

Building Sexual Boundaries: The U.S.-Mexico Border in the Early 20th Century

Written by Marlene Medrano

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MARLENE MEDRANO, JUL 14 2013

The regulation of sexuality was pivotal to United States-Mexico relations in the early 20th century. Government officials, business people, and reformers used the political border to uphold and at times, negotiate sexual boundaries. Anxieties over the dangers to American citizens in the border vice districts came close to causing diplomatic crises several times over the course of the early 20th century. Finally, competing interests at the local, national and transnational level, including the actions of sex workers, shaped sexual commerce in the borderlands.

The United States and Mexico: Two Nationalist Projects

In the early twentieth century, both the United States and Mexico were in the midst of two distinct nationalist projects. By 1920, the military phase of the Mexican Revolution had ended and subsequent governments took on the task of building a modern, progressive nation that presumably incorporated peasants, workers, indigenous people, and women. Revolutionary reformers pursued prostitutes in their gendered program of modernization, through hygiene and rehabilitation, and state-building. In Mexico City, public health officials, hygienists, doctors, psychiatrists, and politicians debated the impact of prostitution and proposed possible measures to reduce sexual commerce. Indeed, prostitution reform became central to state building; in particular, it was crucial to the project of improving the lives of Mexican citizens and redeeming the nation.[i]

The United States, on the other hand, was nearing the end of the Progressive Era (1890-1920), which was characterized by a series of reform movements that targeted prostitution, alcohol, and immigration in an effort to protect the body politic. Reformers' efforts resulted in the abolishment of regulated prostitution throughout most of the country, in the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol, and in restrictive immigration legislation. Progressive Era reformers had delineated a connection between prostitution and immigrants and blamed immigrants for other social ills such as diseases, crime, and pauperism. Their concern with immigration as well as rising fears of white slavery (forced prostitution) led them to concentrate on the Mexican border and push for more restrictive immigration legislation.

For example, the 1907 Immigration Act included a provision which "prohibited alien women and girls from engaging in prostitution for three years after arriving in the United States." Reformers' angst over women's unbridled sexuality led to the passage of white slavery laws, the most significant being the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, widely known as the Mann Act. The law prohibited the transportation of women across state lines 'for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose.'[ii] Grace Peña Delgado has shown how these laws, rooted in the fears of social purity reformers, worked together with immigration laws to exclude certain groups of people at the Mexican border based on their sexual behaviors. Mexican sex workers in particular were either denied entry or deported once immigration inspectors determined they were engaged in sexual commerce in the United States.[iii] Immigrants and prostitutes posed a direct threat to the white, Protestant American family-nation that Progressive reformers worked so diligently to protect.

Progressive Era reformers initiated a movement that the creation of the Border Patrol in 1924 reinforced. The Border Patrol was established as a regulatory apparatus justified by concerns over public health that excluded

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“undesirables” who might pose a threat to the body politic.[iv] This meant further targeting sex workers who tried to enter the United States through Mexican ports of entry. Both nations used familial metaphors in their articulation of the nation albeit for distinct purposes: Mexico used the ‘family as nation’ metaphor to define the new roles for men and women, whereas the United States used it to advance the policies of exclusion initiated by Progressive Era reformers.

Prohibition and Vice Economies

The advent of Prohibition (1919-1933) and the end of the military phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) created conditions that were ripe for the rise of vice economies (including saloons, gambling halls, and brothels) in Mexican border towns. Northern Mexico had been devastated economically after a decade of civil war. Therefore, local governments welcomed the revenues from tourism. Prohibition in the United States led to a tourism boom in several border cities where alcohol was easily accessible. Americans crossed into the Mexican border cities to patronize bars, casinos, and cabarets in unprecedented numbers. Moreover, a steady stream of American prostitutes fleeing reformist persecution had been making their way to Mexico to ply their trade alongside local sex workers since the turn of the century. The Mexican federal government tried to impose revolutionary reforms but had to contend with complex local politics. Bankrupt municipalities along the border saw prostitution and alcohol as sources of much needed income rather than as targets of reform measures.

The United States government concentrated on keeping undesirable people and their “immoral” activities out of the nation, producing legislation that placed substantial restrictions on prostitutes and procurers. Furthermore, during the Progressive Era and increasingly, during Prohibition, government officials and reformers, concerned with Mexico’s “corrupting” influence on American citizens, also attempted to wield their power beyond the border. Local authorities, religious organizations, and reformers continually pressured Mexican local officials to close bars and saloons, especially those in close proximity to the border crossing. They also attempted to close or relocate the zones of tolerance (districts in which regulated prostitution was allowed). Their actions were intended to protect the “virtue” of American citizens who visited the border cities.

Women and the Border

American reformers were particularly concerned about young women’s exposure to the border “underworld.” Drove of young women crossed the border during Prohibition, drawn by the excitement of visiting a foreign city and enjoying drinks forbidden to them in the United States. Entrepreneurs attempted to entice young women by opening a significant number of first-class cabarets and hiring special police designed to protect patrons. Cafes and bars frequently held contests specifically for women, including beer-drinking contests. As a result, reformers in the United States rallied against establishments that served alcohol to women, against the permissive attitude found in border cities, and even against jazz music. Finally, while American reformist elements had driven prostitutes out of the red light districts across the nation, these same reformers expressed outrage and anxiety when these young women migrated to Mexico to ply their trade and blamed Mexican procurers and pimps for their descent into ‘depravity.’ Some religious organizations collaborated with Mexican officials in order to locate American prostitutes working on the border, return them to their homes, and ‘rehabilitate’ them. According to them, even ‘fallen women’ deserved protection and liberation from the degeneracy found in Mexico.[v]

Soldiers and the Border

Young women were not the only objects of concern among American authorities. Military officials expressed apprehension over the substantial number of American soldiers, many of whom were stationed along the border, who visited brothels in cities such as Tijuana and Juárez and were exposed to a range of venereal diseases. While some authorities took a preventive strategy, such as providing soldiers with prophylactic kits upon their return from visits to the ‘sin cities,’ others called for a more permanent solution. Public health officials and military authorities continually urged border city officials to eradicate prostitution and abandon the policy of regulation that had been in place since the late 19th century. Occasionally, U.S. officials threatened to prohibit American soldiers from visiting Mexico if the border towns were not ‘cleaned up.’ Both the American and Mexican federal governments were invested in curbing

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vice activities. Therefore, one strategy both governments utilized was to restrict the number of tourists that entered the border cities by closing the international bridges earlier or completely in order to compel municipal authorities to limit alcohol sales and constrain access to bars, brothels, and cabarets.

Mexican municipal officials, for their part, attempted to ease tensions with the United States. Municipal governments repeatedly engaged in “moralization campaigns” that included relocating the zones of tolerance to less populated areas and closing some of the more notorious vice establishments. The most notable campaign took place during World War II when the city of Juárez closed its red light district for the first time and compelled sex workers to either leave the city or find ‘honorable’ work. The municipal president made it clear that his intention was to preserve the health and welfare of American soldiers who were central to the Allied cause. Other cities soon followed suit. This was a significant diplomatic moment between the two nations as the campaign even garnered the attention and praise of Mexican president, Manuel Ávila Camacho. President Ávila Camacho invoked the Juárez campaign as an exemplary demonstration of transnational cooperation in the fight against venereal disease. This cross-border cooperation eventually led to the establishment of a transnational border health association that made eliminating venereal diseases one of its primary objectives in its early years. Nevertheless, despite the discourse of cooperation and interest in eliminating public health threats, the vice districts were never completely eradicated and prostitution would continue to be a concern for American military officials through the 1970s.[vi]

The Borderlands and Sexual Commerce

In the borderlands, the regulation of prostitution held different meanings for different social sectors. For U.S. authorities, regulation was a way to reinforce the border; by criminalizing Mexican sex workers, they could protect U.S. citizens. For Mexican officials, it was a multifaceted matter. Federal officials targeted prostitution as a part of a larger nation-building project. For local officials, however, regulation meant access to revenue. Regulation was more about increasing profits than about morality or concerns over ‘the nation.’ Incorporating the rhetoric of morality and reform allowed officials to capitalize on restrictive legislation. Broadly defined laws such as those that penalized women for ‘doubtful or disorderly conduct,’ allowed police and public health agents to closely monitor women’s behavior while filling their pockets.

Mexican sex workers engaged the rhetoric of morality even though they recognized that they were outside elite prescriptions of decency. They did not make a claim to honor; instead, they demanded respect based on upholding the moral order and complying with reform efforts. In this way, they could denounce their competitors and justify their attempts to work by their own rules instead of those established the regulatory system. Sex workers rejected claims that their occupation placed them outside of the nation and instead highlighted the ways in which they behaved in the interest of moralization even if they were not ‘moral’ themselves. Additionally, they emphasized their roles as law-abiding, patriotic citizens and laborers.[vii]

American sex workers also attempted to navigate within the border’s vice districts in ways that optimized their interests. Catherine Christenson has shown that following the closure of red light districts in the United States, a considerable number of American prostitutes migrated to Baja California in part because they sought better economic opportunities. Once in Mexico, American prostitutes utilized both their status as foreigners and their knowledge of the Mexican legal system to secure their rights. In some cases, they were able to delay, if not halt, deportation proceedings. Finally, prostitutes were able to use their American identity to claim ‘whiteness’ and thereby, a more advantageous racial status within northern Mexico’s diverse sex industry.[viii]

Conclusion

Sex workers utilized various strategies to negotiate the world of sexual commerce in the border region, a world that condemned them to the periphery of the urban work force while reaping the benefits from licensing and registration fees. Sex workers at times incorporated discourses about prostitution in their appeals and petitions while at other times fervently challenged portrayals of them as vice-ridden and debased. While women’s bodies have historically served as sites for state intervention, sex workers rejected this policy by asserting control over their bodies, their commerce, and their day to day lives.

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[i] Katherine Bliss, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

[ii] Ruth Engs, *The Progressive Era's Health Reform Movement: A Historical Dictionary*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

[iii] Grace Peña Delgado, "Border Control and Sexual Policing: White Slavery and Prostitution along the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1903-1910," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no.2 (2012): 157-178.

[iv] Alexandra Minna Stern, "Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (1999): 41-81.

[v] Marlene Medrano, "Regulating Sexuality on the Mexican Border: Ciudad Juárez, 1900-1960," PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 2009.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Christensen, Catherine, "Mujeres publicas: American prostitutes in Baja California, 1910-1930," *Pacific Historical Review* 82, no. 2 (2013): 215-247.

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