

Bolivian Wrestlers in Skirts

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Introduction

Brightly-colored skirts fly through the air as one woman pulls another's long braid. As she hits the floor, blood pours down her face. The fearless women engaged in this activity are *cholitas luchadoras*, a group of indigenous women wrestlers. The *cholitas* are Bolivian *Aymara* women that fight *lucha libre* style, a form of free-range contact wrestling in which 'anything goes.' The women engage in headlocks, twisting and spinning motions, kicks, and hair pulling. Anything that will bring their opponent down is accepted and encouraged. The *Aymara* people are one of the indigenous groups of Bolivia. However, what differentiates the *cholitas luchadoras* from other women wrestlers most is not their indigenous background but their distinctive dress practice. The *cholitas* wrestle in historical attire consisting of lace petticoats, a Spanish-style skirt (also known as a *pollera*), a shawl, a bowler hat, and two braids with a part in the center of their hair. By engaging in the masculine sport of wrestling while wearing a feminine skirt, the *cholitas* break and redefine traditional gender roles.

In this paper, I will begin by providing information on Bolivia and its society. Next, I will tell about the sport of *lucha libre* and the *cholitas*' dress practices. Finally, I will discuss the gender and modesty implications of the *cholitas*' constrictive dress practices relying on Judith Butler's theory on the performativity of gender.

Bolivia

The landlocked country of Bolivia is located in South America with Peru and Chile to the west, Argentina and Paraguay bordering it on the south, and Brazil to the east and north.

Although the legal capital of Bolivia is Sucre, the effective capital is La Paz (Ember & Ember, 2001). Bolivia is the poorest country in South America and more than half of the 8.6 million Bolivian citizens make their living in agriculture. The current president is Evo Morales, the first

indigenous president in Bolivia's history. While the election of Evo Morales infuriated many Bolivians, the native people viewed it as a sign of progress and change. About two-thirds of Bolivian people are purely indigenous, while the remaining one-third is of mixed indigenous and Spanish background (Minnis, 2008). The prevalent class system is based on cultural, ethnic and racial background, and one's identity is often expressed through sartorial means. The Bolivian middle class is separated into two groups, *cholo* and *mestiza*. This division is also highlighted by their dress styles. The Spanish speaking *cholitas luchadoras* are part of the 'cholo' middle class and are recognized by their braided hair and *polleras* (Ember & Ember, 2001).

The misogynistic treatment of women is a part of everyday life for the vast majority of women in Bolivia. Violence against women includes emotional, physical and sexual abuse by a partner. According to the Center for the Information and Development of Women (CIDEM), seventy percent of women in Bolivia are subjected to violence in their lives. However, this statistic is believed to be lower than the actual percentage because women are often afraid to report domestic violence. In addition to physical and emotional neglect, rape is a prevalent and often underreported fact of women's life in Bolivia. There are laws that aim to prevent abuse, but many women are not aware of their rights. Although the Bolivian government is working on improving women's lives, women still do not have equal status with men. They are paid less in the workforce and there is a large gender gap in hiring because employers do not want to spend extra money on women's healthcare benefits (U.S. Dept of State, 2007).

Groups such as the *Campesinas de Bolivia Bartolina Sisa* fight for women's rights, especially for rural indigenous women (U.S. Dept of State, 2007). However, the root of the high rate of domestic violence is the patriarchal culture and prejudiced attitudes towards women that are entrenched in Bolivian society. The attitudes of male power limit women's ability to take

advantage of the feminist movement and benefit from Bolivia's socio-political maturity. Indigenous women are especially subjected to sexual discrimination, humiliation, and being bound to a domestic lifestyle (Woman Kind, n.d.). Local Andean discourses normalize violence towards women by claiming it is simply customary. Women and men undermine this abusive behavior by blaming it on the intoxicated state of the man. Women often discuss being abused with other women at festivities and local parties, but the abusive acts are underreported to authorities. For example, men often make inappropriate and demeaning jokes regarding women's sexuality and ethnic stereotypes (Van Vleet, 2002). As a result, the movement for women's rights in Bolivia lags behind other South American countries such as Argentina and Chile that have female presidents (Carroll & Schipani, 2008).

Lucha Libre

El Alto, a suburb of La Paz, is home to a group of unique women wrestlers. The *cholitas luchadoras* fight each other in "wacky, tacky wrestling extravaganzas, better known as World Wrestling Entertainment in the United States" (Forero, 2005). Although male wrestlers warm up the crowd, it is the female wrestlers that draw the largest crowds. The practice of female wrestling began in 2001, but it was never meant to be the main act. Organizers simply wanted to add a new attraction to a male-dominated event. Despite being originally placed on the same bill with fighting dwarfs, the success of female wrestlers has grown, and they are now the main event. The *lucha libre* is so popular that a couple of the women are now considered 'semi-professional' and even tour abroad (Carroll & Schipani, 2008).

One of the key reasons for their popularity is the *cholitas luchadoras*' unique, gender-specific "wrestler" outfit. While the men dress in traditional superhero garb for the sport, the women brawl in *Aymara* outfits consisting of a *pollera* (Spanish style skirt), shirt, flat shoes and

two waist length braids. The crowd pays on average \$1.00 per person to see the *cholitas* fight men and women in a cross between a theatrical event and a street fighting show in which a ‘*ruda*’ (“bad” cholita) fights a ‘*tecnica*’ (“good” cholita) (Guillermoprieto, 2008). The *ruda cholita* is known for her feisty spirit and willingness to do anything to win. For example, the *ruda* may spray soda at the crowd and taunt her competitor’s appearance, yelling statements like, “I’m the prettiest!” However, the crowd roots for the *tecnica cholita* because of her gentler method of fighting (Deskins, Jobani, Krauss, 2006).

Every Sunday, large crowds pour into the *chochabamba* coliseum where an announcer prepares the excited crowd for the imminent fight (Deskins, Jobani, Krauss, 2006). The women enter the stadium to a *huayno* beat, a genre of fast, high-pitched Andean music, commonly used during urban dances. A combination of loud disco music and *huayno* echo through the stadium as the women, wearing their traditional outfits, enter the ring in a dramatic fashion. The *cholitas* dance to the music as their fringed shawls swing through the air. Following this grand and upbeat entrance, the women whisk off their hats and shawls and get ready to fight.

Cholita Luchadoras Dress

The *cholitas* are renowned for their dress worldwide. *Cholita* champion, Carmen Rosa states; “I am a *cholita*. A *cholita* is someone who wears layered skirts, shawls, and braids” (Deskins, Jobani, Krauss, 2006). Although this is the prevalent style of dress for today’s *Aymara* women, the garments have historical roots. The 18th century Spanish colonization of Latin America revolutionized dress styles and made clothing a powerful tool of social stratification. Because social stratification is rooted in ethnic differences, dress became a significant determinant of social interaction. The style, fabric, color, and origin of the garments helped people judge others’ class, income, and cultural background (Zorne, 2005).

Wrestling *cholitas* wear extremely colorful and special outfits in the ring. The most noticeable part of a *cholita's* appearance is the distinct bowler hat that balances on the *cholita's* head without the help of pins (Armstrong, 2007). These hats sport a thin brim and are made of felt (Sichel, 1986). The shawl that covers the *cholita's* upper torso, also known as the *manta*, is often tasseled, embroidered, and encrusted in jewels. The role of the *manta* is to highlight and emphasize the skirt (Sichel, 1986). *Cholita* Yolanda 'la amorosa' (the loving one), for example, wears her shawl so that she can flirt with the crowd (Deskins, Jobani, Krauss, 2006). This beautiful and colorful article of clothing also creates a grand, majestic air about the women. When the women enter the arena, they open their arms to extend their shawls for everybody to admire. Then they circle around to show off their shawl's sumptuousness to the cheering crowd. Following their impressive entrance the crowd starts to clap and boo while the women ceremoniously remove their shawls and bowler hats to begin the fight.

The most historically significant garment worn by the female wrestlers is the *pollera*, a full, pleated skirt. The voluminous Spanish style *pollera* skirt is believed to originate in the regions of Andalusia, in the south of Spain, and Segovia, the middle of Spain. Although originally made of wool, the skirt today is made of synthetic fabrics, and its colors follow contemporary fashion trends (Park, 2008). The wrestling *cholitas* prefer bright colors such as gold, other metallic colors, pink, green, and blue to make them appear fierce. Pleats, a row (waistband), and pin-tucks serve as the main constructional elements of the skirt. It requires about four or five pieces of cloth to create the *pollera*. Women wear a number of petticoats under the *pollera* to achieve the desired fullness. Reaching from waist to thigh, the petticoat touching the skin is known as a *mancancha*. Below the knee, the *mancancha* splits into three to five layers of fabric. A woman can wear anywhere from five to twenty-five *mancanchas*, depending

on her preference. As the *cholitas* fly through the air, one can see the intricacies and many layers of the *mancancha* that provide the base of the *pollera* (Park, 2008).

Modesty

The *pollera* emphasizes a woman's hips by creating volume. The hourglass shape stresses fertility and serves as a reminder that Bolivian social ideals still associate women with the activities of the home and mothering (Albro, 2000). Because the actions of the female wrestlers are blurring traditional gender roles, principles of traditional female modesty become contested. In fact, some Bolivian men insist that women wear the *pollera* because it is perceived to be a humble dress type, which downplays female sexuality (Gill, 1993).

While wrestling, the *cholitas* demonstrate an awareness of modesty, which is very important in the Bolivian culture. Rather than fighting in tight, revealing, provocative spandex garments, which is the usual dress style of American 'WWF' wrestlers, the *cholitas* wear garments that completely cover them from the bottom of their neck to mid calf. The many layers of petticoats keep the women modest even if the skirt flies up. However, this constrictive dress makes wrestling more difficult and forces the *cholitas* to be highly conscious of their bodily actions, twirls, spins, and kicks. In fact, they must truly own their body and movements.

***Cholitas* Fight Violence**

The *cholitas* are symbolically fighting back against the violence they endure on a daily basis by proving they can wrestle better than men. *Cholita* champion Carmen Rosa says she is proud to be a stronger fighter than men, especially because the men used to taunt the women. During a recent match, men and women filled the stadium to watch Carmen Rosa defeat her opponent. The women in the crowd uproariously began chanting, "women on top, men below." The scene was described as both empowering for women and as an act of rebellion against

gender clichés (Carroll & Schipani, 2008).

The *cholitas* train in the same manner as men: they lift weights, practice half-nelsons, headlocks, pile drives, and receive guidance from coaches. Furthermore, they do all of this in a skirt. Besides improving their physical strength, they improve their financial status as well by creating profitable touring groups such as “The Goddesses of the Ring” whose slogan is “vengeance and victory in the ring.” Although some male wrestlers embrace the *cholitas*, traditionalists in the sport view them as threatening and argue that the *cholitas* should not be allowed to participate. During a match between *cholita* Carmen Rosa and a sexist male wrestler, Rosa humiliated her opponent by defeating him and then shouting, “Who is better? Men or women? Always women!” (Carroll & Schipani, 2008).

While the *cholitas* want equality for every woman, they are contesting the mistreatment of indigenous women above all. Indigenous women have the lowest rank in Bolivian society. Their low social status is underlined by their noticeable dress style, forced on them by the Spanish colonizers who did not allow indigenous women to be educated and thus restricted them to nothing but child-rearing and manual labor. Lourdes Montero, an indigenous women’s rights activist, states that the fighting *cholitas* have created “a resurgence of pride in the skirt” (Carroll & Schipani, 2008).

Cholitas wear their traditional *Aymara* dress as a symbol of ethnic and gender pride. The complete outfit can cost between \$160.00 and \$220.00. The *pollera* alone costs between \$80.00 and \$100.00. For the lowest class woman in the poorest nation in Latin America, the *pollera* is a major financial investment. However, the *cholitas* are so committed to displaying their femininity and ethnic pride that they willingly spend their hard earned money on this distinctive garment (Gill, 1993).

The *pollera* is the ultimate symbol of indigenous women in Bolivia. The decision for *cholitas luchadoras* to wrestle wearing an ultra feminine style of dress in a traditionally male-dominated sport strengthens women's social status. The *cholitas* represent perseverant, industrious women fighting for gender equality in a misogynistic society. By proving that they can engage in the same activities as men, they actually fight gender discrimination. BBC News Reporter Andres Schipani questioned *cholita* wrestling champion Carmen Rosa about her determination to prove herself. Rosa humbly responded by saying;

Because we cholitas have been humiliated and very discriminated in the past, that is what drove me mostly to be a fighter. I also wanted to show people not only in Bolivia but around the world that a woman can do what a man can do: the sports men do and still be an indigenous woman.

Rosa further commented that she loves to wrestle and that she is proud to wrestle in her traditional garb even though the *pollera* is ridiculed by the non-native, which can be humiliating and degrading. At first, people believed the *cholitas* were making a social statement by refusing modern athletic wear. However, the main reason for wearing the *pollera* is different; it is meant to demonstrate the strength of indigenous women (Schipani, 2008). Through their dress choices, the *cholitas* are contesting the rigid and discriminating gender, racial and class system of Bolivia (Lind, 2003).

Conclusion

The *cholitas* do it all; they earn money from wrestling and still provide for their family's needs. Carmen Rosa refuses to accept the fact that men used to mock the women by stating, "Men are useless; they can do nothing! They are clean because women wash their clothes; they eat because we cook..." (Schipani, 2008). Through their dress, the *cholitas* are proving that women can engage in a male-dominated sport without sacrificing their femininity or compromising their ethnic identity. They also show their disregard of a uniform standard for

women's role in society. Just like the *ruda* engages in an act like an actor playing a part, the *cholitas* show that the only reason men are still on a higher social platform than women is because of existing gender stereotypes, which is a result of a biological fact – men tend to be physically stronger than women.

Frequently, when women enter male-dominated occupations or activities, they change their appearance to seem more powerful. They also tend to downplay their sexual characteristics. However, the *cholitas* do the opposite. By engaging in a male-dominated sport while proudly displaying their overtly feminine dress, they show that one does not have to denounce one's femininity to compete with men. These women demonstrate that gender roles are not entirely distinct, and it is not necessary in Bolivia to conform to patriarchal norms to receive the respect and praise of men.

According to Judith Butler, gender is something one *does* rather than what one is sexually assigned (Butler, 1990). By molding one's body/dress according to societal standards of gender, one becomes 'feminine' or 'masculine' (Entwistle, 2003). By consciously wearing a feminine style of dress while engaging in a male-dominated sport, the *cholitas luchadoras* are proving gender is mostly a performative act. The *cholitas'* combination of feminine dress and masculine sport identify them as tangible examples of Butler's theory.

When the *cholitas* began fighting, they had to combat discrimination and fight people who believed they belonged in kitchens (Deskins, Jobrani, Krauss, 2006). However, *cholitas* like Yolanda '*la amarosa*,' are becoming role models for women across Bolivia because of the courage and perseverance they clearly have in order to keep fighting despite the ridicule they endure. These women are single-handedly changing the face of Bolivian society by drawing attention to a unique and entertaining behavior with larger social implications that lead to social,

economic and cultural change. Although many people think it is odd for these women to fight in *polleras*, the *cholitas* purposefully reject functional athletic wear and choose to fight in a glamorous version of their everyday clothes. For them, the *pollera* is an object of pride; it represents the *cholitas*' past, present, and future in Bolivia. Through dress, the *cholitas* are making a stand on gender conformity, bigotry, and are speaking out against patriarchal oppression. The Bolivian *cholitas luchadoras* are a group of brave women who literally and symbolically fight for women's equality.

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