

Essay on the quince and gender equality in once upon a quinceanera

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The quince is a long-standing tradition for many Latina women; it is thought to be the moment in which a young girl becomes a woman in Latino culture. Traditional Latino clothes, music and rituals are used in a quince to solidify societal expectations of what women are expected to be and do as they enter adulthood. To that end, the quince is a clear establishment of patriarchal values that keep women from establishing agency and power over men. In Julia Alvarez' " Selections from Once Upon a Quinceanera," the way in which Latina women treat the concept of the quince shows many things about how the ritual itself affects young women.

The quince is shown to not promote gender equality, but instead instill very specific values and attributes toward Latina women and young girls. The quince creates very specific views of how women are supposed to act - in fact, this conformity is somewhat comforting to those within the culture. The overall goal of a quince is to offer women " a new community to belong to, a narrative [they] could follow into adulthood" (p. 37). Despite the huge demand for quinceanera, and the claim that it offers girls a sense of purpose and belonging, what it really does is cement patriarchal ideas of the expectations placed upon Latina women as they reach adulthood. First and foremost, a quince has many ritualistic similarities to a wedding - young Latinas are " dressed up in finery not unlike a bride," and all of the pomp and circumstance regarding her dress and her relationship with her family is very telling (p. 38). In essence, a quince is a warmup to a wedding, furthering Latina notions of close familial ties and the expectation of marriage and children.

This message is quite dangerous, actually, and far from the innocuous celebration of womanhood it claims to be. Because it offers her a moment of empowerment in her sexuality, a young woman can confuse it for the only real option for happiness in her life. This can prevent young women from taking any roles that are not already well-defined in Latina culture, and can lead to young pregnancies and early marriages before women are ready. The prevalence of quinces in Latina culture makes it so that the ritual is virtually inescapable; as a result, most Latina women are given this ritual that perpetuates the importance of family and early marriage, leading to population rises and early pregnancies as well. The pervasive Catholic culture promotes no sex until marriage, and loathes contraception - as a result, sex leads to both early, potentially hazardous marriages and children before the young woman is likely ready for that kind of commitment.

According to Alvarez, Latina culture may not fully recognize the problems inherent for girls in their culture - " Statistics are for the gringos. We trust testimonials, what our hearts and telenovelas tell us" (p. 35). As a result, the real effects of quinces on women are never really examined or recognized by Latina culture, because gossip and anecdotal evidence are more highly valued. Because of this, women simply view it as a continuing tradition, which is often perpetuated by abuelas and mothers because they went through the same thing. Only now are there initiatives to perpetuate more responsible, independent female archetypes and role models in media, which is done to help curb the population explosion that is occurring in Latin cultures.

In Latina culture, women who handle the quinceanera business are well-respected, considered a kind of heroine - their businesses are treated with awe, and their expertise is unquestioned. Isabella Martinez Wall is treated like a guru, someone who does " amazing things for young Hispanic girls" (p. 35). Of course, her position is thought to be one of empowering women instead of just furthering traditional gender roles; she is said to change people's lives from young, sinful girls to strong, respectable women. At the same time, even this change makes certain assumptions about young women - that they will be " bad" before their quinceanera, and this makes her " good." The association between certain behaviors and attitudes and a value judgment for good or ill is the problem that keeps the quince from becoming something more progressive. There is still the connotation that, after a quinceanera, a young woman is respected and given personhood, giving the impression that beforehand they are reckless little girls not deserving of agency.

The quince also affects men as well; despite being the beneficiary of privilege, it can also instill dangerous ideas of power that cripple men's expectations of what they are supposed to be. With the presence of the quince, men understand and are shown young women as sexual objects, objects of inferiority to be pampered and kept safe. Men are shown false images of women's power, as the limited power given to them in the quince is misinterpreted as all women are capable of. By making a pageant of marriage, men are shown that they are not supposed to participate in pageantry in any meaningful way; men are always in short supply as

quinces, further separating coming of age rituals by gender. As a result, men and women do not know as much about each other and who they are growing up as they should.

The pageantry of the quince contributes to a consumer and material-based search for identity in Latina culture. Because of all the industry and consumerism inherent to the quince, from clothes to party favors to entertainment, women are shown that they must buy and consume in order to feel important. They feel special because so much money is spent on them; at the same time, traditional values of chastity and sexual modesty are perpetuated at the quince, linking this special feeling to abstaining from sex until marriage. The fact that women are forced to have this ritual and to be informed not to have sex until marriage, and not men, implicitly tells men that they have permission to have pre-marital sex. At the same time, "pure" women, who have not had sex before marriage, are valued and appreciated, making this same act shameful to women. So much attention is paid to female chastity that male chastity is assumed to not need as much enforcement, furthering the idea that, without the quince, women would be promiscuous, sinful people.

The ritual of the quince is noted as being similar in many ritualistic respects to bat mitzvahs, from the "tradition of lighting and dedicating candles" to the need for acceptance from parents. These rituals are noted as being part of an indicator or acknowledgment that people have "made it" in America, to normalize the minority in a country of a white majority. However, by making this statement, it effectively prevents them from trying to reach any

higher. It is a claim of stagnation, as women are no longer encouraged to work even harder and have greater ambitions. Women are given a sense of community and uniformity, but this definition is so strictly enforced that there is little-to-no room for women to still have a community but want to branch out on their own. The purpose of the quince is to turn girls into "respectable" young women, defining that attribute so strictly that there is little margin for change.

The biggest issue with the quince is the narrative that it feeds young Latina women; that they do not necessarily need to work for their own career or their own desires - they are supposed to be doted upon, spent money on, and they must merely focus on their appearance and behavior until a nice man comes along to take care of them. This is a severely limiting perspective that robs them of any agency, and secures them in a fantasy that basically turns them into property for young men with privilege. As a result, Latin women attempt to make their daughters do exactly as they did, spending money on them as a form of adoration and control. all at the same time. What's more, the ritual itself is a form of delayed sexualization, the quince becoming the time they are actualized as people. Boys, on the other hand, are "born men," and are expected to carry over that macho perspective, never having to be primped and spent money on, as that is meant to be their duty. The quince itself is the template for Latino consumer culture, and promotes superficial and traditional cultural values that stifle young women's sense of agency.

In conclusion, the quince solidifies notions of traditional gender values and inequalities that further patriarchal aspects of Latino culture. This is not unlike similar rituals and traditions in other cultures; Latino culture is not the only one with a vested interest in making sure women remained subservient to men. In Jewish culture, bar and bat mitzvahs are celebrations of man and womanhood, which still perpetuate traditional notions of male strength and virility, and female demureness and domesticity, respectively. In my own experiences, even with secular culture, certain genders have certain expectations - if a woman's hair is cut short, people assume that she is "butch" or a lesbian, both assumptions coming from a negative connotation of what that means. At the same time, long male haircuts are said to be feminine, and negative assumptions are made about one's sexuality. In essence, even secular American culture still largely values traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, leaving much more work to do if these loaded images are to be fully addressed.

Works Cited

Alvarez, Julie. " Selections from Once Upon a Quinceanera."