The Oversimplification of Rural Women of the Mexican Revolution

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In her 2017 book, *México's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women*, author B. Christine Arce argues that women of the Mexican Revolution have been presented as an afterthought in many popular historical narratives. Women's understatement may be expected since iconic primary sources have not given historians much to work with. *Corridos* from the period portray revolutionary women in a problematically romanticized way to service the male gaze.[1] Written accounts of these women place extensive emphasis on female soldiers' ability to defeminize themselves or simply characterize them as helpmeets for men. A century later, many modern works still echo problematic attitudes and sentiments that originated from these sources, even if unintentional. Although there has been progress in demystifying the complexities of women during the Mexican Revolution, such as Arce's recent work, many scholars have still fallen into this trap of oversimplification. Women's crucial roles during the Mexican Revolution have long been minimized in popular narratives. When histories do acknowledge these women, they are bound by strict stereotypes based on patriarchal perceptions, such as the camp follower, *soldadera*, *Coronela, Adelita*, or *Valentina*. In this paper, I counteract the disturbing lack of nuance offered by historical narratives concerning these women in order to restore these women's complex contributions to the history of the Mexican Revolution.

I have selected four primary sources which serve as evidence to support my argument: a firsthand account from a Pancho Villa camp, two iconic revolutionary corridos, and a piece of

[1] *Corrido*s are popular, poetic ballads, which spread the folklore narratives of historical events and figures of Mexico. Many were created during and shortly after the Mexican Revolution, and often told stories about romance, outlaws, and revolutionary figures. Corridos vary depending on their period and their performer, but the general sentiments are usually similar across different versions. For more information, see Henry Cowell, "Mexican Corridos," *Smithsonian Institution*, accessed November 20, 2025; Dan W. Dickey, "The Corrido: A Cultural Ballad of the Mexican-American Experience," *Texas State Historical Association*, updated October 9, 2020.

feminist literature. These pieces allow scholars to see how these women were perceived during the Mexican Revolution and how these accounts were replicated following the conflict. Sources created post-1920 serve as brilliant examples of how the patriarchal perceptions of these women evolved to fit different narratives. The firsthand account of women during the Revolution can be found in American war correspondent John Reed's 1914 book, *Insurgent Mexico*. In the chapter "Elizabetta," Reed describes his observations of and interactions with a widowed Villa camp follower of the same name. Both corridos analyzed in this essay are broadside prints, which include lyrics of the ballads "Adelita," and "Valentina," alongside illustrations by José Guadalupe Posada. The ballads are dated as being printed in 1917 and 1915, respectively, and served to influence the public's perception of revolutionary women. My last source is Margarita Robles de Mendoza's 1931 *The Evolution of Women in Mexico*, or *La Evolucion de la Mujer en Mexico*, which was a book that compiled numerous articles she had written over the years. One of the most iconic feminist authors of her time, the book includes an article which discussed the mythical soldadera in the promotion of moderate feminism in Mexico.

Scholars debate the span of the Mexican Revolution, so this paper employs the well-established timeframe of 1910 to 1920. The revolution that followed President Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship was a bloody and chaotic period of Mexico's history. The call to arms from Francisco Modero's *Plan de San Luis Potosí* mobilized the rural populations of North and South Mexico and contributed to the emergence of the three vital early revolutionaries: Pascual Orozco, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, and Emiliano Zapata. In the North, Orozco and Villa raided federal military sites with little to no mercy. In southern Mexico, Zapata led his forces in the Battle of Cuautla, where they engaged in guerilla warfare against Díaz's army.[2] When Villa captured Ciudad Juarez at the

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[2] Susan M. Deeds, Michael C. Meyer, and William L. Sherman, "Madero and the Liberal Indictment of the Porfiriato," in *The Course of Mexican History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 369-370.

same time as Zapata's victory in Cuautla, the regime fell to Madero in 1911.[3] Madero did not stay President for long; in 1913 he was forced to resign by General Victorio Huerta before presumably being assassinated. Following these events, a civil war began, with revolutionary leaders who felt betrayed rebelling against the new regime. Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, along with rebels Alvaro Obregón and Venustiano Carranza, resisted Huerta's rule through violent means.[4]

As the Mexican Revolution continued to evolve and the country cycled through numerous presidents, rural women of the lower class continued to be involved in the military enterprise. Many were left with no better choice than to become camp followers, others were forced to join the movement, and others found liberation through their revolutionary efforts. The railroads built by the Díaz regime revolutionized war within Mexico, as they allowed for this hypermobility of the rebel forces' weapons, cavalries, and women.[5] Many of these women were camp followers in some form or another, who performed domestic duties for the troops such as laundering, cooking, and setting up camps.[6] As the conflicts of the period ravaged the rural regions of the country, these women also participated in the conflict as soldiers on both sides. Regardless of why they supported whichever side they did, these women blurred the lines between the different roles historians have identified, a fact that many histories of the Mexican Revolution fail to acknowledge.

Many scholars agree that the study of women of the Mexican Revolution truly began in 1980, with historian Anna Macías's article "Women and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920." Scholarly literature that discussed these women had been published prior to her article, but Macías's work is most important to modern historians' research of rural women's participation in

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[3] Deeds, Meyer, and Sherman, "Madero and the Liberal Indictment of the Porfiriato," 374.

[4] Mitchell Yockelson, "The United States Armed Forces and the Mexican Punitive Expedition: Part 1," *Prologue*, Fall 1997.

[5] B. Christine Arce, "Soldaderas and the Making of Revolutionary Spaces," in *México's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women* (State University of New York Press, 2017), 43.

[6] Rebecca Epstein, "La Adelita, Part 1: Feminist Fighter or Chauvinist Creation?" *The Strachwitz Frontera Collection*, February 2, 2021, accessed October 4, 2025.

the revolution. Macías's piece pioneered further research and literature, given how many works published within the last decade reference her knowledge. However, she also introduced a common issue historians encounter when discussing women who participated in the revolution, which is the reductive and often disagreed upon terminology. Macías believes there is a very harsh distinction to be made between *soldaderas* and those who fought in battle alongside the male soldiers, or *soldados*.[7] Macías's definition of the soldadera was heavily inspired by the one presented by author Rosa E. King, which reduces them to merely followers of their male leaders.[8] She echoes King's description claiming that, "The Mexican soldadera followed her man when he left home…if he died, she became another soldier's woman."[9] Her sentiment also appears influenced by the aforementioned account of John Reed, whose description of a woman named Elizabetta describes that exact phenomenon. Macías denounced these *La Coronelas* as "unusual" as well, diminishing their efforts while enforcing traditional gender roles.[10]

Such a conservative sentiment undermines these women's efforts and their identity. Nevertheless, I argue this sentiment is still present in the historical literature, although more scholars are attempting to dispel such portrayals. Andrés Reséndez Fuentes argues in his article, "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution," that women who did accompany male soldiers to the conflicts of the revolution were "…generally regarded as

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[7] *Soldadera* refers to the Spanish word soldada, or soldier's pay. The term originated from male soldiers paying women of the military camps for domestic services, such as laundering, meal preparation, et cetera. For more information, see "Viewpoints on Women in the Revolution," Library of Congress, accessed November 20, 2025.

[8] Rosa E. King was an English woman who lived through the Mexican Revolution as a hotel owner in Cuernavaca. Her book, *Tempest Over Mexico*, details her lived experiences as a foreigner present during the Mexican Revolution. For her description and definition of the soldadera, see "Chapter XII," in *Tempest Over Mexico* (Little Brown and Company, 1940), 182-4.

[9] Anna Macías, "Women and the Mexican Revolution: 1910-1920," *The Americas* 37, no. 1 (1980): 71.

[10] *Coronela* is the label Macías assigned to women who fought in conflicts, organized military troops and operations, and held titles. Macías, "Women and the Mexican Revolution," 75.

marginal to the fighting and extraordinary, or strange, in character."[11] Although Fuentes does make an effort to dismantle this perpetuation of sexism, he is one of numerous historians who separates these women in based on their actions. In his article about the different ways women were organized by revolutionary leaders and their supports, Fuentes is a staunch supporter of creating neat and orderly classifications, specifically stating that women who fought in battles should be referred to as female soldiers or fighters, with camp followers being a synonymous term for soldadera.[12] Fuentes's article claims that scholars' emphasis on the versatility of these women overcomplicate analyses of their motivations.[13] While there is logic behind Fuentes's perspective, it completely disregards the complexity of women's motivations and actions, viewing them through the single lens of gender roles. Such a limited focus on what women did and what label they must be assigned by scholars only further contributes to the sanitized, gendered stereotypes that continue to plague modern histories.

Utilizing clearly defined terminology can allow historians to easily convey the wide variety of responsibilities women took up during the Mexican Revolution. However, modern works that attempt to dismantle the patriarchal perspectives on these women have fallen victim to the oversimplification which accompanies this strategy. For example, a 2019 article from *The Toro Historical Review* aimed to shine a spotlight on the significant impact of these women and denounce their sexualization by popular media. But it still perpetuated the reductive labels of the domestic camp follower and the brave soldadera.[14] Many modern publications unfortunately disregard nuances when it comes to these stereotypes, with most of the secondary literature I

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[11] Andrés Reséndez Fuentes, "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution," *The Americas* 51, no. 4 (1995), 525.

[12] Fuentes, "Battleground Women," 547.

[13] Fuentes, "Battleground Women," 526.

[14] Jessica Yarissa Mora, Diana Martinez, and Daisy Sanchez, "The Sexualized Image of Soldaderas Using Propaganda from the Mexican Revolution: 1910-1920," *The Toro Historical Review* 7, no. 1 (2019).

explored still utilizing rigid terminology. There is hope, however, with authors such as B. Christine Arce embracing the unorganized realities of these women. Arce specifically calls out prior works, such as Anna Macias's article, for their lack of nuance. In her chapter "Soldaderas and the Making of Revolutionary Spaces," Arce argues that while categorical distinctions can be useful, such clean-cut identities oversimplify the reality that women served a range of ever-evolving roles. For example, Arce shows that many women who were served primarily in domestic, feminine roles transitioned to fighting in the battles, such as those who "…when their soldier perished, picked up his rifle and continued [to fight] for him."[15] By neglecting the many different responsibilities taken on by rural women, historians fail to properly recognize their influence on the Mexican Revolution.

John Reed's perspective of the Mexican Revolution was recorded initially as a commission for *Metropolitan Magazine*. Many scholars note his book, *Insurgent Mexico*, as both providing valuable insights and containing an incredibly biased, and at times, problematic, perspective of the Mexican Revolution.[16] In the chapter, "Elizabetta," the peon army that Reed was shadowing had lost to the federal troops at La Cadena, and in defeat, they trekked to Santa Domingo to break before their next move.[17] The women Reed observes at the camp are described as docile, subservient creatures. The dialogue between Reed and a man named Don Petronilo introduces the reader to the patriarchal society of the Revolutionary War.[18] When talking to Reed about all he had lost because of their defeat, Petronilo cries out for his wife and other belongings, such as his money, before exclaiming, "But I am wrenched with grief when I think of my silver spurs inlaid with

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[15] B. Christine Arce, "Soldaderas and the Making of Revolutionary Spaces," in *México's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women*, State University of New York Press, 2017, 61.

[16] Reed was notably biased toward the revolutionaries and perpetuated simplified stereotypes regarding the Mexican Revolution. For further insight, see Kenneth J. Grieb, review of *Insurgent Mexico*, by John Reed, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 1, no. 3 (1970): 638.

[17] The word "peon" means rural, usually poor, wage-laborers and acts as the primary term Reed uses to describe the rebel forces he shadowed during his time in northern Mexico.

[18] Don Petronilo was a soldier of the peon army who fought at the hacienda in La Cadena.

gold….”[19] When Reed first perceived Elizabetta, she was trudging behind the mounted Captain Felix Romero. He claimed that she had been found following the defeat at the hacienda, traumatized by the death of her husband and wandering around the battleground. Captain Romero claimed her as his woman and she followed behind him as he traveled to San Domingo, carrying his riffle as he commanded her to. Elizabetta supposedly saw Reed and pleaded for him to let her stay with him for the night. Reed allows her to, and while the captain is beyond insulted, the two simply sleep next to one another, as the village serenades them. By the next morning, Elizabetta accepts the captain as "…[her] man…" and when Reed inquires whether she will travel further north with the troops that day, she bewilderingly replies that she will, as she must go with her new man.[20] Reed's text demonstrates how women's value was measured by their ability to provide for men and their community; they were seen as commodities rather than people.

The corridos of the Mexican Revolution epitomize an idealized woman who fulfilled roles through extreme feminization and sexual objectification. Women did indeed fight in the battles as covered above, but their history has been sanitized to reinforce the patriarchy of Mexican society. One of the most noteworthy examples of this belittlement is the corrido, "Adelita." The woman who inspired this corrido is unknown, just as most female revolutionaries have been made anonymous in the historical narrative.[21] The 1917 broadside print contains a variety of the corrido's lyrics as well as an illustration drawn by José Guadalupe Posada. The story does mention the conflicts of the Mexican Revolution, but only to emphasis the narrator's relationship with Adelita. In the final two sections, the narrator exclaims, "…my homeland calls me to the camps to go and fight. Adelita, Adelita…by God do not forget about me…So then stay, Adelita…I am going to go

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[19] John Reed, "Elizabetta," in *Insurgent Mexico* (D. Appleton & Company, 1914), 101.
[20] Reed, "Elizabetta," 109.
[21] Epstein, "La Adelita, Part 1."

to war to fight…"[22] In this corrido, Adelita was not a brave revolutionary, but rather, an object of affection that inspired male soldiers to risk their lives for the revolutionary cause. Adelita is instead a reward for the narrator to return to, one he fantasizes about as he leaves for battle "…who I love and cannot forget, who I love and idolize, and who I will marry."[23] Adelita is a concrete example of how women's efforts during the Mexican Revolution were erased.

In similar fashion, "Valentina Nuevo Corrido," assigned women a perfunctory role in the Mexican Revolution. The lyrics of the corrido have morphed over time, especially in the case of translations. However, the lyrics printed on the broadside from 1915 tell the story of a revolutionary man infatuated with a young woman named Valentina. The narrator's passion is misogynistic at its core, as his language conveys an overtly masculine, almost animalistic desire for this woman. The word choices made claims his passion dominates him and says he is being hunted by his enemies, words that invoke thoughts of predatory animals.[24] His word choice demonstrates that these revolutionary women are nothing more than a creation for men; they are living creatures just like men, but they exist to be subservient and serving. The narrator reinforces this rhetoric through the sexual objectification of not just Valentina, but also multiple *Juanas*.[25] "One Juana and another Juana, two Juanas I have at the same time…" implies that the narrator is being pleasured by multiple women at once, promoting the viewpoint that revolutionary women did nothing more than their feminine duties (domestic tasks and sex work) and only to benefit their men.[26] The image that accompanies the text, once again illustrated by Posada, only furthers this

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[22] José Guadalupe Posada, "Adelita," broadside, Mexico City: Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, 1917, from Philadelphia Art Museum. Trans. by Samantha Lizarraga.

[23] Posada, "Adelita," trans. by Samantha Lizarraga.

[24] José Guadalupe Posada, "Valentina nuevo corrido," broadside, Mexico City: Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, 1915, from Library of Congress: *Caroline and Erwin Swann collection of caricature and cartoon*. Trans. by Samantha Lizarraga.

[25] Within the context of the lyrics, *Juanas* most likely refer to camp followers of some sort or another, who the author does not know the individual names of.

[26] Posada, "Valentina nuevo corrido," trans. by Samantha Lizarraga.

problematically romanticized narrative. Posada's depiction of Valentina caters to the male gaze with her showgirl outfit. "Valentina," served to further diminish the crucial efforts of rural women during the Mexican Revolution. Besides, sanitizing real figures who participated in the conflicts like "La Adelita," the corrido emboldens the patriarchally approved version of revolutionary women.

Margarita Robles de Mendoza's article on feminism and suffrage was published alongside several other works of hers in a collection in 1931. The primary content of this work was to advocate for a moderate variety of feminism, based primarily on a concept akin to complementarianism.[27] Her mention of the soldadera figure is brief, but the excerpt provides a valuable perspective of rural women during the Mexican Revolution in the 1930s. Robles de Mendoza employs a romanticized version of the soldadera to advocate for feminist ideals, specifically in a way that reassured conservative readers. Her language is selected carefully, as she justified the masculinity of these women as necessary to support her man and their shared country, "…she has faithfully followed in his footsteps…He has taken her with him everywhere. Wife, friend, comrade, partner, all this she has been for her man…"[28] Although Robles de Mendoza's motivations were progressive in nature, her usurpation of the soldadera for her political goals contributes significantly to the injustices these women face in the historical narrative. Robles de Mendoza's portrayal negates the fact that, as pointed out by Arce, many women were captured and forced to participate against their will, or had no other choice but to join the efforts of the revolution to ensure their survival.[29] Robles de Mendoza's rhetoric is a primary example of how these women

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[27] In her work, Robles de Mendoza makes several claims that women and men should be equal because they serve different roles in society that are meant to work together, a concept that is reminiscent of modern interpretations of theological complementarianism.

[28] Margarita de Robles Mendoza, *La Evolution de la Mujer en Mexico*, 97-104, Mexico: Imp Galas, 1031, quoted in "The Mexican Revolution (1910-1940)" in *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader*, edited by Nora E. Jaffary, Edward W. Osowski, and Susie S. Porter, Westview Press, 2009, 331.

[29] Arce, "Soldaderas and the Making of Revolutionary Spaces," 61-2.

have been misrepresented in the historical record, which has ultimately, even if subconsciously, been perpetuated by modern studies.

Corridos produced during the Mexican Revolution and literature that was published shortly thereafter built the foundation of problematic representations of rural women during the decade, which historians have, even if inadvertently, echoed in modern narratives. Many modern narratives of the Mexican Revolution still minimize women's roles and contributions, which does a disservice to these women and to the history itself. Experts, such as Elena Poniatowska or Elizabeth Salas, note that without women performing the various roles they did during the revolution, it never would have survived, and Mexican history would be vastly different.[30] I concur with this sentiment and additionally illustrate that even in recently published scholarly literature, historians place too great an emphasis on separating these women into various archetypes, even if they offer more modern analysis overall. Without discussing the fluidity of women's participation in the Mexican Revolution, or how their efforts have been historically simplified, gendered, and or completely ignored, scholars only further contribute to the patriarchal rhetoric that plagues the historical community.

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[30] Elena Poniatowska is a renowned journalist and author regarding women of Mexico. See, Elena Ponitowska, *Las Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution*, (Cinco Puntos Press, 1999).