Introduction: Why Women?

Gender is crucial to individual identity and, in all societies, to the roles individuals will play and the experiences they will have. The position of men and women in any society is a social construct, not a natural state. Each society and every social group has a culture that defines the roles and rules of masculinity and femininity; by conforming to these definitions, an individual becomes a "legitimate" man or woman.

The goal of this book is to examine these roles and rules and thus understand the variety and limitations of the female experience in colonial Latin America. One overarching limitation in both Spanish and Portuguese America was the existence of a patriarchal social organization. In the New World as in the Old, a clear sexual hierarchy placed women below men. By law and by tradition, men held the lion's share of power in government, religion, and society. Furthermore, a man, particularly a father, was supreme within his family. Legally, all those living within the household were required to obey him.

In this society, women were defined first and foremost by their sex and only secondarily by their race or social class. In many colonial documents, the lack of attention to women's race and class suggests that these attributes were malleable. Sex was not. Indeed, it can be argued that sex was the most important factor in determining a person's status in society. Nonetheless, gender alone does not explain the various experiences of women in colonial Latin America. We must also keep in mind the importance of race, class, demography, life course, spatial variations, local economy, norm and reality, and change over time.

Latin America was a unique region. Here, beginning in the sixteenth century, three peoples and their cultures were brought in close proximity with one another. Indigenous Americans, Africans, and European

Iberians were not on an equal footing, for by conquering America and importing African slaves, Europeans represented the dominant culture, the culture of the conquerors. Nonetheless, in Latin American colonial societies, the histories of three major groups of people were intertwined. But race in colonial Latin America was even more complex than these three major racial groups. Over time, new and socially distinct racial categories were created – *mestizo*, *mulato*, *zambo*, and their multiple variants – each with its individual social role and societal expectations. These expectations or stereotypes would at times provide women with both differing opportunities and limitations.

Colonial Latin America was also a society of clearly delimited social hierarchies. These hierarchies constantly affected the lives women led, whether at the top, middle, or bottom of the social scale. Acceptable behavior for a poor woman, daughter of a lamplighter or a weaver, was quite different from that for the daughter of a titled nobleman or a powerful miner.

Gender, race, and class worked in tandem. These overlapping categories produced situations in which a person's position in society could be both complex and contradictory. Because several elements determined what a woman could or could not do, one cannot simply consider one variable alone without keeping in mind other important factors. Perhaps the foremost factor was demography. The number of females and males living at any one time and place was of primary importance because the ratio of men to women (differential sex ratio) could enhance or limit women's choices. The relative number of males to females varied by age and was usually the result of death rates, types of settlement, and patterns of immigration. Thus, in regions that supplied migrants to developing zones, there was often an acute shortage of young men of marriageable age. On the other hand, in societies with a surplus of men, such as mining or frontier towns, women were a relatively scarce commodity and tended to have a greater field from which to select marriage partners.

Life course also affected women, for their experiences changed as they moved through childhood, courtship, marriage or spinsterhood, motherhood, widowhood, and old age. Moreover, a woman's responsibilities and power might vary greatly depending on her position within a household or family. For example, the wife of the head of a household probably had a far greater role in the running of her home than did a spinster aunt or an orphaned niece who lived under the same roof. A

woman's role also changed when, upon her husband's death, she became the head of a household or family.

Although all the regions mentioned in this book belonged to either the Spanish or the Portuguese crown, spatial variations also affected women's experiences. Regions differed in importance: Mexico and Peru from the earliest days of Spanish settlement were the centers of the empire, whereas Chile and the Río de la Plata tended to be more isolated. With respect to racial composition, some areas, such as the Andean highlands, maintained a relatively large indigenous population throughout the colonial period, whereas other zones, often along the coast, developed a large African American population. Women's lives were also influenced by the type of space they inhabited, that is, whether they lived in cities, in rural zones, or along the fringes of the empire.

Wherever they lived, the local economy had an impact on women's roles and women's relative power because the overall prosperity or poverty of a region made a difference in their lives. Elite women in seventeenth-century Mexico City, for example, lived lives of far greater opulence and diversion than did elite women in poorer regions, such as Santo Domingo. The nature of the local economy – agricultural, mining, or proto-industrial – as well as the specific goods produced also affected women, especially those forced to work for a living.

In these societies, there was often a gap between the social ideal, the model to which the society theoretically aspired, and the female-lived reality. To some degree, all women were subject to an ideal standard for female behavior. While this standard reflected social and racial variations, it was always clearly different from the standard for male behavior. But although both the law and cultural norms set standards, the experience of any one woman or group of women might vary significantly from the stated ideal. During times of economic and/or political stress, women were able to violate these standards and thus challenge culture ideals. Moreover, women's experiences in colonial Latin America changed over time. As the region moved from a society of conquest to one of stable institutions and Counter-Reformation Catholicism, and then to a society of modest enlightened reforms, both the female ideal and the female reality shifted.

My goal in this book is not to present colonial women as either empowered or victimized by their culture. All people live in their cultures and usually act in accord with the prevailing values of their times.

Most women, and men, do not think of themselves as victims of those values or as rebels defying social norms. Instead of seeking heroines or victims, this book hopes to understand women in their time and their society, without judging them by the standards of our political or social agendas. Only thus can we penetrate colonial society while illuminating questions of gender, power, and race.

This book begins by examining the role of women in the three societies that later would be joined by the Iberian voyages of discovery – European, African, and American. Chapter 1 reviews the legal and religious gender ideologies, as well as the social realities, that shaped the lives of women in the Iberian Peninsula. The position of women in the indigenous societies that would eventually come under the political domination of Spain and Portugal, as well as the role of women in traditional African societies, is reviewed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 analyzes the experiences of indigenous women within the New World through the period of conquest and colonization. In Chapter 4, we follow the migration of European women to America, examining their experience and the effect of their arrival. Chapter 5 concentrates on the role of women within marriage and the family. An analysis of the position and power of elite women within colonial society follows in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 examines the religious roles of colonial women and considers those who were tied to the church, both formally and informally. Next, Chapter 8 considers the economic roles of women, concentrating especially on the female presence in the colonial workforce. Slave women, an involuntary labor force, are the focus of Chapter 9. The book then considers women who deviated from socially acceptable patterns in Chapter 10, and it concludes by examining the gradual changes produced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment reforms in Chapter 11.

CHAPTER ONE

Iberian Women in the Old World and the New

> There are very few noble women who are beautiful, wise, soft, captivating, rational, and clean in all things that pertain to women and who are not covetous and envious of that which other women have. There are few women who are sincere and who do not contradict everything a man may say, do, or dictate, but rather are happy to accommodate his desires. But even though noble women with good attributes are difficult to find, men cannot live without them. Therefore, men must learn the ways to acquire their love.[1]

At the time of the discovery of the New World, a queen sat on the throne of Spain. Isabel I was a strong, even dominant woman. A fanatical defender of the Holy Roman Catholic faith, she was instrumental in imposing religious unity on both her own country and neighboring Portugal. At the same time, she fiercely maintained the juridical independence of Castile and established the laws of her kingdom as the foundation of Latin American jurisprudence. But Spain itself was the product of several traditions, as well as the conflicting experiences of warrior and mercantile societies. Church, law, and tradition all affected the role of women in the Iberian Peninsula and by extension in the American colonies.

Because both Spain and Portugal had experienced years of Moslem conquest, followed by years of Christian reconquest, the position of women in the Iberian Peninsula was quite different from that throughout the rest of Europe. The role of women in these societies reflected

[1] An anonymous fifteenth-century author, in Michael Solomon, trans. and ed., *The Mirror of Coitus* (Madison, Wis.: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1990), 30.

the combined effect of Islam and Roman Catholicism. On the one hand, the Islamic ideal of the cloistered, sheltered woman, the woman protected in the home or the harem, continued to resonate in Iberian society, as did the strong link between female virginity and honor. On the other hand, the gap between the idealized conduct of women and their real behavior was sizable. Women in Christian society, for example, especially the rural peasants, enjoyed a good degree of independence. Furthermore, women in Iberian societies benefited from legal rights that went far beyond those accorded to other European women at the time.

Spanish thinkers and writers such as Fray Martín de Córdoba, Juan Luis Vives, Fray Luis de León, and Juan de la Cerda influenced the gender ideology that conditioned the official fifteenth- and sixteenth-century view of women. All opined on the nature of women and all agreed that women were less intelligent, rational, and wise than men, a result of a nature governed by the flesh rather than the spirit. Intellectually inferior and possessing only limited understanding, women were constitutionally incapable of treating matters of substance. Because of their natural foolishness, women were admonished to keep silent. Furthermore, their lack of mental acuity made it unnecessary to teach them to write, although reading instruction sufficient to manage devotional literature was acceptable.

Not only mentally inferior, women were also morally fragile and prone to error. Their fleshly nature meant that women tended to have uncontrollable carnal appetites and could little resist temptation. They were particularly susceptible to evil and easily swayed by the devil. Unable to govern their own passions and behavior, women were dangerous to themselves, their families, and society at large if uncontrolled or uncloistered. Popular culture and literature not only accepted this vision of women; it also stressed that women were inconsistent, gossipy, overly emotional, irrational, changeable, weak, prone to error, deceitful, and profligate.

Although some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish and Portuguese writers emphasized the role of women within the family, the ideal of Counter-Reformation society was to keep women under control through enclosure. Only by remaining in their homes, convents, orphanages, *recogimientos*, prisons, or other institutions could women be protected from their "natural weaknesses." Only when placed under male religious guidance could women's unbridled sexuality be prevented from wreaking havoc on society. The growing strictures placed

on women were for their own good, the good of men, and the survival of Christian society.

Central to this gender ideology was paternalism, a belief in the dominant position of the father over his wife and children. Just as paternalism ordered the relationship between the monarch and his subjects or between the pope and his flock, it shaped that between men and women. Men were by definition morally superior to women, whereas women, because of their natural fragility, needed restrictive regulations defining their conduct. A man's role was to guide and control, a woman's to obey, whether within the context of kinship, marriage, or the church. As a result, a woman's place in society was defined primarily by her relationship to a man or a religious institution. Her most important social attribute was that she was the wife of a particular man, the daughter of so-and-so, or a nun.

The teachings of the Roman Catholic Church regarding premarital purity, marriage, and the concepts of male and female honor also greatly influenced gender ideology. The church decided what constituted acceptable sexuality, with whom and how. Believing that marriage should be the norm for all but the most pious, the church stressed the importance of female virginity before marriage and chastity after. Although there was no room for female sexual pleasure outside of marriage, sexual relations between husband and wife played a vital role within marriage. In theory, women had the right to demand that their husbands have sexual relations with them. Indeed, both marriage partners were encouraged to perform their *debito matrimonial* (conjugal duty), not for sexual pleasure but in order to accomplish the biblical injunction to "be fruitful and multiply."

The church's concept of sin stressed the sins of the flesh. Sexual abstinence was a virtue, and too much pleasure in sexual acts, even within marriage, was by definition sinful. This view was further enhanced in the mid-sixteenth century by the Counter-Reformation which stressed the link between sex and sin. Ideas about a woman's virtue were strengthened by an Iberian Christian culture that emphasized one figure, the Virgin Mary, an idealized female distanced from any sexual contact or experience. Paradoxically, although her condition as a mother "without blemish" made her impossible to emulate, she was the model for all female behavior, combining sexual purity, perfect motherhood, stoic suffering, and sacrifice.

The church, in conjunction with a woman's male kinsfolk, was charged with the important task of inculcating socially acceptable

behavior. Men, both clerical and lay, defined a woman's conduct and enforced their definition, and the misconduct of women was often seen as the private business of men. At the same time, the church worked to protect women's virtue and to control female sexuality by the use of the confessional, ecclesiastical visits, enclosure, and the Inquisition. A good woman was to be virtuous, pure, resigned to her lot in life, passively obeying her father, brother, husband, and confessor.

In addition to religion and gender ideology, Iberian society embraced a set of social codes in which honor figured prominently. For women, honor was tied to private chastity and public conduct. A woman's chastity was to be reflected in both her appearance and behavior; "good" women dressed modestly and were not erotic in their bearing. Meek in behavior, women were to avoid all and any situations that could lead them astray and seek semi-seclusion or at least the company of female family members of high repute. Honorable women were those who displayed *vergüenza* by going to church frequently, living with a respected family or in a convent, and generally leading an "honest and sheltered life."

A man could earn honor by conforming to the social ideals of his status group, while a woman could jeopardize it through the frailties of her flesh. According to prevailing ideas, women were divided into the "virtuous" and the "shamed," with the dividing line between these two groups closely tied to female sexuality. In theory, there were no gray areas in this moral code, and any woman who sought sexual pleasure inside or outside of marriage was the same as a prostitute.

Because the honor of the entire family depended on the sexual purity of its females, women's sexuality was subjected to severe control. But because not all families were equal, some had more honor to defend than others. Control of women's sexuality therefore differed according to social group. In Spain and in America, there was little direct control over the sexuality of lower-class women, for they and their families were viewed as having no honor to protect.

From the late fifteenth century on, another attribute of honor was "purity of blood" (*limpieza de sangre*) the proven absence of Jewish or Moorish ancestry. In America, people of African descent would soon be added to the list of those with impure blood. In both the Old World and the New, male and female lineages would be scrutinized for impurities, but female virtue was of paramount concern in ensuring that no impure blood entered a family's veins. Thus the control of female

sexuality, along with racial endogamy and an insistence on legitimacy, became the socially accepted method of guaranteeing that one's children enjoyed purity of blood.

Despite these values and stereotypes that placed women in a clearly subordinate position, the women of Castile – and, by extension, those of Spanish America – had comparatively greater legal rights than did other European women. Although their legal condition was far from equal to that of men, Castilian and Portuguese laws were exceptionally fair to women. This was especially true for laws of inheritance; both males and females were legal heirs. Indeed, inheritance depended on legitimacy and the degree of relationship to the deceased, not gender; if a woman was a closer blood relative, she was preferred over a man. Furthermore, it was impossible to disinherit one's legitimate progeny, and all women, regardless of their marital status, could inherit and own property.

Iberian law also called for equal inheritance for all of a couple's legitimate children. This meant that heirs inherited irrespective of their sex, age, or order of birth. In other words, inheritance was gender blind. This principle of equality was highly beneficial to women. But, paradoxically, women from the wealthiest families in the Iberian Peninsula and America were at a disadvantage if their forebears had created entails (*mayorazgos*), which reserved the estate for the eldest male. In matters of *mayorazgo*, women could inherit titles and properties only when there was no surviving male heir.

With the exception of *mayorazgo*, women inheriting, owning, buying, selling, exchanging, and donating property had the same basic legal rights as men. Women not only inherited property; they could also bequeath it, thus transferring property to their heirs. Moreover, on the death of their husbands, widows were entitled to half of the property belonging to the couple. In some cases, widows could inherit the right of *patria potestad*, the legal control over the lives and property of their minor children. Even in marriage a woman's property remained hypothetically distinct from that of her husband, and, as a result, children inherited separately from their mother and father. If a married woman died without children, her parents, siblings, and cousins, not her husband, had first claim on her estate. Tied to the concept of separate maternal and paternal property inheritance was that of separate maternal and paternal lineage; in Spain, Portugal, and Iberian America, children took the last names of both their father and mother.

The granting of a dowry at the time of marriage was another way to transfer property to women. Dowries, given to help support the expenses of marriage, were legally an advance payment of a daughter's eventual inheritance. The grant, usually made in the form of goods and cash, theoretically belonged to the woman, although the actual control of the property usually fell to her husband. But he could not alienate any part of the dowry and was responsible for preserving it as best he could. In Spain as in America, a woman who believed her husband guilty of malfeasance could bring him to court, demanding that her dowry be returned to her or administered by someone else. As early as 1693, for example, a Michoacán woman sued to reclaim her dowry, removing it from the hands of her spendthrift husband. Upon the death of her husband, repayment of the dowry to the widow took precedence over all other obligations. If a bride died childless, the dowry was returned to her parents.

The rights of single women were especially marked in Castilian society. Like single men, unmarried women reached the legal age of majority at twenty-five. Paradoxically, social pressures worked to encourage marriage, an institution that limited a woman's legal independence. Unlike those of men, women's legal rights were affected by their marital status, for marriage deprived women of a separate juridical personality, transforming them into the legal wards of their husbands. Married women needed their husbands' permission to do what single women were free to do – buy, sell, give away their property, and draw up a will. Nonetheless, because both church and state were determined to safeguard the institution of wedlock, marriage also bestowed social status and a degree of power on women.

Marriage in the Iberian Peninsula was a legal, ritual, liturgical, and sacramental matter, governed by the rules of canon and civil law, which in turn were based on Roman law. Holy wedlock was also a legal contract that joined a man and a woman in a household for purposes of sexual intercourse, procreation, and general cooperation. Marriage was a necessary condition to bear legitimate children – that is, children who were acknowledged by both parents, entitled to support from both parents, and legally able to inherit from both parents.

Because marriage was a religious sacrament, it was governed by the Roman Catholic Church. The church not only performed the marriage; it set the requirements for a marriage to be legally binding. Canon or church law established that a man or a woman could have only one spouse at a time (monogamy) and defined eligible marriage partners.