

Chapter 6

Madrinas Paving the Way: Understanding the Development of Latinx Feminism

Kiara Manosalvas

Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

Brooke Rappaport

Tennessee State University, USA

Lucia Quezada

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7305-7070>

University of Georgia, USA

Grace-Ellen Mahoney

University of Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT

*This chapter provides an overview of the history of Latinx feminism. It includes a brief history about Latinx feminist leaders and the development of feminism including womanism, Black feminism, *mujerismo*, and *womanista*. The chapter includes ways in which Latina feminism highlights indigenous ways of knowing including *mestiza* consciousness, *borderlands*, and *nepantla*. This chapter sets the groundwork for the authors to explore contemporary perspectives on Latinx feminism including their own feminist identity developments in another chapter.*

“Racism in Latin America is sophisticated enough to keep Blacks and Indians in the subordinate condition within the most exploited class, because its most effective form of ideology: the ideology of whitening, so well analyzed by Brazilian scientists. Transmitted by means of communication and the traditional ideological systems, it reproduces and perpetuates the belief that the ratings and values of white West-

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ern culture are the only true and universal. Once established, the myth of white superiority proves its efficiency and the effects of violent disintegration, fragmentation of ethnic identity produced by him, the desire to whiten (“cleaning the blood” as they say in Brazil), is internalized with the consequent denial of their own race and own culture.” (Lèila Gonzalez, 1988, p. 15, translated from Portuguese)

BRIEF HISTORY

History is filled with many examples of Latinx leaders whose activism contributed to the rise of a new, more radical feminism – a feminism that honored and centered the unique experiences of women of color. Latinx feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Dolores Huerta, Cherríe Moraga, Florinda Soriana Muñoz, Yolanda Guzmán, Ana Livia Cordero, Lèila Gonzalez, and several others had a profound impact on future generations of Latinx people. Through story-telling, political activism, and artistry, these influential Latinx feminists began spreading an important message and opened the door for future Latinx feminists (Charleswell, 2014; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

Unfortunately, the influence of these powerful women is often minimized when Latinx history is taught. This suppression of history and knowledge is not accidental; instead, it is a systemic suppression of history used to manipulate marginalized communities into participating in their own oppression (Chavez-Dueñas & Adames, 2021). For example, in contemporary Latinx culture, *marianismo* refers to the gender-role expectations placed on Latinx women and the associated behaviors, norms, and guidelines that they are then expected to fulfill. Specifically, marianismo emphasizes self-sacrifice, self-denial, subjugation, honor, nurturance, humility, and chastity (Comas-Díaz, 1988; Ginorio et al., 1995; Gil & Vasquez, 1996). Marianismo has become an incredibly powerful tool of gender oppression amongst Latinas that reinforces a strict binary socialization of gender identity (i.e., male vs. female) and sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexuality; Chavez-Duenas & Adames, 2021). However, marianismo as a gender ideology did not even exist within Latinx culture until the Spanish colonized the Americas. The Spanish enforced these ideas of marianismo (and later institutionalized these beliefs via oppressive, misogynist laws) as a tool of colonization to silence and disempower Latinx women. One of the most insidious ways the Spanish did this was by socializing Latinx women to develop a profound reverence for the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary was described as “the worker in the home, the self-sacrificing woman, the balance of motherhood and purity” (Baldwin & DeSouza, 2001, p. 10). Consequently, Latinx women were socialized to believe that being a “good woman” meant behaving just as Virgin Mary would. And so, began the erasure of the powerful, revered Latinx woman.

Understanding the impact of colonization and gendered racism on Latinx women is critical, but what is just as important (yet often dismissed) is a discussion of how Latinx and Indigenous women were regarded prior to Spanish imperialism. Pre-colonial accounts of women in Latin America demonstrate that they were revered and seen as powerful, with many women serving in high leadership positions (Chavez-Duenas & Adames, 2021). For example, Aztec culture enforced laws that ensured that both women and men received equal shares in economic inheritance. Andean culture reinforced that women had rights to all inherited and acquired goods and property, regardless of marital status. Unfortunately, the Spanish could not tolerate the political, religious, and economic power that Latinx women held in society, and thus began the gendered-racism that diminished and silenced women. This gendered-racism was later institutionalized via laws that prevented women from obtaining their own property. Under these same laws imposed by the Spanish, all married women were classified as legal minors, meaning

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