The Mexican Revolution was a man's war. Granted there were moments for women, such as Aurelio Robles and others like her, who dressed as men and valiantly led troops into battle; the soldadera who prepared food, made love, smuggled ammunition, and provided inspiration for countless corridos; and elite feminists who fought for the rights of women. But what did the revolution really do for women in those initial heady decades? The more salient question is what did women do for the revolution? These are the two basic questions that must be considered when discussing this pivotal event in Mexico's history. The answer to these questions as indicated by the literature undermines the popular view of gender equality and gender rights. The Mexican Revolution was a fundamentally patriarchal event, but as many scholars have shown, women could negotiate patriarchal hegemony with enviable resourcefulness. Yet these acts, although pleasing to find in the historical record, speak to continuity more than change. Gender scholars of nineteenth-century Latin America revealed that women employed the rhetoric of liberalism to promote their causes before statesmen and judges much like their revolutionary sisters wielded the political language of the day to press their cases.[1] I do not mean to devalue the impact of the revolution on breaking down class barriers and empowering working-class voices in the new state, but women gained few significant benefits in the first half of the twentieth century. Still continuity does not mean stagnation. Revolutionary Yucatán was not Porfrian Yucatán. Stephanie J. Smith makes this clear in her welcome addition to regional studies of the Mexican Revolution.

Smith's impressive archival sleuthing in provincial repositories animates the story of Yucatán women in the Mexican Revolution. After culling through criminal records, legal statutes, feminist periodicals, and government documents, Smith presents us with an engaging study that is thematic rather than chronological. She sets the context of the "revolutionary laboratory" in the first two chapters by laying out government calls to improve women's status through education and new
labor laws. For example, Governor Salvador Alvarado (1915-18) attempted to lessen the dire situation of domestics by mandating minimum wages and hours and canceling debt servitude that kept them in a state of domestic slavery. Smith's analysis of revolutionary rural education meshes well with Mary Kay Vaughan's work but also provides interesting regional specificity by discussing how Alvarado bent to pressures from henequen planters to curb the radicalism of female teachers, who insisted on teaching their rural students about their legal rights. Smith also analyzes law codes and judicial outcomes in the Yucatán and how different types of courts either opened or closed doors for women, especially in cases of seduction, deflowering, and divorce. The short-lived military tribunals certainly favored women and handed down decisions that benefited them more than men. Women fared worse in regular courts, especially in the 1920s when medical doctors defined their honor through physical exams to judge the integrity of their hymens.

The next three chapters are the most revealing of how women negotiated the revolutionary project and staked their claim to nascent rights as citizens and women. Smith analyzes church-state relations and highlights the fight for control over marriage, birth, death, and popular morality. The anticlericalism of revolutionary leaders paralleled the same trajectory in Juárez's Mexico and made this reader think that liberals and Porfrian científicos never made the trip to the peninsula in the previous century. Nonetheless, the important conclusion of this discussion is that women fought anticlericalism with the words wielded by revolutionary statesmen. For example, in defending their right to regain their parish church and priest, one group of men and women cited Article 27 of the Constitution to argue that the churches belonged to the people, who also possessed individual rights to practice religion freely. Individual rights also played out in the liberalization of family law in the Yucatán. Divorce with the right to remarry became legal, and Smith found that for the first time, more men than women sought divorce under the new statutes. She suggests that women might have lacked the resources to hire lawyers to win their cases, but I suspect that women might have had more to lose in a bid to divorce, namely, the custody of their children. Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto made divorce even simpler by allowing one spouse to initiate the proceedings with or without notifying the other. This act fostered a divorce tourism industry whereby estranged spouses from the United States and other parts of Mexico traveled to Mérida to terminate their marriages legally. Indeed, divorce tourists could end a marriage in the morning and still visit Mayan ruins before dinner. Smith's fascinating discussion reveals nuanced changes in how some Mexicans viewed marriage, which was increasingly as a contract based on romantic love, one that each individual had the right to end when love fizzled. Prostitutes and other unruly women round out the story of women's agency in revolutionary Yucatán. Again the story could take place in 1890s Oaxaca de Juárez or 1905 Mexico City. The state monitored their movements, scrutinized their bodies, and continued to consider them the unclean rabble of the cities. Yet for a brief time, the state likened prostitutes to other exploited workers and endeavor to remove the loci of their abuse. Namely, they outlawed brothels and madams and expected prostitutes to be free agents to ply their trade and forbade them to live with more than one other public woman.

In the end, Smith's narrative is a cheerless tale when looked at from the top-down. Certainly Alvarado and Carrillo Puerto held progressive views but ultimately failed to liberate women, because they held fast to a gender ideology that valued women most for their subservient roles as wives and mothers. Elite feminists also failed to bring lasting changes to Yucatán women. Sexual honor still determined whether women received a fair hearing in court. In the end for most women, living in revolutionary Yucatán was not much different than living in Porfrian Mexico. Viewed
from the bottom-up, Smith's study is more hopeful. Yucatecas like their predecessors were not mere receptacles for state policy. They learned the revolutionary rhetoric and turned it back on the state to argue for their rights in the military tribunals or at feminist meetings. Yet this is not unique to this period. Women mustered the same strategies in colonial and nineteenth-century Mexico. What Smith's study proves is that women were indeed resourceful; they listened to the political discourse around them and could brandish that very language in attempts to advance their goals. Smith achieves another objective. She shatters the heroic feminist myth and proves that continuity more than change epitomized women's position in revolutionary Yucatán.

In sum, Smith's *Gender and the Mexican Revolution* is an engaging story of women who struggled to shape the revolutionary project but were stymied by a centuries-old gender ideology that blocked their emancipation. The book will find an audience among specialists, but Smith's engaging writing style and clear analysis makes this an excellent choice for classroom use as well.

Note

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24998

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.