

Roles of Women in the Dominican Republic

Traditionally the Dominican Republic, like many nations in Latin America, has been a patriarchal society where the father is the head of the household, responsible for his wife and children, who answer to him as the family's final authority. In the period in which the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is set, this was the case, even though today, modern marriages allow for more equality. Family is a cornerstone of Dominican culture, and extended family provides support, identity, and a social outlet. Like the Mirabals, Alvarez's family members lived close to one another. Until her family fled the island in 1960, she and her sisters were surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

In the time of the novel, social expectations for men were very different from those for women. Just as Señora Mirabal chose to ignore her husband's philandering in the novel, there was little stigma associated with extramarital affairs or fathering children out of wedlock. Many women turned and may continue to turn a blind eye to their husbands' infidelity. In general, men were praised for their "machismo," while women were expected to be pretty, obedient, and demure.

In this predominantly Catholic country, beautiful women continue to be prized, and the Virgin Mary remains the female ideal. The patron saint of the Dominican Republic is the Virgin of La Altagracia, the Virgin of Highest Grace. Many girls are named Altagracia in her honor. In fact, Julia Alvarez takes her middle name from this most highly regarded figure. Her children's book, *A Gift of Gracias: The Legend of Altagracia*, is based on the legend of the island's protector.

Partly because the Virgin is a powerful symbol and the mother of Jesus Christ, motherhood is held in high esteem. Women's roles and responsibilities, however, have rapidly been changing. Even though women are still expected to take on most of the responsibility of caring for children, there has been an increase in women's labor force participation and in the percentage of female-headed households in the Dominican Republic. Women are occupied in all aspects of the economy, and maternity is protected under the country's constitution. Today, employers cannot fire women for being pregnant. Constitutionally, women in the contemporary Dominican Republic have equal rights, including the right to own property.

In the Time of the Butterflies depicts Minerva Mirabal's struggle for an education, and the compassion she shows her half-sisters when she realizes what their lives might be like without an opportunity to obtain formal education. Indisputably, social norms have changed since the 1960s, and today women in the Dominican Republic are generally better educated than men. Statistically, they are more likely to be literate and stay in school longer than their male peers. Women are doctors, lawyers, educators, business owners, and professionals. However, as in many other parts of the world, they often receive lower wages for the same work and earn less in general.