 2003 they have been taken and will continue to be taken much more seriously than her predecessors of the 1950's and 1960's.

Yes, Spanish America was more prompt in responding to the call. And a woman rose to the near Presidency of Argentina. And her personality has been extremely controversial, but Eva Peron, in spite of all the criticism, and her resorting to all the theatricality and display of her charismatic femininity, succeeded in promoting well being among the workers of Argentina, to the

point of being so loved by her people that she was proposed as a candidate to canonization after her death!

Juan Domingo, her husband, was mocked for placing her or allowing her to place herself at the top, but perhaps Evita's true contribution to the image of a powerful woman rests on her willingness to sacrifice or make the necessary adjustments in her personal life to lead a better defined and more active role in public life. It is necessary for more women to recognize that, in order to see more open roads to their success, they must be willing to sacrifice and make the necessary adjustments. Women entitle women, and one should not overlook the fact that the first Latin American to receive the Nobel Prize, in 1945, was a woman: the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral. A rural teacher herself, she exalted the teaching profession and was welcome in Mexico to direct several cultural and literary projects, by no one less than three of the greatest Latin American writers of all times: Alfonso Reyes, essayist, poet, playwright, dean of Mexican Scholars, Pedro Enríquez Ureña, the outstanding Dominican almost Mexican writer and essayist, and José Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher and essayist who was then, Secretary of Education. "Her true merit rests in her prose writings from which her doctrine of human rights emerges with clarity and courage", says Fernando Alegría, her fellow Chilean literary critic.

#### SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

It is of the essence to teach women to think, not like men, as some have concluded, and much less become their carbon copy, but to understand some of the advantages of coming to terms with their need of coming out of their shells and transferring their educated innate virtues, to the whole of society.

Let us now look at another segment of the Spanish American population by recognizing that much, but not enough, is happening already in the Hispanic Southwest, where young Junior High-School students are being exposed, and hopefully will continue to be exposed to experiences that teach them the advantages of studying and being independent. But more and better preparation is needed and budgets are not as adequate. On the other hand, a great deal is also happening in the Hispanic American world, not only in the field of education, especially of the poor, but in other areas. One example of how these women are improving their financial status is that of the *maquiladoras* in the border towns between Mexico and the United States, where inexpensive labor is contracted and women are paid low salaries by American standards. These women are beginning to have more financial solvency and if my well-to-do acquaintances complain that they have no house help any more, and that the American economy is hurting their lifestyle, I cannot help but feel glad about the fact that these women are better paid than they would be otherwise. And one may ask whether these women are receiving an education. And I'll have to say that, as a rule, they are not, but that there are

some factories that have provided some education for these women whose families are eating, dressing and living better than before.

The channels for improving the life of women do exist. But there are also other dangers, such as the competition of less expensive Chinese labor. But let us not be pessimistic. As you know, schools have an increasing Hispanic population in the Hispanic Southwest. The University of California has 13% Hispanics, while some of the State Universities have a population as high as 30%. And the number of Chicano women writers, among them Sandra Cisneros, is constantly increasing. More women than men are going to college in the United States, and the female student population in Mexico is 50–50 in the case of the upper and upper middle classes. And many women work along with their husbands, each in their respective professions. But in Latin America, where unemployment is high, oftentimes one of the two will work, while the other one may have only part-time employment. So, while in the U. S. As more women than men are going to college. A good number of these women have a family and are going to school against all odds. In the *Quijote* class I teach, I have always asked my students what it means to them to follow their dreams and the young women often speak about how much it means to them to educate themselves and their children and how, sometimes, their husbands went to college before them or later will follow them. These are big dreams come true for Hispanic students, of either gender. But it is important to recognize that successful women often face old and new difficulties and all this is best expressed by another woman of the region of the Maya, a mestizo from Chiapas, Mexico, Rosario Castellanos, novelist, essayist, diplomat, poet, whose works address, also, the problem of the indigenous people of her homeland. Castellanos served in the National Institute of Protection of the Indigenous People of Mexico and defended the rights of men and women of not only that area, but of Mexico as a whole and the World. Her poems make a true exaltation of women and expose their case.

The above becomes more evident as we read her poetry. In *Meditation on the Brink*, Rosario Castellanos rejects different methods of which real women, as well as female fictional characters, have availed themselves in order to respond to the ancestral limitations placed upon them by society:

No, it's not a solution  
to throw oneself under a train like Tolstoy's Anna  
or gulp down Madame Bovary's arsenic  
or await on the barren heights of Avila

the visit of the angel with the fiery dart  
before finding the cloak over one's head  
and starting to act.

Nor to deduce geometrical laws by counting  
the beams of one's solitary confinement cell  
like Sor Juana did. . . It is not a solution  
to write while company arrives,  
in the Austen family living room  
or to shut oneself up in the attic  
of some New England house  
and dream, with the Dickinson's family Bible  
under a spinster's pillow.

There must be another way that's not named Sapho  
or Mesalina or Mary of Egypt  
or Magdalene or Clemencia Isaura.

Another way to be human and free.  
another way to be.

And if we wished to update another of her poems, *Valium 10*, written  
in 1973, all we would have to do in 2003 would be to change its title to perhaps  
to, perhaps, *Prozac10*, *Zoloft 100*, or *Buspar 200*, or give it the name of any  
other similar drogue still used today to serve the exact same purpose. Let us  
read *Valium 10*:

Sometimes, (and don't try to diminish its importance  
saying that it does not happen often)  
your measuring stick breaks,  
you misplace the compass  
and you have nothing left.

The day turns into a mere succession  
Of incoherent facts and functions  
That you perform through habit and inertia.

And you live it. And you dictate the letter  
to whom it may concern. And teach the class,  
The same, to the auditor as to those who are  
registered.

And that same evening you write the text  
the printing press will devour the next morning.  
And you keep an eye (Oh, just superficially)  
on how things are running at home, the perfect  
coordination of multiple programs

-because your oldest son now dresses up  
in order to attend a “quinceañera” dance  
and the youngest wants to be a football player  
and the middle one has a poster of Che near his record  
player.

And you go over the expense account and reflect  
with the cook, about the cost of living and the  
“ars magna combinatorial” from which the daily menu  
emerges.

And you still have strength left to remove your make-  
up and to put on the nurturing crème and even read  
a few lines before turning off the lamp.

And in the dark, at the beginning of your sleep,  
You realize what has been lost:  
the most expensive diamond,  
the navigating map, the book  
with one hundred basic questions (and its respective  
answers) for at least a basic, simple, elemental  
dialogue with the Sphinx.

And you have the painful sensation  
that in the crossword puzzle  
an error slipped,  
that made it impossible to solve.

And you spell out the name of Chaos.  
unless you take off the cap of the pill container and  
swallow the one that condenses,  
chemically pure, the order of the world.

The present conditions of women who are anxious and frustrated by the  
Multiplicity of roles they are expected to play, has been depicted by this great  
Mexican writer of all times, through her masterful use of irony!

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