

The Female Body and Women's Print Media in Early 1960s Colombia

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In the early 1960s, the female-authored press, before heavily concerned with female social activities and communal service, turned emphatically to beauty and fashion as remarkable elements of womanhood and femininity. More than ever before, women's magazines and newspapers focused their content, articles and images, on the female body. By regulating the body, middle- and upper-class women, with multiple ideological concerns, established in their press a route to interpret the character of their participation within the national project. Print-media narratives on regulation of the body emphasized certain types of female public and private roles as well as specific women's adaptation strategies to Colombian modern life.

Middle-class and elite women comprised a heterogeneous group as some women supported religious views whereas others adhered to a secular vision of their society. Such ideological division produced a dichotomy between a religious- and secular-oriented female-authored press, often proposing contrasting ways to approach to and interpret women's positioning in the national scene. Both urban religious and secular women welcomed the conceptualization of the body in their publications, sometimes in different, but also in similar ways, to assert themselves as subjects of progress and modernization. From a Catholic and ascetic-oriented perspective as well as from a secular and sybaritic-oriented viewpoint, urban women sought to contain, hide, but also display the body in a modern fashion, illustrating through their print media the ambiguities they experienced in early 1960s Colombia.

My research explores two female-authored publications, *Ideales* and *Mujer*, as public expression of middle- and upper-class women's concerns, interests, and lifestyles in a

modernizing country. It aims at revising the scarce historiography in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America. This scholarship, despite underscoring the centrality of the body in the construction of a modern nation, neglects the particularities of women's body narratives. It heavily draws on mainstream texts, largely authored by men. A gender analysis of *Ideales* and *Mujer* illustrates how the narratives of the female body described a heterogeneous and not always consistent response to the modernization challenges. While presenting a shared language of womanhood, the female-authored press also reveals ideological tensions.

Ideales and *Mujer* appeared as a turbulent era came to an end and a promising economy flourished. In 1958, with Alberto Lleras Camargo as the first president of a National Front, the elites agreed to political peace; they also concurred in undertaking a firm model of modernization. Although there was agreement in the fact that Colombia needed to advance quickly towards "progress", the long-existing conservative- and liberal-oriented cultural beliefs still influenced the ways in which people perceived what this process compromised in social terms. Cultural struggles over how to cope with the country's modernization increased between factions and social groups. *Ideales* and *Mujer* were representative of the competing perspectives which middle- and upper-class women drew upon to interpret their roles in the novel economic and political scenarios. These two female-authored publications depicted the traditional dichotomy between the Conservatives' and Liberals' political ideologies that heavily shaped Colombian modernization. But more importantly, they revealed the nuances of such polarity. They showed how conservative- and liberal-oriented everyday views mirrored the Conservative and Liberal political division respectively. Indeed they distanced one another while sharing a common language on and approaches to the modernizing national project.

From seemingly rigid and divergent perspectives, female-authored publications coincided in the regulation of women's body. While religious and conservative women reinforced notions of a traditional and moral body, secular women encouraged the conceptualization of a liberal and self-indulgent body. Yet both religious as well as secular women appealed to the female body to establish similar ideologies on womanhood. Motherhood, spirituality, and prudent social public roles were emphasized by both conservative and liberal urban women alike.

The Catholic-oriented alternative to cope with national progress was usually posed by female educators and high-school girls who devoted their periodicals to define the modern femininity through a shared and old-rooted religious language. In their view, womanhood not only referred to social and familial commitment but also to Catholic devotion and national spirituality. Nuns who owned female schools and tenth and eleventh-grade female students contributed to the print media that drew on such conservative- and Catholic-defined views of modern women. Emphasizing chastity, virginity, and virtue, their publications regularized the body through narratives that encouraged ascetic women whose major mission in the national transformation would continue to be the conciliatory and unifying role within the household.

Published in the Catholic and Conservative-party stronghold of Manizáles, *Ideales* was produced by the Association of Female Catholic Schools and distributed to all religious schools in the country. *Ideales* targeted the young female body and described it as being suitable for home tasks and future maternity as well as being adaptable to the demands of a respectable sociability. Moreover, in *Ideales*, the female body was God's gift, the result of his generosity. Through fashion tips, etiquette advice, and moral teachings, *Ideales* defined a particular woman that despite her educational and professional ambitions, needed to preserve the feminine qualities that God prescribed for lovely and spiritual married women.

Nuns and moralist students did not actually believe young women could ever be detached from desiring to be in fashion, but insisted on the fact that it should be done under the consideration of God's will and supremacy. In this respect, their narratives of the body frequently channeled moral and spiritual messages that aimed at restraining young girls from engaging in ostentatious practices that conformed with a more secular and epicurean lifestyle. In an article on bodily beauty, for example, *Ideales* recommended girl students to be in fashion, but always bearing in mind God's wishes before deciding on clothing and makeup. Ending with "I do not want you to be antiquated; I only want you to praise highly God's magnanimity,"¹ the article iterated that women required to be bodily modest and act according to the Catholic church beliefs. The conservative-oriented print media insisted on the discreet display of the body: the more concealed the body was, the better for encouraging a virtuous woman.

From a less conservative and religious perspective, elite and white-collar women utilized narratives of the body to define a modern woman in their publications. In their view, women participated in a cosmopolitan urban culture where both the local and the transnational were at hand for women to deploy them and thus integrate themselves into the economic developmental project of the country. For them, womanhood included self-discipline and sophistication.

As one of the most successful female-authored magazines in the country, *Mujer* promoted this secular and cosmopolitan view of modern womanhood. Directed by the wealthy Flor Romero de Nohra, it circulated largely throughout the national territory, having readers and correspondents in the major national cities. Only two years after its launch, *Mujer* was able to reach Colombian women living abroad and organized a foreign correspondent team that wrote for the publication from main urban centers of Latin America and the U.S.. By highlighting the regulation of the body through beauty routines and health regimes, *Mujer* delineated a woman

¹ "Cómo conseguir ser más bella."

that managed to cope with the various challenges of modern life: bodily refinement, maternity and spirituality. Although emphasizing a secular experience of modernization, *Mujer*, like *Ideales*, defined womanhood in terms of emotions, motherhood, and public display that left women in a still rather traditional positioning within the national scene.

In an elitist way, *Mujer* encouraged bodily embellishment through the highest technology and with the most prestigious stylists of the country. Because the insertion to transnational dynamics was a central component of national modernization, the body needed to be treated by experts who, utilizing the most advanced international technology, could assure the best results for Colombian women. Breast care narratives constituted the site *par excellence* in which the combination of technology, transnational expertise, and local needs operated. Colombian women were urged by stylists to draw more attention to their breast condition rather than just focus on their hairs, faces, and body shapes. Through “very modern treatments!” women could better their too small or big breasts and their sagging or soft breasts. Beauty regimes should include even those bodily parts that were not completely accessible to the public sight. But *Mujer* not only described the breast care routines in terms of technology and embellishment. The breast aesthetic, though not evident at first glance, determined love and sexual success for women.

As much as women needed to beautify their bodies, they had to shape them through physical activities such as gymnastics and yoga. These practices were crucial for modeling women’s physical figures and, in the particular case of yoga, for acquiring serenity. Alongside gymnastics and yoga, psychoprophylaxis offered women the opportunity to relax and comfort their bodies through breathing and meditation exercises. Its specificity relied on a medical-oriented characterization that yoga and gymnastics did not have: psychoprophylaxis was a medical proscribed method for women to have a successful pregnancy; it also prepared women

for their labor. Like gymnastics and yoga, psychoprophylaxis required self-discipline. While it insisted on persistence, psychoprophylaxis crafted an avant-garde woman who although being pregnant took care of her body by utilizing advanced medical techniques for health and comfort.

As some women proposed the secular- and liberal-oriented view of their role in the modernizing country, highlighting transnationalism, urban cosmopolitanism, and consumption, others preferred an austere and moral path. The female-authored publications served as platforms for women to pose and assert contending but still similar visions of womanhood while participating in the debates on national progress. Periodicals such as *Ideales* and *Mujer* targeted the female body as the medium through which women could channel their interpretations on modern femininity. They revealed the everyday ways in which politically marginalized actors -- women-- engaged in the national rhetoric of progress and transformation.

Focusing on the regulation of the female body, by underscoring beauty regimes, fashion styles, and bodily etiquette, the print-media narratives modeled competing views that ironically coincided in their conclusions over women's duties and femininity in modern Colombia. Though it is true that the conservative- and liberal-oriented press differed from one another in the ways they proposed to modify and display the female body, both agreed in that womanhood rested on motherhood, spirituality, and beauty. While the conservative-oriented press recommended a modest body care and the liberal-oriented print media insisted on a rather sophisticated and technologically based body care, both encouraged the disciplining of the body as a shared ground for women to first beautify themselves, then seduce men, and finally reproduce. Body care and display, either austere or glamorous, circumscribed women to their performance as mothers. Moreover, although the conservative-oriented press underscored the virtues of an ascetic bodily attitude and the liberal-oriented print media stressed a sybaritic female body, both bolstered the

importance of a disciplined body, suitable for expected female spiritual obligations. Therefore, both pious and secular women, through chaste clothing regimes and bodily exercise routines respectively, trained themselves to contribute to the emotional and spiritual social balance.

Just as the female-authored press created a bodily model of beautiful, spiritual, and conservative mothers, so it described a bodily model of beautiful, spiritual, but liberal mothers. Looking at this magazines shows us that religious and secular women had at hand two separate and distinct ways to approach the modernizing national project through narratives of the body, according to their ideological preferences and inclinations; however, both conservative and liberal women alike experienced such modernizing era as delicate, glamorous, and emotional mothers and housewives.

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