

# Dancing Women

The Impact of Salsa on Perceptions about Gender,  
the Body, and Sexuality in Puebla, Mexico



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 1: An Anthropological Conceptualization of Dancing Women .....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 The Anthropology of Dance .....	6
1.1.1 Salsa.....	8
1.2 The Notion of Gender in Salsa Dancing .....	8
1.2.1 Female Bodies in Motion .....	10
1.2.2 Dancing from Restrictive to Celebratory Femininity.....	11
1.3 Performing Gender Identity in Dance.....	13
1.4 Conclusion.....	15
<b>Chapter 2: Life of Women in Mexico.....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 Gender in Mexican Culture: Machismo and Marianismo .....	16
2.2 From Gender Inequality to Violence Against Women.....	19
2.3 Dance in Mexican Culture: Accepting Gender Diversity .....	22
2.4 Conclusion .....	24
<b>Chapter 3: The Progressiveness of Women Dancing Salsa .....</b>	<b>26</b>
3.1 Methodology of Fieldwork .....	26
3.2 Perceptions about Gender: Salsa as Space for Liberal Femininity .....	27
3.3 Perceptions about the Body: Resistance and its Limitations .....	30
3.4 Perceptions about Sexuality: The Open-Mindedness of Salsa Dancers.....	32
3.5 Conclusion .....	34
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>43</b>
List of Interviews .....	43
Photos.....	44

# INTRODUCTION

Salsa is danced all over the world. Couples in Asia swing their hips to this same rhythm as those in Europe or North America. However, most people associate salsa with Latin America and imagine female salsa dancers as exotic Latinas. Salsa is a dance characterized by elegance and sensuality where the dancers glide and turn over the dance floor with surprising and often extraordinary movements. In the eyes of many spectators the female salsa dancer often embodies sexy and hyper femininity. It is ironic that Latin-American women are often perceived with this stereotypical image of the female salsa dancer as it contradicts traditional norms and values for women that are dominant in this region. Latin-America is characterized by conservative cultural traits rooted in the norms set by the Catholic Church. Therefore, in this context, female salsa dancers seem to represent the opposite of what is socially expected from them. In order to shed light on this contradiction between the way in which women behave in salsa dancing and the way in which they conventionally should behave, this thesis analyzes perceptions about gender, the body, and sexuality of salsa dancing women in Puebla, Mexico.

The case of Mexico has been chosen for this research, because it is considered to be one of the Latin-American countries in which machismo and patriarchal structures are most present until today. In other words, in Mexican society the thought that men are the dominant gender who have the most power in decision-making, while women are associated with the role of a housewife who must sacrifice themselves for their children and are subordinate to men, is still widely spread and present. Consequently, Mexican women suffer from gender-inequality and discrimination, facing various disadvantages in daily life including harassment and violence. Therefore, a biography of women's lives in Mexico can provide new insights into the obstacles that they face at the present time and into the opportunities that they have to empower themselves. Analyzing perceptions about gender, the body, and sexuality of salsa dancing women in Mexico is aimed at understanding how this activity can change their lives in a society where machismo is the norm. Hence, this study can create new opportunities for women to empower themselves and to rethink existing gender relations.

The main objective of this research is to understand the impact of the activity of salsa dancing on the worldview and the self-image of Mexican women regarding notions of gender. The research is guided by the following question: *What impact does salsa dancing have on the perceptions about gender, the body, and sexuality of Mexican women?* The central hypothesis is that, by getting involved in salsa dancing, the women's perceptions about gender, the body and sexuality are changing towards a more self-confident image about themselves and a more open and progressive worldview. In order to answer this central question, the research is divided into three different sub-questions, objectives and hypotheses. The first sub-objective is to determine if being involved in salsa dancing is related to non-traditional and non-conventional ways of perceiving gender in general and femininity in specific. The corresponding sub-question is the following: To what extent does salsa dancing affect the way in which women perceive gender and femininity? The hypothesis is that by dancing women develop a more progressive view of notions around gender and femininity which is expressed through their own performance of femininity and their acceptance of homosexuality. The second sub-objective is to analyze the influence that salsa

dancing has on the body politics of the female dancers. Here, the question is: To what extent has the activity of dancing salsa influenced women's perceptions about the body? In the hypothesis it is assumed that women who dance salsa start to dress in a more liberal manner, showing the curves of the body and more uncovered skin. The third and last sub-objective is to understand the impact that salsa dancing has on women's sexuality and how they conceptualize their relationships with men. Therefore, the following sub-question is asked: How has the perception of sexuality of women changed by dancing salsa? The respective hypothesis considers that women change their perceptions about sexuality by being involved in salsa dancing, in the sense that they are freed from the traditional idea of female gender roles and assume a more progressive position with regard to their sexuality.

This thesis is based on qualitative research which was done in form of fieldwork in the period between May 30, 2019 and July 30, 2019 in Puebla de Zaragoza, Mexico. Here, participant observation, executed in different dance schools and salsa events, formed the main method of this study, which takes on an anthropological perspective. Next to informal conversations, and observatory notes, the main technique were semi-structured interviews with women who are intensively involved in dancing salsa. A more detailed discussion of the methodology of the fieldwork, underlying this research, is presented in chapter 3.1.

The first chapter 'An Anthropological Conceptualization of Dancing Women' sets the theoretical framework of this thesis. This chapter uses literature review to discuss the current anthropological debates on dance in general and salsa dancing in specific. This section presents the definition and an explanation of dance in anthropology. This is followed by concepts about gender in salsa dancing that are analyzed. Special attention is paid to body politics, sexuality, and femininity. This theoretical chapter concludes with an illustration of how dancing can be seen as a performance of gender identity. The second chapter titled 'Life of Women in Mexico' provides the contextualization of this research. In other words, the social and historical situation in which women dance salsa in Mexico is described. This includes the how the concept of gender is gestated in Mexican society, the position of women in this country, and a characterization of dances in Mexico. The third chapter 'The Progressiveness of Women Dancing Salsa' constitutes the empirical part of this thesis. Here, after a brief description of the methodology employed during the fieldwork that this thesis is based on, the empirical data are summarized and analyzed. This part of the thesis covers three distinct parts: perceptions about gender, perceptions about the body, and perceptions about sexuality. The thesis closes with a conclusion that reflects on the objectives of this thesis, answers the research question(s) and draws conclusions about the hypotheses.

Last but not least I would like to express my gratitude to all the people who have cooperated significantly in the development of this thesis. A research, and especially fieldwork, is not an experience that can be done alone. Rather, it has been impacted by the people who I have met. They have not only shaped my research, but also me as an academic and as a person. I want to thank Dr. Pablo A. Isla Monsalve of the University of Leiden who guided me in the process of setting up my research and who was always ready to answer my questions and eradicate my doubts. Thank you for your valuable feedback, your involvement, and your wise advice. My gratitude also goes to all of my informants in Mexico who have shared their stories and experiences with me and took me into their world of salsa dancing.

# CHAPTER 1

## AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DANCING WOMEN

### 1.1 The Anthropology of Dance

People around the world have been dancing for a long time and a variety of reasons has motivated them to do so. There are the ones that dance because dancing is part of their tradition, others move their bodies in the context of celebrations, and for some people dancing is incorporated in religious practices. It is unmistakable that dance is part of social practice and cultural knowledge around the world, which means that it should be of major interest to anthropologists. However, dance is not extensively studied within anthropology and when it is being addressed, these studies mostly illustrate and analyze indigenous dance as an element in rituals and ceremonies (Krystal, 2012: 4; Wulff, 2015: 666). The few scholars that contribute to the anthropology of dance, basically created two main lines of discussion within this field: (1) an anthropological debate on what dance is and how to define it, and (2) studies of dance as means and context of social and cultural actions (Cowan, 1990: 18).

The question of what dance is and how to define it, is not an easy one. In everyday language the term “dance” is being used to refer to body movements that are associated with music (Kaepler, 2000: 117). However, ‘the concept of dance is a Western category that fails to distinguish among different cultural activities’ (Kaepler *in* Wulff, 2015: 666). Thus, what Westerners describe as dance does not necessarily have an equivalent in other societies, but it can have different reasons and meanings in different cultural contexts. While in the West dance is mostly motivated simply by entertainment, in other part of the world dance is practiced for a variety of different reasons. Therefore, a more complex and inclusive definition of the category “dance” is crucial.

Some scholars like to take the association to music out of the definition of dance, in order to include forms of bodily movements that practiced without any kind of rhythm. One of these authors is Spencer (1985: 209) who describes dance as ‘the use of the human body in time and space’. Kaepler (2000: 117) goes one step further by arguing that these movements and this use of the body is part of a wider system of knowledge. Therefore, she defines dance as ‘structured movement systems’. According to Kaepler (2000: 117), these systems of knowledge are created by, known by, and agreed upon by a group of people that preserves this knowledge in their shared memory. Here it becomes evident that dance is related to the cultural and social context of the society in which it takes place. This point is also adverted by Krystal (2012: 5), who says that dance involves ‘some degree of bodily conformity to socially shared conventions’. Thus, dance is a social and cultural construct that represents aspects of its social and cultural context and therefore, is culture specific. Including this notion of dance being culturally bound into the definition, dance can be seen as ‘a cultural form that results from creative processes which manipulate human bodies in time and space’ (Kaepler, 1978: 32). In addition, Wulff (2015: 666) argues that the movements that make up dance, ‘are performed during some kind of altered state of consciousness, an elevation or even trance’. This means that dancing has an impact on the dancer’s state of consciousness, it moves something inside of the dancing person and

influences his or her awareness. In trance one experiences and develops a changed relationship with oneself and one's surroundings, which then can lead to a different perception of self and other outside of that state of trance. Recognizing that dance does something to the dancer's state of consciousness, the moving body can be seen as evidence and medium to communicate exactly this altered state of mind. Thus, when studying dance, including an analysis of the consciousness of the dancer and how it changes, becomes relevant. By researching this aspect of dance, valuable insights about the effects of dance on the dancer's self can be gained and then used to make sense of the concept of dance in general.

As illustrated above, there is no one answer to what dance is and how to define it. Different anthropologists have developed a wide range of concepts and definitions and continue discussing this challenge without agreeing on one single definition. For the purpose of this analysis the term "dance" refers to a dynamic and culture specific concept. It is noteworthy that the anthropologist of dance do agree on one thing: 'the definition of dance must be constructed through the perceptions and explanations of the local people' (Royce, 1997: 9). Since the people themselves construct "dance" depending on their social and cultural reality, it would only make sense to conceptualize this category from an emic perspective. Anthropologists differentiate between the emic, which is the focus of researchers on 'local explanations and criteria of significance' to explain a certain phenomenon, and the etic, which is 'the research strategy that emphasizes the ethnographer's rather than the local's explanations, categories, and criteria of significance' (Kottak, 2014: 55). The aim of anthropology is to discover the local (emic) views, perceptions, and beliefs while the (etic) interpretations of the anthropologist serve as a means to compare them to the emic perspectives, but rather stand in the background. Consequently, the conceptualization of dance and the definition of this concept, should be based on the ideas, concepts and experience of those who dance. This implies that when studying dance one has to examine how the people in their specific context define dance and give meaning to it. Only by understanding what dance means for them, one can analyze and comprehend what they are doing and why they are doing it.

As mentioned before, a second line of argumentation within the anthropology of dance describes dance as a means and context of social and cultural actions. This debate focuses on who dances what, why, how, when, where, with and for whom. The underlying notion on which the anthropologists base their studies is that dance can reveal insights about cultural knowledge and social practices, because it communicates overt and tacit (hidden) information about the conduct and current state of social affairs (Krystal, 2012: 4). Therefore, studying dance allows to gain insights on the wider society in which it takes place and its social order. Kaepler (2000: 120) emphasizes this point by arguing that 'the aim of anthropological works is not simply to understand dance in its cultural context, but rather to understand society through analyzing [dance]'. This is an important characteristic of the anthropology of dance, which - as one can see - tries to say something about society through dance. Thus, it can be said that for anthropologists, dance can function as a window into social and cultural notions about society.

However, as Hewitt (*in* Franko, 2006: 188-189) argues, dance is not only a presentation of a society's social order, but it is also the production of it. Meaning that dance, as an active creation of meaning, has the capacity to shape aspects of society. Wulff (2015: 666) argues that this shaping happens in two ways. On one hand, she recognizes that dance can have an impact on social change. But on the other hand, she also describes dance

as being capable of keeping the existing social order intact. Therefore, dance can be seen as a powerful tool for both: the folk and the dominant power of society. Firstly, for folk dance can function as a strategic resistance that challenges the social order, by confronting traditional norms and values. Secondly, for the dominant power of society dance can operate as a mechanism of controlling people. In this case, dance becomes a scheme of 'social organization that compel[s] conformity but accommodate[s] individual needs and capacities' (Krystal, 2012: 5). This does not mean that all dance necessarily shapes society, nonetheless, it is important to mention that this is an option, consciously and/or unconsciously.

This discussion within the anthropology of dance provides an essential foundation for the continuation of this analysis and it has been shown that dance reveals information about society, but also creates new meanings as well as challenges existing meaning and interpretation. Consequently, a deeper analysis of dance provides a window into society and this window will be used in this study when analyzing the activity of dancing salsa in order to draw conclusions about female identity in Mexico.

### **1.1.1 Salsa**

As mentioned, the specific dance chosen for this research is salsa. Salsa is a couple dance performed on a style of music with the same name. Salsa music consists of 'extravagant, clave-driven, Afro-Cuban-derived songs anchored by piano, horns, and rhythm sections' (Marion, 2006: 102). Therefore, McMains (2015: 1) characterizes salsa music as 'an update take on Afro-Cuban dance music'. However, while there is consensus that New York is the birthplace of salsa (music and dance), its various influences are highly debated and unclear (Poey, 2014: 2). The most popular vision is that Porto Rican diaspora in New York created the dance in the 1960s, but it is believed that there are also roots in other Latin countries of the Caribbean, as well as Central and South America (Marion, 2006: 103). However, exactly which county had how much influence on the development of salsa remains uncertain. Nowadays salsa refers to Latin American culture in general, but it is danced all over the world.

Within the anthropological studies of salsa dancing two themes stand central. On one hand anthropologists study salsa by looking at gender structure in it, and on the other hand, they discuss the concept of identity by analyzing at the relation of dancing salsa to the dancer's construction of self. Both of these notions will be discussed in the following sections. First, a detailed discussion of gender in salsa dancing will be outlined, followed by an analysis of notions of identity in salsa.

## **1.2 The Notion of Gender in Salsa Dancing**

Before discussing the notion of gender in salsa dancing, the definition of gender from an anthropological perspective needs to be elucidated. When speaking about women and men, anthropologists see 'the behavioral and attitudinal differences between the sexes emerg[ing] from culture rather than biology' (Kottak, 2014: 209). This means that the way a woman or a man behaves is based on her or his enculturation instead of innate attributes. As Beauvoir (in Ames, 2012: 122) puts it: 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. Gender, then, is the variety of structures build upon biological sex that make someone woman or man. As Gutmann (in Sanabria, 2007: 146) puts it: gender is 'the ways in which



differences and similarities related to physical sexuality are understood, contested, organized and practiced' in a certain cultural context. These cultural constructions of whether someone is male or female are closely connected to gender roles, which are 'the tasks and activities that a culture assigns to each sex' (Kottak, 2014: 209). All cultural contexts have certain ideas about what women are supposed to do and how men are presumed to act. This specific behavior that society expects rapidly develops into gender stereotypes. According to Beggan and Pruitt (2014: 509) gender stereotypes are created and consistently applied ideas about a certain behavior 'that is deemed culturally appropriate for men and women'. However, these notions are oversimplified. Often, these concepts do not 'refer to a social reality, and they do not necessarily give accurate hints of what people actually do' (Eriksen, 2010: 29). Thus, although stereotypical ideas about gender roles and behavior are widely spread, they do not always apply to what actually happens. Gender stereotypes and notions about gender in general are very determining in all kind of dances. As shown in the following, also salsa is strongly marked by gender stereotypes.

In salsa the men who dance take the lead and women take on the role of follower, which means that men control and initiate all movements and, therefore, the dance and its patterns are labelled from his point of view (Beggan & Pruitt, 2014: 511). This structure positions the male as the strong, dominant part of the couple and the female as the submissive, passive one. Consequently, salsa is associated with stereotypical gender roles (Bock & Borland, 2011: 17). In line with Brinson's (in Spencer, 1985: 209) argument that 'dance derives from, and maintains, strong continuing links with surrounding circumstances of life' it would be logical that salsa is structured according to stereotypical gender roles, since, as mentioned before, it originated from Latino culture and background which is characterized by machismo. In this context the role of women as followers "makes sense" because it is 'compatible with the way women learn to perform gender' (Eriksen, 2011: 201) in Latin American societies and the role of the man as leader supports the idea of the man's 'masculine and heterosexual identity' that is central to machismo (Eriksen, 2011: 155). Beggan and Pruitt (2014: 509-510) argue that this sex-based role differentiation rooted in ideas of machismo indicates that the structure of salsa can be seen as institutionalized sexism.

So why would women voluntarily take part in an activity that is structured according to a system that they have been trying to fight for so long? According to Marion (in Beggan & Pruitt, 2014: 510) there is a difference 'between the dancers' personal values and beliefs regarding sex roles and the expression of sex roles in the context of partner dancing'. This means that the women who dance separate their own beliefs from ideas surrounding salsa and its structure. In line with this argument Peters (1991: 147) describes dancing as 'roleplaying', because the dancers take on roles that not necessarily match their actual ideas and identity. This indicates that there is some degree of "staging" gender when dancing, because the dancer can be someone that he or she is not outside of the dance. It is important to note that this staging and roleplaying in salsa 'start(s) and stop(s) on the dance floor' (Skinner, 2008: 73). That women take on the submissive role of following in salsa dancing, does not mean that they do the same in their life outside of the dance. Moreover, the sexist structure and stereotypical gender role differentiation in salsa 'do(es) not automatically result in status inequality', because both roles are equally important and needed for the dance to function (Beggan & Pruitt, 2014: 526-527).

However, even if and when the gender role differentiation in salsa dancing is consciously questioned, it is still felt and lived (Marion, 2006: 589). This active experience

of stereotypical gender roles and structurally based sexism makes that women might respond to it (Beggan & Pruitt, 2014: 510). In this sense, salsa dancing can be a space for resistance. During his research Skinner (2008: 73) observed that many women seem to ‘devolve their independence to following the mans’ lead’. This can be explained by conscious reflections about the structure of salsa dancing and the resulting urge to want to resist and act on this experience. On one hand, these consequent actions mainly take place outside of the actual dancing, because the structure of salsa is ‘an essential element of [the] dance’ that cannot be changed easily (Beggan & Pruitt, 2014: 517). But on the other hand, women can add some styling to the partner dance and thereby they give the dance their own special flavor (Bock & Borland, 2011: 17). Here it can be seen that the women’s passiveness and submissiveness are negotiable to a certain point. However, it is important to notice that resistance is not always what actually happens, it is only an option. The other possible outcome of the stereotypical and sexist structure of salsa dancing is that it can bring about reproduction of the practices and ideology underlying the dance (Skinner, 2008: 68). In other words, salsa can work as a reproduction of stereotypical gender roles and structures as well as offer an opportunity for women to resist them. All depends on the women’s interpretation of and the meaning that they choose to attach to experiencing this structure.

### 1.2.1 Female Bodies in Motion

The experience of dance is based on the body, which is the central element in all kind of movement. From an anthropological perspective there is a difference between the biological body and the cultural body. The former one is the ‘collection of cells, combined into organs, which themselves operate in systems [...] which ultimately make up the whole of the body’ that is studied by biologists and medicine practitioners and scholars (DeMello, 2014: 5). The cultural body, the one that anthropologists refer to, is a social construct which is shaped ‘by culture, by society, and by the experiences that are shared within a social and cultural context’ (DeMello, 2014: 5). Moreover, the meaning of the body also depends on the historical context and, therefore, ideas about it are continuously changing among time and space (DeMello, 2014: 5). Because of the relation of the cultural body’s meaning to its context, Cowan (1990: 23) argues that the way in which the body is used, conceived, and experienced necessarily reflects the structures, practices and symbolism of the external environment. This means that by studying the body, other aspects of the wider social and cultural context of society can be analyzed and understood.

The cultural body calls attention to the sex and gender that it is associated with. This is especially the case for dancing bodies, since, as argued earlier, dance often emphasizes male or female stereotypical characteristics<sup>1</sup>. Marion (2006: 582) argues that dance has the potential ‘to move and persuade us about what it is to be male or female’. Therefore, dance can help to understand cultural ideas about female or male identities<sup>2</sup>. However, the body is not only a medium through which scholars can learn about sex role identities, but it is also an instrument through which experiences of the dancing people themselves are grounded and a complex relationship with an individual’s subjectivity is built (Bock & Borland, 2011: 22). When dancing salsa women perform roles that are stereotypically associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> See 1.3. for an analysis of how these gender stereotypes are staged in dance and what this does to authenticity of salsa dancing in relation to gender identity.

<sup>2</sup> In the following, the analysis will be centered on women’s realities and experiences, since this study is focused on women dancing salsa.

female gender. This experience of gender roles at the level of the body can function ‘as a means to an alternative understanding of self’ (Bock & Borland, 2011: 23). Through the bodily practice of dancing, which offers a space for trance and altered state of consciousness, the women can learn about and reflect upon this stereotypical structure and subsequently, develop conscious reactions to it. This is why, as mentioned earlier, different scholars argue and agree that dance is a space of resistance (see Bock & Borland, 2011; Marion, 2006; Skinner, 2008).

According to Bock and Borland (2011: 1) dance is a form ‘of self-fashioning aimed in part at liberating the dancing subject from restrictive and disciplinary identity categories’. In the case of salsa, this self-fashioning occurs in form of sexy clothing. Salsa dancers dress very liberal, they are showing a lot of naked skin and also emphasize their curves with tight cloths. This stands in contrast to the conservative way in which women are supposed to behave in Latin America and therefore, the salsa dancers are contesting and resisting the existing order. As an informant of Bock & Borland (2011: 16) sees it: *‘to ‘look’ like a puta, to perform in this sense, should not be read [...] as an assimilation of the social dictates of what it takes to be feminine but rather as a repossession of one’s own body away from the higher social powers, such as parents, church, and society’*. Here, she identifies her self-display as a form of resistance and establishes salsa dancing as an opportunity for women’s free expression. Thus, through the rejection of conventional classifications and standards, the dancing female body works as a site of resistance. However, this informant even goes a step further by noting that the sexy self-display has nothing to do with trying to meet stereotypical criteria of being feminine, as many scientists would argue (see Bock & Borland, 2011). But how is it then that the women’s self-fashioning and self-display in salsa dancing is related to their femininity and their female identity? This issue will be discussed in the next section.

### **1.2.2 Dancing from Restrictive to Celebratory Femininity**

Often female salsa dancers are seen to embody femininity, because of the sensual way they move and the sexy manner in which they dress. This association arises due to a general conceptualization that being feminine is being sensual, sexy, and seductive. However, femininity is not related to specific characteristics, rather it is the ‘portrayal and performance of female gender’ in general (Abidin & Thompson, 2012: 467). Thus, there are different presentations of femininity, which means that the image of the sensual, sexy and seductive women is only one of several performances. Nonetheless, because of its strong presence in Latin American people’s minds, it can be said that this specific presentation is seen as an idealized femininity in Latino societies. It is important to mention that the image of ideal femininity changes among time and space, because it is narrowly connected to the sociocultural and historic context. An ideal femininity arises based on the image that women have of what the male audience desires (Abidin & Thompson, 2012: 474). These dominant ideas, then, become the ‘public cultural construction of femininity’ and the idealized femininity of society (Balogun, 2012: 364). From an anthropological perspective, it is essential to analyze local interpretations (the emic-perspective) of what people themselves conceptualize as femininity when conducting a study that is related to this topic. Therefore, ideas about femininity of salsa dancers in Puebla, Mexico will be discussed in chapter 3.2.

This idealized femininity as being sensual, sexy and seductive, that is embodied by salsa dancers, is, however, not so common among and widely lived by women in Latin

American societies, because of the restriction put on female behavior by conservative norms and values. As Bock and Borland (2011: 17) argue, 'salsa dance taps into a natural sensuality that exists prior to culturally imposed inhibitions on women's self-expression'. They indicate that women have a natural sensuality that is restricted by stereotypical ideas about gender roles and behavior. It is by dancing salsa that women actively negotiate and challenge existing norms of women's sensuality and femininity. This is possible because 'the physical and social rules of the [...] salsa environment provide a kind of protective structure' in which women can perform without shame or fear (Bock & Borland, 2011: 18-19). In this safety zone women are able to express themselves freely without society's restrictions. Thus, the women's self-fashioning and -display in salsa is related to their femininity so that salsa provides them with a space in which they can explore and live their sensual femininity. As Skinner (2008: 68) describes it: 'dancing [...] is a zone for self-discovery, self-expression, and experimentation'. Therefore, it can be concluded that the activity of dancing salsa offers 'an escape from a restrictive femininity to a celebratory one' (Bock & Borland, 2011: 23). This celebratory femininity entails that the women are not subject to society's cultural and social restrictions on the performance of the female gender, rather they 'exercise autonomy and agency by attending and "exhibiting" themselves at dance events' (Bock & Borland, 2011: 24).

By seeing salsa dance as a space in which women can move from a restrictive to a celebratory femininity, it also becomes an arena that allows for the realization of fantasy (Gotfrit *in* Skinner, 2008: 68). According to McRobbie (*in* Skinner, 2008: 73-74) dancing is a fantasy, because it 'creates a temporary blotting-out of the self, a suspension of real, daylight consciousness, and an aura of dream-like self-reflection'. Thus, salsa is a fantasy of 'stepping out' of the ordinary life, leaving behind the everyday self by savoring 'different senses of daring and potential daring, desire and being desired on the dance floor' (Skinner, 2008: 68). Moreover, it can be said that the fantasy in salsa is connected to sexuality. Normally legitimate opportunities for contact between people of the opposite sex are usually rare, however, in the context of salsa dancing touching is acceptable and even encouraged (Royce, 1997: 1999). This intimacy between male and female bodies provokes a loosening of tight reins of female sexuality (Gotfrit *in* Skinner, 2008: 68). This indicates that women who dance salsa, experience a change in mindset when it comes to sexuality. However, when, as McRobbie and Skinner argue above, this fantasy and its subsequent liberalization of ideas about sexuality is part of "stepping out of the ordinary life", what happens when the dancing class or the salsa evening is over?

Skinner (2008: 72) himself argues that 'the dancing can encourage and facilitate [these] changes which can then extend off the dance floor back into [the] everyday living as a woman'. He bases his response on the testimony of one of his informants who sees the loosening of her sexuality and obtained sensuality in salsa dancing permeating 'from her dancing into her non-dancing movements and self-expression' (Skinner, 2008: 72). Therefore, it can be said that changes happening and obtained on the dance floor are not limited to this space, but rather extend to influencing the self even outside off the dance floor and becomes part of the identity of the dancing women. Here one can see that the activity of dancing salsa is connected to, or even intertwined, with the identity of the dancers.

### 1.3 Performing Gender Identity in Dance

Identity is an important concept in relation to salsa dancing, because what people do matters to who they are. But what is identity from an anthropologic point of view? Most generally speaking, identity is a person's 'psychologically salient individuality, the way he or she feels different from or similar to other people' (Luhmann, 2015: 532). Thus, 'identities are [...] points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (De Gregorio-Godeo & Mateos-Aparicio Martín-Albo, 2013: xiii). This means that identity is made up of elements that a person relates to, or, in other words, identifies with. Most identity theorists see self-claim of one's identity and consequently the 'refusal to be characterized by someone else's narrative' as a central characteristic of identification processes (Luhmann, 2015: 535). However, this self-description needs to be affirmed by others in order to be established as a part of one's identity (Luhmann, 2015: 532). This means that it is not sufficient to say 'I am Mexican' for others to recognize a person as such. From an anthropological perspective, identities are seen as relational to one another, when talking about identity, anthropologists refer to social identity instead of individual identity. Eriksen (2010, 73) describes social identities as having a close relationship between each other and external circumstances. Therefore, 'identities may change as society changes' (Eriksen, 2010: 73). This point indicates that identities are not static, but rather fluid and changeable just as the interactions in which they are produced. In line with this argument, Eriksen (2010: 71) considers the term "identification" as more accurate than the word "identity", since "identity" 'gives an impression of being a fixed thing', while "identification" leaves more space for the dynamic and variability of the concept. However, because most scholars use the term "identity", this will also be used in the continuation of this text in order to avoid confusion.

According to the discussion above, gender identity then would be about the identification of women or men with certain elements that make them be recognized as and feel female or male. This also entails the categorization into a group based on a shared notion of being a woman or man. In this line of thought gender identity is what Butler (1999: 23) calls 'a descriptive feature of experience'. However, as she further argues, there is no such thing as a joint female or male experience and therefore, no homogeneous female or male gender identity. Consequently, Butler (1999: 23) sees the concept of gender identity rather as referring to 'a normative ideal' that is assured through the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. In this sense femininity refers to patriarchal norms about how a woman is supposed to be and to behave and thus, according to this perspective, femininity refers to a stereotyped version of a woman. Because of the given argumentation, it can be proposed to reject the notion of gender identity in general, and femininity in specific, as a descriptive concept and rather conceptualize them as a dynamic terms that give space to the various ways in which women and men construct and perceive the world around them. Here, gender identity and femininity do not describe a homogeneous group that experiences their womanhood in the same way, but it expresses all the different ways that make someone identify as a woman.

The question then is, how do people construct their gender identity and establish themselves as being male or female? Luhmann (2015: 534) argues that identity is performed, enacted and presented. This means that people perform certain actions which contribute to the construction of their identities. Therefore, gender identity, and femininity, can be considered 'a set of repeated acts' (Butler *in* Ames, 2012: 123). Thus, certain practices and

performances construct someone's identity as a woman. According to Ames (2012, 123) dance can be considered one of these performances, because dancing is 'a practice of femaleness'. Shay (2006: 56) agrees with her when stating that 'dance constitutes one of the major vehicles for the construction of identity'. Thus, dance is a space in which identities can be shaped and created.

When speaking about how gender identity and femininity are constructed in salsa, it can be said that by dancing women perform the normative ideal that female identity refers to, because it is this ideal of a sensual, seductive and sexy woman that is enacted in salsa dancing. This indicates that Butler's perspective that one becomes a woman by performing a certain set of repeated actions refers to the construction of 'the stereotypical women', a social opinion of how a woman is supposed to be according to society's imagination. However, the question is to what degree the dancing women actually take this femininity performed in salsa and use it as a point of reference for their own gender identity. At this point the work by Skinner (2008: 73), who says that the gender relations that take place in dancing salsa 'start and stop on the dance floor', is illustrative. Thus, not only with respect to the gender roles that women take on in dancing (as explained above in 1.2.), but also in regard to gender identity, it can be said that what women are and do during the dance is not necessarily what they are and do outside of the dance. Therefore, salsa dancing can be seen as performance and staging of gender identity and in specific of a normative, idealistic and stereotypical woman. By applying the performative approach, which is 'concerned with practices through which we become 'subjects' decentered, affective, but embodied, relational, expressive and involved with others and objects in a world continually in progress' (Zhu, 2015: 597), it can be analyzed how salsa dancers become authentic through this embodied practice. According to this approach, identity is shaped through authentication in bodily interactions. The term authenticity refers to something that is what it appears to be or claims to be (Zhu, 2015: 595-596). In this context it could be argued that the represented gender identity of women in salsa, and thus the whole fantasy of salsa in general, is not authentic, because the dancers are only staging their femininity. Thus, 'the dance is [...] an exact simulation' of the normative ideal female gender identity, but it does not necessarily exceed the social space of dance (Daniel, 1996: 781). However, 'authentic and inauthentic are no longer asymmetrical counter-concepts per se', but instead 'they become fluid concepts that can be negotiated' (Zhu, 2015: 596). This idea is based on the rise of post-structuralism, constructivism and postmodernism which establish the belief that there is no actual, true idea of authenticity, because it is only a 'projection from beliefs, context, ideology or even imagination' (Zhu, 2015: 596). In line with this argument, gender identity in salsa becomes a negotiation of the dancers' perception of self, rather than an authentic or unauthentic staging. Therefore, it can be argued that salsa offers a social space for women to negotiate their identity by performing and staging an image of women that they not necessarily conform with outside of dancing. It can even be said that dance offers an opportunity to break through the normative and idealistic definition of being a woman, because by enacting a certain gender identity that is different from how a woman feels, she can reflect on this existing structure.

Concluding, it can be said that women stage and perform a stereotypical representation of gender identity and femininity in salsa dancing. Women enact social scripts about gender identity that make them attractive in the eye of men. However, the performance of the dance does not necessarily continue outside of the dancefloor. Instead the staging of and the subsequent reflection on the normative ideal female gender identity,

leads to a negotiation of the dancers' gender identity in which they possibly refuse to expand the performance of femininity in salsa to their normal social life. More research is needed about how the gender representations in salsa dancing relate to the women's perceptions of gender outside of dancing. This issue will be discussed in chapter 3.

## 1.4 Conclusion

As illustrated in this chapter, dance can function as a lens through which aspects of society can be analyzed. Using this perspective, anthropological theorists argue that salsa dancing can be considered a performance and negotiation of gender. As shown, the concept of female identity refers to a normative ideal of how women are supposed to act. This stereotypical image of women is being negotiated and contested in salsa dancing by the performance of different interpretations of womanhood that are unconventional and that are challenging social norms. Therefore, female identity becomes a more multifaceted concept that refers to the various ways in which women perceive, construct and perform their self, instead of referring to one shared and homogeneous experience. Thus, salsa dancing constitutes a space for resistance: resisting stereotypical gender roles, resisting restrictive norms about gender behavior, and resisting the imagined normative ideal of female identity. In order to resist and negotiate these aspects, the dancing women make use of their bodies. By moving, acting, and dressing in ways that are not accepted by social norms and values, the women have a mean to liberate themselves from restrictions that are imposed on them by social institutions. This process of negotiation not only applies to the dancing women's gender identity, but it also happens in relation to their femininity (which of course is intertwined with their female identity). Therefore, it can be said that salsa dancing also offers an opportunity to explore one's femininity and shift from a restricted form of femininity to a celebratory femininity.

This chapter has provided an anthropological conceptualization of women dancing salsa. This discussion will be placed in the context of Mexico in the next chapter by, firstly, examining the social context of machismo in which all these events take place. Secondly, the traditional role of Mexican women will be explored by explaining the notion of marianismo. Last, but not least, dance will be discussed in the context of Mexico in more general terms.

## CHAPTER 2

# LIFE OF WOMEN IN MEXICO

### 2.1 Gender in Mexican Culture: Machismo and Marianismo

Mexico's traditional society has a 'historically strong and orthodox Catholic Christian religious foundation' (Huck, 2017: 148). Therefore, social notions of the country are based on religious ideas, which makes Mexico 'a rather conservative place with regard to conventions affecting gender relations and gender identity, practices of marriage and the construction of family, and sexual mores' (Huck, 2017: 147). When talking about gender related manifestations in Mexico (as well as in Latin America in general), rapidly the concept "machismo" turns up. Basham (1976: 127) loosely translates this Spanish term as 'the cult of the male' and defines it as referring to traditional male behavior of hyper masculinity that has become commonplace in Mexico and most other parts of Latin America. This hyper masculinity that Basham sees as characterizing for machismo consists of exaggerative behavior of male stereotypes, as sexuality, aggression and physical strength. Wentzell (2011: 393) also agrees with Basham's definition and describes machismo as referring to a specific style of masculinity that has patriarchal structures in its essence. Thus, the concept of machismo entails ideals and practices that 'purportedly determine male identity and masculinity, and which structure male interactions with women and other men' (Sanabria, 2007: 152). According to this idea of masculinity, men are in a position of power, virility, and authority (Huck, 2017: 156). This dominant and privileged position of men 'leads to patterns of behavior in which men are expected to provide for their families, but also in which extramarital liaisons and other manifestations of male sexual conquest are not uncommon' (Huck, 2017: 147-148). Thus, there is a conflicting issue here: on one hand Mexican masculinity according to machismo is characterized by 'a strong commitment to the family, both as its material provider and financial caretaker, and its defender against any kind of challenge or threat' and therefore, is respected (Huck, 2017: 156), while on the other hand a typical macho man has a high level of sexual desire and strong self-confidence. Many Mexican men are womanizers who appear to never evince fear and withdraw their emotions and thus, this traditional masculinity also has a negative connotation (Basham, 1976: 126-127; Wentzell, 2011: 393). In practice this means that Mexican men enjoy the freedom to do pretty much what they want and often get away with mistreatment and abuse of women.

At this point, it can be noticed that machismo does not only determine male identity or masculinity and the position of men in Mexico, but, because of the interdependent relationship of the genders, it is also related to specific ideas about how female identity or femininity should be filled in and which position Mexican women should adopt on the family as well as in society at large. This much less discussed counterpart to machismo is called "marianismo", a concept based on the idea that women should be 'enculturated into being passive and subservient to men' (Sanabria, 2007: 152). Moreover, according to this cultural ideal that is predominant in Mexico, the central feature of women is to be self-sacrificing mothers that confine to traditional roles in the family and the household (Huck, 2017: 148; Sanabria, 2007: 152). Although marianismo is not a religious practice, this idealized version



of women is based on features of the Virgin Mary, which gave the concept its name (Huck, 2017: 157). Therefore, the idea that women need to be sinless and hold a moral superiority, which is at the core of marianismo, is based on the character of the Virgin Mary (Stevens & Pescatello, 1973: 94). The expected characteristics and social position that marianismo assigns to women in Mexico, indicate an ambiguous role of women in Mexican society. On the one hand Mexican women are perceived as queens of the family who nurture husband and children, and on the other hand, they are “slaves” to men, due to their subordination and lack of free expression and action. In practice this means that ‘women are not functioning in many characteristically human ways because of local patriarchal social structures and because of the ancestral history of subjection: these have denied them the possibility of functioning in many different areas’ (Valdés, 1995: 428).

However, as mentioned in chapter 1.3 there is no homogeneous female experience and hence, no uniform category of women. Rather, there is diversity between women (Franco, 1989: xii). Acknowledging that not all women are the same and thus, not all Mexican women can be described by female identity as characterized in marianismo. Mexicans have a unique concept to characterize women that fail to live up to this ideal: Malinchismo. This concept refers to a particular kind of female identity according to which the woman described as “malinchista” is rebellious and ‘betrays not only the ideals of womanhood, but also the notion of Mexican national identity itself’ (Huck, 2017: 158). This conception of non-ideal women is rooted in the story of a woman known as Malinche who betrayed her own people by helping the Spanish during the conquest (Huck, 2017: 157-158). The concept illustrates the restriction of free expression and action of women in Mexico. Accepted behavior of Mexican women is constructed and dependent on male hegemony which creates many limitations in the life of women in Mexico. This makes it paradoxical that machismo is partly reproduced by mothers educating their children to conform to ideas of this cultural notion.

One particularly interesting issue in the context of Mexican machismo and marianismo is how these cultural notions approach sexuality. According to ideas around machismo and marianismo, ‘good women have sex when required’, but they do not enjoy it (Stevens & Pescatello, 1973: 96). This stands in stark contrast to the sexual behavior of men, whose masculinity is perceived as accomplished by “sleeping around” (Wentzell, 2011: 396-397). Thus, while many Mexican women have to endure extramarital sexual adventures of their husbands, they are expected to restrict their sexuality to marital obligation and procreation. According to Basham (1976: 129) this denial of female sexuality can be traced back to the association between wife and mother: A blurring of wife-mother roles ‘tends to preclude any desire on the macho’s part for his wife’s enjoyment of sexuality, as her expression of such pleasure would undoubtedly require acknowledgement that his mother also may have relished sexual relations, a thought very painful for the macho to contemplate’ (Basham, 1976: 130). Thus, although ideas and manifestations of machismo and marianismo in Mexico establish different forms of female agency, for example women as caretaker or as stabilizer of the family, these cultural notions also constitute female sexuality as restricted and make it a social taboo.

The question that arises here is, whether the cultural notions about male and female identity and behavior outlined here still represent today’s reality. According to Huck (2017: 158) machismo and marianismo still continue to influence social structures and practices in Mexico. It can be said that the two social constructs impact life of women in Mexico, as well as in other countries of Latin America, by making them face various obstacles and limitations

in their daily life. One tragic issue, that is very present until today, is that 'machismo is also often responsible for domestic violence against women' (Sanabria, 2007: 152). Many men still think in terms of machismo and thus, see their violent behavior against women as justified on the basis of these traditional gender roles and identity that subordinate women to men. Butler's definition of gender identity (given in chapter 1.3.) describes gender as being constructed through performances. She further argues that what we understand as male or female can change as performances of gender change. In line with this argument it becomes evident that the dominance of machismo is not fixed or unchangeable. Rather, masculinity according to machismo is a social and cultural construct that can change when performances change. Thus, although scholars argue that machismo is still present in today's Mexican society, change and transformation are possible and in fact are already taking place to some degree. Marcías-González & Rubenstein (2012: 3) argue that gender relations of power (domination and subordination) are being transformed and changed by certain social actors. These changing gender relations of power include changes in manifestations of machismo and marianismo in Mexico. While expressions of these cultural notions are changing in today's Mexican society, these changes mainly take place in higher social classes. As Basham (1976: 138) argues, patterns of machismo 'decline in importance as we proceed up through the social classes' (Basham, 1976: 138). Therefore, it can be argued that machismo is more pronounced in lower-income classes and less educated classes than it is in upper classes (Basham, 1976: 138). However, also in lower socioeconomic classes notions of machismo and marianismo are changing. In today's Mexico many people say that they prefer traditional gender identities and traditional social institutions due to the stable social order that they are associated with (Huck, 2017: 147). Nonetheless, when observing the actual behavior, 'practices often contradict with these stated preferences' (Huck, 2017: 147). Hence, what people say tends to be different from what they actually do. Marriage is a suitable example to illustrate this point. The traditional institution of marriage is highly valued in Mexico as a foundation of the family, yet 'divorce and unmarried cohabitation are common' (Huck, 2017: 147). Therefore, when conducting research in Mexico on a topic related to gender identity and consequently to machismo and marianismo, it is important to take this difference of what people say and what they actually do into account and to analyze what this contradiction implies. It is important to remember that, although machismo and marianismo are useful categories to understand gender identities, they are not the only effective concepts from which to depart a valuable analysis (Marcías-González & Rubenstein, 2012: 2).

In conclusion it can be said that manifestations of machismo and marianismo are changing in Mexico (especially in higher social classes), but they still influence social life and experiences of womanhood. Although characteristics of machismo are not always displayed, hyper masculinity is still 'the socially expected behavior for males' (Basham, 1976) and is not yet 'destined to disappear as a cultural pattern in Latin America' (Stevens & Pescatello, 1973: 100). This constitutes a problem, because 'more egalitarian relationships between men and women are necessary if Mexico is to "modernize"' (Wentzell, 2011: 393). Therefore, gender (in)equality is an important issue in Mexico in relation to not only social development, but also economic and political progress. This dynamic will be discussed in the following section.

## 2.2 From Gender Inequality to Violence Against Women

The discussed cultural notions “machismo” and “marianismo” have an impact on power relations between men and women. In Mexico these power relations are highly unequal, not only in regard of the social implications as outlined above, but also in relation to economic and political factors. These unequal power relations between women and men, create high rates of gender inequality in Mexican society. According to Stacey (*in* Frias, 2008: 217) ‘gender inequality can be conceived as a system that justifies and perpetuates the domination of women by men in all areas of private and public life’. Thus, the concept of gender inequality refers to structurally based gender differences in key dimensions of social life. These differences are found on and maintained by patriarchal structures and ideologies (Frias, 2008: 2017). Since, as established in chapter 2.1, Mexican society is utterly patriarchal, it is not surprising that it is marked by deep gender inequality.

When talking about gender inequality in Mexico it is important to mention that the socio-economic and political situation and the position of women has already improved significantly since outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, which can be seen as the starting point of the struggle for women’s rights and the elimination of gender inequality (Huck, 2017: 152). In the recent years the Mexican government has increased its legal and political commitments to gender equality by implementing laws and policies as the ‘2006 General Law of Equality between Women and Men, the establishment of gender mainstreaming requirements within the Planning Act and the Federal Budget and Fiscal Accountability Act, [...] the National Programme for Equality and Non-Discrimination (Prolgualdad) 2013-2018’ (OECD, 2017: 25). These initiatives intent to provide ‘gender mainstreaming in government, and [...] the representation of women in the national legislature’ (OECD, 2017: 23). One of the main problems is that many laws and policies are limited to specific states, which causes regional differences in terms of gender equality and women’s rights (Frias, 2008: 218). Illustrative of this is the decriminalization and legalization of abortion in Mexico City in April 2007 (Becker & Díaz Olavarriets, 2013: 590). While this is seen as an important milestone for women’s reproductive and health rights, it is restricted to Mexico City and abortion is still illegal in all other states. These hold on to conservative views about sexual and gender norms which are legitimized by a reference to the authority of the catholic church. Therefore, it can be said that traditional religious conservative thought is the main hinderance to gender equality in Mexico. Consequently, ‘true change requires not only inclusive public policies and effective implementation, but also a fundamental reshaping of gender stereotypes’ and social norms (OECD, 2017: 26). Thus, although the law has improved, it ‘still treats men and women in Mexico differently, and in many states women’s rights are virtually inexistent from the legal point of view (Frias, 2008: 242). For this reason, there is still ‘a long way to go on the road to gender equality’ (OECD, 2017: 23). One example that illustrates the inferior position that Mexican women still have today, is their participation in the labor sector: ‘Fewer than half (47%) of working-age Mexican women participate in the labor force’ and of the women that do work, ‘nearly two-thirds [...] are trapped in informal jobs, which offer low pay, inadequate social protection and little safeguard against poverty’ (OECD, 2017: 24).

Another factor that is indicative of gender inequality in the Mexican society is the high rate of gender-based violence against women: ‘More than half of all Mexican women report being victims of some kind of violence in their lifetime, yet many of these cases are not reported to the police’ (OECD, 2017: 32). This high rate of violence against women is

horrifying and it has tremendous effects on the victims' lives. One main challenge that results from this violence against women are health issues. Violence against women is only recognized as a major health problem in case of death (Romero Mendoza et al., 2018: 9). This approach ignores other physical and mental health issues (depression, anxiety, panic disorder) and adoption of risky behavior (alcohol and drugs) that can be provoked by violence (Romero Mendoza et al., 2018: 10). Therefore, 'the government of Mexico fails to protect women from different types of criminal offences and also to provide justice to the victims' (Liu & Fullerton, 2015: 4260). As a consequence, women experience violence which can have interfering impacts on their lives. However, Mojarro-Iñiguez et al. (2014: 536) argue that 'women in Mexico are not just passive victims', rather they are active agents who search for solutions to better their situation. One factor that can reduce female crime victimization rates are improvements in women's education (Liu & Fullerton, 2015: 4261). In other words, higher educated women are less likely to be victims of violent crimes. But as usual, there are always exceptions to the rule.

Although violence against women has existed in Mexico for decades, in the 90s this problem escalated to a next level when more and more women were murdered in a very brutal and disrespectful way by drug cartels in Ciudad Juárez (Berlanga Gayón, 2015: 114). While this city is still the most dangerous one in Mexico, the phenomenon called "femicide" has spread over the whole country and also exists beyond the Mexican borders (Martin & Carvajal, 2016: 990). In the most simplistic way, femicide can be defined as 'the killing of women for being women' (Angulo Lopez, 2019: 167). In Mexico femicides have developed into a serious and wide spread problem: 'according to official data from the National Institute of Statistic and Geography (INEGI), between 2000 and 2015, in Mexico alone, 28,710 violent murders committed against women took place' and in the year 2013 ' 32 out of 100 women were killed' (Angulo Lopez, 2019: 169). Originally, these femicides or brutal murders of women that were carried out by anonymous assassins of the cartels had only instrumental purposes, but soon began to evolve into a form of communicative media loaded (Berlanga Gayón, 2015: 106). According to Radford and Russel (*in* Berlanga Gayón, 2015: 117), who were the first ones to introduce the term in English, femicides can be interpreted as an example and a message to women in general, that demonstrates male dominance and control over women. Therefore, it can be argued that femicides are a political tool to keep patriarchal structures in place. This point is underscored by Angulo Lopez (2019: 168) who argues that femicide can be seen as 'the most extreme display of patriarchal force exercised to recover the gender borders historically delimited, and to protect the male rights and privileges socially established'. In his statement the word "recover" is very important, because it implicates that men have lost some of their position of power and dominance as a consequence of the advancement and empowerment of women in the political and economic domain over the past years. Hence, the emergence of femicide can be traced back to the decline of traditional gender relations. Especially drug lords (who are the embodiment of machomen) feel the need to reestablish and to demonstrate their dominance and power. However, it is not the closing gap of the gender inequality that should be blamed for the brutal violence against women in Mexico, rather the focus should shift to the extreme power inequality between men and women that was created in the first place (Berni, 2018: 112). The long history of traditional social structures of patriarchy and the associated macho masculinity have led to a naturalization of subordination and disadvantages of women, so that it is the historic inequality in which femicides, and violence against women in general, are rooted (Berni, 2018: 114).

In conclusion, it can be said that femicides, by being directed to the recovery of male dominance and power and by being based on gender inequality, then, refer ‘not just to the physical death of the body [of women], but also to the obliteration of a woman’s subjectivity, personhood or memory either before or after death’ (Martin & Carvajal, 2016: 991). Therefore, ‘the subjective dimensions of violence are as important as the assault to the physical body (Scheper-Huges & Bourgois *in* Martin & Carvajal, 2016: 991). By obliterating women’s subjective aspects, the men exercising the violence impede the women’s access to personhood, recognition and even citizenship. In other words, femicide represents a total denial of all rights for women. Hence, femicide represents a mechanism of control over women, their bodies, and female life. This point illustrates the extent of male dominance in Mexico: it is so strongly rooted in many men’s minds that it is difficult to change, and when change is attempted or initiated, men are being creative in inventing new ways of keeping patriarchal structures in place and continuing the subordination of women. Thus, many Mexican men are very persistent in keeping their dominance, as illustrated by the example of femicide.

While this describes women as being passive victims, the opposite is true. Instead of being bare subjects to structures, women are active agents engaging in changing their “fates”<sup>3</sup>. In 1994 a group of women came together in Ciudad Juárez in order to generate national and international attention to the femicides happening in that city and to protest against the impunity of the assassins accusing the Mexican state and police force of not doing their job of protecting female citizens (Wright, 2011: 711-712). In fact, feminist protests against traditional gender relations have existed in Mexico for a long time. The feminist movement of the country started around 1915, when ‘women were very involved in the Mexican Revolution’ and, during this period gained the right to divorce and to do abortion in the case of rape (Huck, 2017: 152). In this starting period of Mexican feminism, women were concerned first and foremost with political equality, while in a second wave of feminist activism, between 1968 and 1990, women focused on changing ‘the culture of gender in Mexico and the relationship between men and women’ (Huck, 2017: 152). Here, ‘masses of women began assembling [...] in order to voice grievances about social inequalities’ (Huck, 2017: 152). Although these two aspects still play a central role in Mexican feminism, nowadays a more intersectional feminism is arising, which especially pays attention to indigenous women’s rights (Huck, 2017: 152). The women’s movement in Mexico always had to struggle with the strong patriarchal structures and the catholic conservative moral which takes an important and central role in Mexican social life (Marcos, 1999: 431). It can be argued that patriarchy and machismo (as part of it) have been the source of most problems of women in Mexico. Although a lot has changed, Mexican women still face many obstacles that are rooted in the society’s machismo and patriarchal structures. However, they find creative ways to deal with the daily struggle of male domination. Next section analyzes how dance can provide a way of dealing with gender relations and perceptions about gender.

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<sup>3</sup> This argument is related to the anthropological debate about structure versus agency in which academics discuss in how far people act according to social structures or act as independent agents. Most agree human beings are somewhere in between on a continuum between the two.

### 2.3 Dance in Mexican Culture: Accepting Gender Diversity

Before approaching the quest of gender in Mexican dance, a short overview of the dance culture in Mexico is required. Mexico is a country with a rich assortment of different dances: it ranges from indigenous dances over folkloric ones to western and modern dances. But especially folkloric dance traditions are an important element in Mexican culture and life and take on an important role in the construction of a national identity. These dances originate in a combination of ‘the colorful costumes and dances of the indigenous peoples of the region with those brought originally from Spain and later from the United States’ (Huck, 2017: 233). Thus, these dances refer to the Mexican history and heritage. Examples of Mexican folkloric music and dance are the Bolero which is ‘a slow-paced, romantic ballad form of music and its associated ballroom dance whose origins can be traced to Cuba’ (Huck, 2017: 234) and the dance of the *Concheros* which is a sacred dance performed in circular form by an exclusive group of dancers (Rostas, 2009: 1)<sup>4</sup>. However, the most famous dance form event on a global scale is the *Ballet Folklórico* in Mexico City that has existed since the 1960s and combines classical dance with Mexico’s indigenous dance traditions (Huck, 2017: 235-236). While this is the most famous dance performance, the most popular dance music in everyday Mexican life is the Mariachi. This type of music is played by ensemble groups dressed in ‘colorful costumes that look like a cross between ranching clothes and frilly tuxedos’, wearing a large sombrero and that play ‘trumpets, violins, and a mixture of different guitar types’ (Huck, 2017:241-242). All in all, ‘music and dance are very much a part of Mexican daily life’ (Huck, 2017: 233) and of the countries popular culture<sup>5</sup> (Beezley & Curico-Ngay, 2012: 1).

Coming back to the question of gender in Mexican dance, it has to be stated that this is an understudied topic. While many scholars have been writing about dances in Mexico and their relation to national identity, there is little academic research on the notion of gender in Mexican dance and none about relations of gender salsa. The few academic studies that exist on the topic focus on the *muxe*. Thus, in the following, the focus will lie on an analysis of the construction of gender identity of the *muxe* in Mexican dance, in order to verify later in this thesis if the findings are also applicable for salsa dancing in Mexico. The *muxe* are ‘persons who appear to be predominantly male but display certain female characteristics’ and are fulfilling ‘gender role[s] between men and women, taking some of the characteristics of each’ (Chinas in Stephen, 2002: 43). This group is specific to the Mexican state of Oaxaca where they are visible by openly using dresses, sometimes makeup, and most of them also wear long hair (Belonsky, 2014: 62). Although the *muxe* are engaging in homosexual relations (Mirandé, 2012: 525-526), according to Stephen (2002: 43) they ‘are not referred to as “homosexuals” but constitute a separate category’: they can be perceived as a third gender.

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<sup>4</sup> This dance is a complex practice entangled in Mexican dance culture. A detailed discussion of this dance, however, exceeds the purpose of this paper. Therefore, see Rostas (2009) for an elaborated description of this dance.

<sup>5</sup> Popular culture can be defined as the ‘everyday culture’ and it ‘identifies a set of behavioral practices with pervasive, ordinary character and acknowledges the general acceptance of these practices, their roots in common knowledge, and their frequent expression in nonwritten form’ (Beezley & Curico-Ngay, 2012: 1). Moreover, popular culture ‘distinguishes a community and often serves as a synonym for national identity’ (Beezley & Curico-Ngay, 2012: 1).



Photo 1: Danza de las Mascaritas

Many *muxe* are involved in a folkloric dance called ‘*danza de las mascaritas*’<sup>6</sup>. This dance is practiced in regions of the state Oaxaca, where the *muxe* are at home. During the *danza de las mascaritas* eight or more male-female couples perform using allusive clothing and masks (González Gómez, 2016: 211). However, although nowadays there are some dance groups that accept women for the role of the female dancer, originally all characters are performed by men (González Gómez, 2016: 211). This is where the *muxe* come in taking over the role of the women. It is surprising to encounter a practice like that in a country that is ‘depicted as male dominated [and] driven by the cult of machismo, patriarchy, and excessive masculinity’ which all indicate intolerance for homosexuality and transsexual behavior (Mirandé, 2012: 510). It can be said that the *danza de las mascaritas* is opposing normative Mexican gender relations by incorporating the *muxe*, or as Mirandé (2012: 521) calls them, ‘man-woman’, as performing the character of the women. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the *muxe* ‘are very well integrated and accepted into the communit[ies]’ of the Oaxaca region (Mirandé, 2012: 538). However, this has not always been like this and still is not consistently the case, because some see their practice as ‘moral failing, a lapse in judgment, and even a bad habit’ (Franco, 2019: 69). Here, as González Gómez (2016: 227) argues, the participation in the *danza de las mascaritas* is openly affirming the gender identity of the *muxe*. By performing a female character, the dancers can adopt female characteristics and take on a more female identity. González Gómez (2016: 227) further explains that by participating in the *danza de las mascaritas*, which is a popular dance tradition, the *muxe* gain more acceptance by their families and others for their identification with Mexico’s third gender. Thus, by performing the role of women in this cultural dance tradition, the *muxe* gain social acceptance and a respected place in the community. This argument indicates that the performance of dance and of a certain gender identity through dance, a change of social perceptions about gender relations can be initiated. However, it is questionable that this acceptance is authentic, since in the *danza de las mascaritas* the dancers wear masks and thereby hide the true self. Wearing a mask is a way to hide and to forget about the self. Thus, the performance of the *muxe* in this specific dance can rather be associated with a roleplay and the staging of another person, than with an authentic representation of the true self and of the *muxe* identity.

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<sup>6</sup> In English: Dance of the masks.

The question that arises here is, whether these findings are specific to the case of the *muxe* and the *danza de las mascaritas* or whether they are applicable to other contexts. If they were, this would mean that dancing salsa could contribute to a modification of perceptions about femininity and female gender roles and that salsa dancers could take the specific femininity performed during the dance and adopt it also outside of the dance context. However, this process is more complex than it may seem, because contextual factors play an important role here. While González Gómez' argument that the *danza de las mascaritas* contributes to the acceptance of the *muxe* as a third gender is valid, the specific historical context needs to be recognized. In the state of Oaxaca 'a matrifocal family system [...] persists in the face of patriarchy, where women have a great deal of power and autonomy, economically, socially, and in the kinship system' (Mirandé, 2012: 536). This power position of women is 'considered unusual in other parts of the country' (Stephen, 2002: 43). It is also a region where same-sex sexuality was widespread and had been normalized in the pre-colonial and pre-Columbus times. It was only by the arrival of the Europeans and the introduction of the Spanish law that 'homosexual men were sentenced to death by burning' and as a consequence local belief about homosexuality changed over time (Mirandé, 2012: 515). The Spanish also introduced the two-gender system, as in the ancient Mexican times 'cross-dressing Aztec priests and Mayan gods who were at once male and female' were part of the people's cultural practice (Mirandé, 2012: 536). Therefore, it can be argued that the acceptance of the *muxe* who now are accepted as a mixed third gender can be traced back to the Mexican historical period before the arrival of Columbus. Moreover, these historical factors facilitate the local changing perspectives about gender in the current time. Consequently, it can be argued that changes in perception about gender relations are more difficult in the urban area where people are not as connected to the indigenous past and traditions and where patriarchy and machismo have been dominant in a more intensive way.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As has been established in this chapter machismo and marianismo are part of the Mexican patriarchy and cause diverse difficulties for women's lives. Next to the restrictions and taboos imposed on women, for example related to sexuality, Mexican patriarchal structures provoke gender inequality. While higher social classes have already advanced in terms of gender equality, generally speaking Mexican women are still highly disadvantaged in most social, political and economic areas. As argued, in order to improve the situation of women in Mexico, conservative religious and patriarchal beliefs have to be undertaken. This is highly necessary, because violence against women poses a serious consequence of both gender inequality and patriarchy. Femicides are the most recent and most extreme expression of the violence and naturalization of the subordination of women in Mexico. This illustration of the social position of the female gender is important for the next chapter, because it will analyze how the perceptions of women about gender, the female body, and sexuality, which are all structured by this framework, change when being involved in dancing salsa and how women set themselves apart from these patriarchal beliefs of the Mexican society.

Unfortunately, although dance is very present in Mexican life and the country's popular culture, the academic literature about gender in Mexican dance is only limited, so is the literature on salsa dancing in this country. Because of this lack of literature, this



chapter has shown how the *muxe* construct their gender identity in the *danza de las mascaritas*. This example was relevant, because its findings will be compared to the empirical data of women dancing salsa in Mexico later on in this thesis. It is hoped that the analysis of the *muxe* and the *danza de las mascaritas* can give valuable insights to how women construct their gender identity in salsa dancing. By performing the female character in the *danza de las mascaritas*, the *muxe* affirm their female identity and their participation in this dance makes other people accept their femininity. The question that arises here is whether these findings can be transferred to salsa dancing. If so, this would mean that women would be able to adopt the ideal femininity (talked about in chapter 1) and that others would accept this establishment of a more progressive female identity loosened from traditional gender relations. While this will be investigated in the next chapter, it is unclear whether it is the case, because of the different context in which the *muxe* interact and the context in which women dance salsa. The *muxe* interact in a specific historical context of indigenous homosexuality and cross-dressing. They do not intend to show that they are women by participating in the *danza de las mascaritas*, rather this dance is an affirming activity that gives their way of life and their way of constructing gender legitimacy. Salsa dancing, however, takes place mainly in urban areas where the feeling of belonging to ancient pre-colonization traditions is not as present and therefore, patriarchy structures and machismo are even more dominant. In this context, there is not so much understanding and space for alternative interpretations of gender. Therefore, performing idealized femininity in salsa dancing (as described in chapter 1), is rather expected to function as a resistance to male dominated culture rather than to be a way of gaining acceptance. The following section will further look into this issue.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PROGRESSIVENESS OF WOMEN DANCING SALSA

#### 3.1 Methodology of Fieldwork

Before discussing the empirical findings and the analysis of these findings in the light of the research question, it is important to understand how this data was collected. The data collection is based on fieldwork that took place in the period from May 30, 2019 until July 30, 2019 in Puebla de Zaragoza, Mexico. Moreover, this thesis is based on a qualitative study that departs from an anthropological perspective. This means that this research methodologically shifts the perspective from the observer to the actors, in this case the individuals who are the focus of the study (emic perspective). The individuals that this research focuses on, or in other words the research population, consists of women who are dancing salsa in Puebla de Zaragoza, Mexico. While I of this thesis had nine main informants, there was an uncountable amount of informal conversations with many other women. This study preselected the research population by only including women who have been dancing salsa for at least half a year and dedicate more than four hours a week to salsa dancing. The rationale for focusing the data collection to this subgroup of women is that, if dancing plays a substantial role in the lives of these women, the research better reveals a possible shift in the perspectives of these women and therefore, provides a better data set for the study. In order to collect data on the women's perspectives and ideas on the subject of the research, different methods were combined. This triangulation of methods is important and beneficial, because each method has different weaknesses and strengths and thus, in combining them they can complement each other ensuring that the validity of the study is as high as possible (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011: 128).

One of the main methods used during the fieldwork was participant observation, which consists of participating in extraordinary and daily activities, interactions and events of the research population to obtain information on the social and cultural aspects of the identified group (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011: 1). In this context the I participated in salsa classes of different dance schools and observed the trainings of a show team<sup>7</sup> during the entire time of fieldwork. All of the information obtained during participant observation was put into notes for further analysis. While obtaining explicit and especially tacit information<sup>8</sup> was one of the main goals of participant observation, it was also aimed at getting in touch with informants, sharing time and experiences with them and, thereby, building up rapport<sup>9</sup>. The research done in the context of this thesis has put a lot of value into building up rapport, because some of the topics were quite sensitive and thus, it was perceived as important to have a good relationship with the informants. The participant observation allowed for an

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<sup>7</sup> In salsa dancing a 'show team' is a group of dancers that perform together on stage.

<sup>8</sup> Tacit aspects of culture are the ones that are unspoken and unconscious. Therefore, knowledge about them cannot be obtained by talking to people, but rather they must be observed by a neutral outsider.

<sup>9</sup> Rapport is a state of interaction that is achieved when the researcher and the informant have a full mutual trust (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011: 47). This trust is important to be able to obtain truthful information and to be able to talk about sensitive and personal issues.

collection of a wide set of information and data, and it was possible to identify data that indicated differences between what people say and what they actually do could be seen.

These differences would then be discussed with the informants in the semi-structured interviews that were conducted based on the contacts and rapport created through participant observation. These interviews are the second main method this study employed. In total 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted in addition to the many informal conversations during participant observation. The semi-structured interviews were given a central role in the process of knowledge creation as these interviews allowed me to obtain deep and extended information about the perspectives, ideas and feelings of the salsa dancing women on gender, the body, and sexuality. Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to ask open-ended questions and therefore give the informants the possibility to talk about aspects of the topic that are important according to their personal opinion. With the permission of the informants, not only notes were taken to document the non-verbal gestures and expressions, but the interviews were also recorded and then transcribed.

In anthropological fieldwork data collection and analysis are an interactive process and, therefore, both have been alternated during this research. For part of the analysis the software Nvivo has been used. In this program transcribed interviews and notes of the participant observation were coded, which helped to create an overview and order of the collected information. Doing this during the period of fieldwork revealed what kind of information was still missing and provided ideas for new questions to be asked in following interviews and conversations. This interactive process increased the quality of this research.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that every anthropological research is tied to the code of ethics from the AAA<sup>10</sup>. This code of ethics was also applied to this present study. The most important aspect of the code is the informed consent, which was achieved during this fieldwork by verbally informing the informants about the content of the research and asking for their permission to conduct it. Furthermore, as part of the code of ethics from the AAA, anonymity is granted to the informants of this research in order to protect them. Thus, all names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

### **3.2 Perceptions about Gender: Salsa as Space for Liberal Femininity**

‘When I dance, I feel more feminine, because in this space one is free to express oneself. If I wanted to dress in a skirt or whatever I use in a dance presentation on a daily basis, I can’t because of machismo and violence. Men do not let us explore that good part, on the contrary, one goes in the street and walks with the head down because men are shouting many ugly things. In salsa it is the opposite, everything is totally different, one can show one’s attributes’ - Fernanda (dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019).

As my informant Fernanda explains, for women in Mexico it is difficult to explore their femininity freely, because of male macho behavior that could endanger them and can be uncomfortable. Instead women are restricted in the sense that they should not attract attention by dressing and behaving in a certain way. This indicates that the cultural notions of marianismo and machismo are indeed still present in the Mexican society and structure women’s lives and actions. However, as Fernanda describes it, in salsa women are free to

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<sup>10</sup> See code of ethics AAA (2009) <http://s3.amazonaws.com/rdcms-aaa/files/production/public/FileDownloads/pdfs/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/AAA-Ethics-Code-2009.pdf>

express themselves as they want. Therefore, it can be argued that salsa constitutes a separate space within society in which different rules apply.

But how then is femininity and gender constructed in this distinct space? In order to answer this question, first of all, it is important to understand how femininity is defined by the Mexican women who dance salsa<sup>11</sup>. My informant Miguelina and I were sitting on the ground in the corner of the spacious dance studio after an exhausting salsa class discussing how she perceives femininity. She was silent for some time, contemplatively drinking some water before saying: 'I think it is more like a stereotype' (Miguelina, professional dancer, interview: 17/7/2019). For her being feminine does not necessarily have to do with being a woman and therefore, not every woman is feminine. She tells me that for her being feminine is a type of woman that society is used to, one who looks good and dresses well. My other informants totally agree with Miguelina by describing femininity as 'taking great care of the one's physique' (Paola, dances in a show team, interview: 23/7/2019), 'being sensual and delicate' (Cecilia, dances in a show team, interview: 22/7/2019) and 'being flirty' (Andrea, dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019). The way how the female salsa dancers to whom I talked in Puebla, interpret the concept of femininity, is in accordance with what has been called idealized femininity in chapter 1.2.2., a specific performance of the female gender associated with characteristics such as sensuality, sexiness, and seductiveness. While my informants describe female salsa dancers exactly with these characteristics, they do not see themselves fitting into this stereotypical image of femininity: 'I am not feminine, because I do not adapt all the things that society expects from women. [...] Instead of wanting to look good, I prefer to be comfortable, and I also do not use so much make-up' (Paola, dances in a show team, interview: 23/7/2019). This contradiction between their self-description and how they describe other dancers arises, because by dancing salsa women perform the mentioned "idealized femininity". However, as Miguelina (professional dancer, interview: 17/7/2019) explained to me, they only stage or act the role of the salsa dancer, which does not mean that they actually are like this: 'I see dancing as if it was acting. That is, when you act, you have to get into a role that maybe is not yours, but you have to feel it and you have to act like that role. When I dance, I feel like this, I can be someone that I am not and when I stop dancing, I am me again'. Thus, salsa dancers seem to embody the idealized femininity, because it is what they stage and perform. But it is only a role that they play during the dance that does not express their actual identification. These findings verify Skinner's (2008: 73) argument (given in chapter 1.2.) that gender identity in salsa is staged and that this performance 'start[s] and stop[s] on the dance floor'.

Nonetheless, although it is just a staging or roleplay, the performance of idealized femininity during salsa dancing can be interpreted as a resistance against traditional and patriarchal gender norms and values, because it breaks with the image of traditional femininity as described by *marianismo*. I remember conducting an interview in the colorful garden of a small café with Paola while drinking hot chocolate, when she told me with sparks in her eyes that in salsa dancing women step into another role and position than the one that they hold in society, namely, a more independent one (Paola, dances in a show team, interview: 8/7/2019). Coming back to how female dancers construct gender and femininity in the space of salsa, it can be said that, although they do not identify with the idealized femininity that they perform while they dance, their conceptualization of this gender and femininity begins to disconnect from traditional and conservative beliefs. My informants see

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<sup>11</sup> As explained in chapter 1.2.2. it is essential to use the emic perspective to fully understand the lifeworld of the investigated people.

their femininity as being built upon their independence and the empowerment of the female gender (Miguelina, professional dancer, interview: 3/7/2019; Fernanda, dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019;). Paola (dances in a show team, interview: 8/7/2019) stresses that women who dance salsa are not dependent or subordinated to men anymore, instead she says: 'I seek independence in my life, I want to be me and do what suits me and it makes me feel comfortable'.

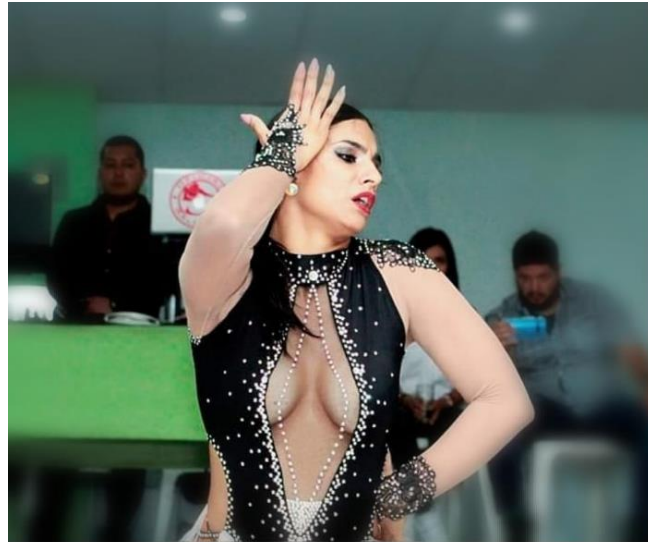


Photo 2: Informant Julia performing idealized femininity during a salsa show

While before her body language radiated proudness, this was replaced by an expression of sadness when she added that many non-dancers mistake this independence and the free expression of her femininity for sluttiness and see it as disobedience, 'just because I do not hide like everyone else' (Paola, dances in a show team, interview: 8/7/2019). Julia (professional dancer, interview: 22/6/2019) told me as well that 'men see women like us as sexual objects and do not recognize the art in salsa dancing'. The salsa dancing women in Puebla that I talked to are performing a more liberal femininity in their dance and thereby are resisting traditional femininity and gender conceptualizations. Mexican society, which is inherently conservative and patriarchal (Huck, 2017: 147), shows antipathy for this alternative. The way that society sees the femininity performed by the female salsa dancers can be related to the cultural notion of *malinchismo*, as described in chapter 2.1., and it illustrates the restriction of free expression of women in Mexico. Thus, this antipathy shows that salsa constitutes a space that stands separately from the rest of the Mexican society in terms of the acceptance of diverse gender identities and their roles, as has also been indicated above.

A space is constructed by its people, and thus, the free and safe space that salsa provides in the context of female self-expression, is due to the perceptions of the dancers themselves. As mentioned above, my informants define their womanhood in terms of independence and empowerment. Hence, it can be said that they have a progressive view about what it means to be a woman and about the role of women in society. However, this is not only the case for their own gender identity. I noticed that the salsa dancing women that she met during the fieldwork were also open-minded towards others. A good example

is their attitude towards homosexuality. In the Mexican society, generally speaking, being very different is not permitted as expressed by the informant Constanza (dances in a show team, interview: 21/6/2019): 'You cannot be different, like ... you just cannot!'. At the dance competition at the salsa congress<sup>12</sup> in Puebla, which the I attended during my fieldwork, there was a category for 'male partners', in which two men danced together. While this seemed to be totally normal to my informants and they even admire them, they told me that many (not all) non-dancers reacted with a shock, saying 'Ah no! Why would two men dance together and move like women?!' (Paola, dances in a show team, interview: 8/7/2019). This observation indicates that the female salsa dancers in Puebla who I interviewed have a more progressive and open-minded view about gender identity in general.

The question is whether the progressive perspectives about gender and femininity arise due to the involvement in salsa dancing, or that the women had a more liberal education and thus, their beliefs were not as conservative in the first place. However, a correlation between dancing salsa and being open-minded and progressive is almost impossible to prove, since there are many unisolated factors that influence human thought and opinion. While this dilemma will be picked up in the conclusion of this thesis, it should be noted at this point that women are able to gain exposure to more liberal views about gender when they begin to dance, because they get to perform the 'idealized' femininity which stands in contrast to traditional ideas of *marianismo*. Thus, women are able to enter a separate and safe space that can introduce them to alternative ideas and ways of exploring femininity, no matter whether they already had a more liberal education before or not.

### **3.3 Perceptions about the Body: Resistance and its Limitations**

'In Latin America we live in a very macho world, so women's sensuality is not perceived as it should be. Men look down on women and see the sensuality of them only as a sexual object. That is why women hide. Salsa opens a space for women to explore their sensuality as what it is: the essence of being a woman' - Fernanda (dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019).

In an interview with Fernanda, she summarizes the bottom line of this section: while the Mexican society restricts women in their exploration of their femininity, salsa constitutes a space where this exploration is possible. In this exploration the body and especially the way the body is being decorated, play a central role. As established in the section above, the informants see femininity closely related to physical aspects of women. Chapter 1.2.1 argued that the way in which the body is used, conceived, and experienced reflects the structures of the external context (Cowan, 1990: 23). The empirical data expound in the last section, shows that the salsa dancing women in Puebla to whom I have talked to, perform a femininity that is contradicting traditional gender norms and values in Mexico. Consequently, this indicates how restricting and limiting the overall structures of the country's society are for women and for their exploration of womanhood and femininity. Thus, salsa constitutes an important space in the resistance to the patriarchal existing order. This resistance that

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<sup>12</sup> A salsa congress is an event where many national and international participants come together for a weekend to take classes during the days and have salsa parties during the nights. The salsa congress in Puebla, named "Euroson Latino", also hosts an international dance competition.

has been talked about in chapter 2.2 functions largely through the body, and in specific through physical decorations such as clothes.

I was sitting on the ground during a workshop at the salsa congress in Puebla, leaning against the wall and observing the happenings in the immense room that was filled with over 200 women taking a lady styling class<sup>13</sup>. One girl following the steps of the teacher in the front, circling her hips in a sensual manner, particularly caught my eye. She was wearing a black, very close-fitting tight that had “Salsa Latin” written on the right thigh in golden, glittery letters. Her toned, naked belly was visible to everyone, because she was only wearing a sports bra, that had the same golden, glittery color as the letters on her tight. However, she was not the only one dressed in a very liberal way. In fact, most of the girls seemed to wear shirts that show the belly or back and they were all using very tight pants and their dancing high heels. In one of the interviews Cecilia (dances in a show team, interview: 16/7/2019) explained that during dancing she likes to dress in ‘skirts or shorts and more sexy blouses, clothes that are tighter and do not hide the body, because the thing is to demonstrate everything that comes with the movement’. Constanza (dances in a show team, interview: 1/7/2019) agreed with this, when explaining that ‘the clothes in dancing have the role to show the dance and not to show the body’. Thus, to dress sensual and sexy is not done to fit into the image of idealized femininity, rather these kinds of clothes are used to show the movements as best as possible and hence, to fully demonstrate the dancing abilities. Therefore, it also makes sense that Paola (dances in a show team, interview: 23/7/2019) shares: ‘when I dance, I look differently, because I do not use clothes like this in my daily life. [...] Usually I use sneakers, jeans, and simple t-shirts. I like to dress as comfortable as possible’.



Photo 3: An example of how women dress in the space of salsa

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<sup>13</sup> Lady styling is what salsa dancing people call the female addition to the partner dancing. It refers to arm and hip movements that the woman can do independently while being led by the man. Moreover, it also includes free steps that women do alone when being let go by men, which happens more or less once or twice in the duration of one song.

With all of my informants I observed this same pattern namely that the informants dressed very differently when dancing salsa from how they dressed in the daily life outside of dancing. This clear distinction between body adornments outside and inside the space of salsa leads to two different conclusions. Firstly, this behavior indicates that the sensual and sexy femininity, called ideal femininity in this text, is not adopted by the female dancers and applied outside of dancing, but is only staged during the dance. Thus, the women's presentation of the body leads to the same conclusion as in the section above, which is that salsa dancing women do not embody the ideal femininity, but only perform it in the context of the dance. Secondly, the fact that the informants exclusively show a lot of skin and the curves of their bodies during salsa dancing, while dressing more conservatively in their daily life, demonstrates that although they are resisting the existing social structures by going against conventional norms and values (see 3.2 *supra*), this temporary resistance stays in the space of dancing salsa. The women to whom I have talked to, only exercise the controversial body adornment inside of the space of salsa. Therefore, it can be argued that there are no long-term implications or changes resulting from this resistance.

This limitation to the resistance within the space of salsa dancing, can be traced back to the difference in structures of the two spaces (society and salsa). As argued above, salsa dancing constitutes a separate space from the wider Mexican society, in which there is more acceptance for different gender identities and expressions of self. This context makes alternative forms and practices possible and even celebrates the resistance of the traditional norms and values. In the space that is the wider Mexican society, however, patriarchal ideas and behavior grounded in machismo are the norm. These express themselves through harassing behavior against women, especially against the ones dressing liberal: 'When women dress in a way that shows a lot of skin, they are always regarded as a sexual object. So, because of machismo women cannot dress themselves as they want' (Fernanda, dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019). Thus, the safety of women would be compromised if they were to behave like they do in the space of salsa and this makes it difficult for them to continue the resistance that they practice by dancing salsa and performing the ideal femininity in this dance. In conclusion, it can be argued that although the female salsa dancers in Puebla whom I have interviewed do not adopt and embody the sensual and sexy femininity that they perform and stage during dancing, they would not be able to take it outside of the space of salsa even if they wanted, because the bodily practices related to this specific femininity endanger the women, due to patriarchal and machismo structures deeply rooted and resent in Mexican society and male behavior. However, the fact that the resistance through bodily adornments is limited to the space of salsa, does not mean that the salsa dancers do not take the resistance to dominant structures outside of the safe dance floor. The next section discusses more subtle ways in which the salsa dancing women resist traditional norms and values.

### **3.4 Perceptions about Sexuality: The Open-Mindedness of Salsa Dancers**

'Sexuality revolves around men, so before [dancing] I always thought: ah no, what if he does not like me and what if my body is not how he likes it, and so on. But now with everything that I live and experience dancing, like that feeling of enjoyment, happiness and all of that, now I feel like my body and my sexuality are mine. I do not care anymore what others think,



when I like it. It is like I have been empowered at some point' - Fernanda (dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019).

According to Fernanda dancing salsa has not only changed how she perceives her own body and sexuality, but it has also affected the way in which she deals with men and their opinions. She feels like dancing salsa has empowered her. This section will analyze these changes that Fernanda describes and argue that, although there are no visible adjustments in the way that female dancers express their femininity through bodily adornments outside of the space of salsa, the women experience mental transformation, especially with regard to their sexuality.



Photo 4: The informants of the women's only show team before their presentation at the Euroson Latino

All informants agree that 'in Mexico female sexuality is a taboo' (Cecilia, dances in a show team, interview: 22/7/2019). While male sexuality is celebrated, 'there is no acceptance for the idea that a woman can feel pleasure' (Fernanda, dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019). However, in the space of salsa female sexuality is perceived differently. During my fieldwork in Puebla I went to observe the rehearsal of a women's only show team every Tuesday evening. They were practicing a choreography that they then performed at the salsa congress of the city. The thirteen women would always stand in front of the spacious mirror repeating the steps again and again: as soon as the music started to play they were coming to the front with turns that were accompanied by elegant arm movements, to then throw themselves on the knees flipping their hair around while touching their waists, which was followed by rolling on the floor, twisting their legs in the air and then standing up while popping out their butts. Seeing this performance left the impression of a seduction dance, because it looked like the women were flirting with the audience trying to attract them. When I observed this group, I was noted very self-confident women who were not having any glimpse of shyness. Constanza (dances in a show team, interview: 21/6/2019) confirmed this observation when she shared in an interview with me: 'I believe that I have become more sociable, more open, and I can better interact with other people'. In fact, all informants stressed that they have become more sociable, extrovert, and open to new things and people. This is also the case for relations and interactions with men: 'I feel like it is easier

for me now to be in contact with men, because in salsa you have to, and then you get used to it' (Virginia, dances in a show team, interview: 26/7/2019). These personal changes that the women in this study experienced, are not limited to the space of salsa. Rather, also outside of dancing they describe themselves as more open when in the contact with other people and more self-confident. Therefore, it can be argued that the internal changes initiated by salsa dancing are different from the external ones (like body adornment) in terms of extension into the women's daily life. This difference can be accounted for by the fact that mental progressiveness is less visual and thus, not so exposed to society and its traditional norms and values. In other words, open-mindedness is not as noticeable on the first sight and does not endanger the women as provocative clothes do.

Thus, the women's perceptions about sexuality are also not visible in daily life, but the informants in this study definitely have more progressive ideas about this topic. According to Cecilia (dances in a show team, interview: 22/7/2019), women who dance salsa are more open about their sexuality, because 'the movements are erotic and moving like this makes one more open about these things'. My informant Constanza (dances in a show team, interview: 21/6/2019) described this point with the argument that salsa dancing leads to a close bodily contact with a lot of (stranger) people in the dance classes and parties. By saying this she confirms Gotfrit's (*in* Skinner, 2008: 68) argument that the intimacy between male and female bodies provokes a loosening of tight reins of female sexuality (as unfold in chapter 1.2.2.). However, my informants went one step further in their argumentation by describing how this loosening of their sexuality goes hand in hand with a feeling of empowerment. As Fernanda (dance teacher, interview: 28/6/2019) points out: 'women are usually ashamed of the whole issue, but salsa dancing empowers women, then they talk about whatever and to feel free to tell the truth about their sexuality'. Therefore, it can be said that being involved in salsa dancing gives the women confidence and provides them with different perspectives through which they feel more independent and empowered. Accordingly, it can be concluded that salsa can be a space that helps female dancers to develop themselves as a person and as a woman, to explore their position as a woman and to free themselves from traditional gender roles and the suppression of patriarchy, which all together gives them a feeling of empowerment.

### 3.5 Conclusion

As established in this chapter, female salsa dancers in Puebla perform and stage a femininity characterized by sexiness, sensuality, and seductiveness, that has been called "idealized femininity". This describes a femininity that is desired by men. However, this desire does not exceed casual relationships, because for serious or matrimonial bonds men want a woman who fits into the image of *marianismo*. The dancers I interviewed for this study do not fit in either of the two extremes. Their thoughts and ideas are pretty progressive and open minded. Consequently, they do not fulfill the conservative characteristics of *marianismo*, but their performance of idealized femininity, which is mainly related to physical aspects, starts and stops in the space of dance, and thus they do not fit into this stereotype either. Therefore, it can be argued that the female salsa dancers constitute a category in between. However, it is very important to acknowledge that there is not homogeneous identity of salsa dancing women. As in all social groups, there are differences between the individuals, which makes generalizations impossible.

Although the performance of idealized femininity is limited to the space of salsa, it can be interpreted as a resistance to traditional gender norms and values based on patriarchal structures and machismo. This limited resistance mainly takes place through body politics: the female dancers dress in a way that is not accepted by society. Thus, just as the *danza de las mscaritas*, talked about in chapter 2.3., salsa is opposing dominant ideas about gender roles and behavior. However, while the *muxe* gain acceptance through the performance of this specific dance (González Gómez, 2016:227), there have been no indications during the fieldwork underlying this study that the female salsa dancers do so too. Therefore, the findings of the case of the *muxe* (illustrated in chapter 2.3 *supra*) are not applicable to the case of female salsa dancers in Puebla, because they cannot take on the idealized femininity that they perform during dancing outside of the dance. This is due to the continued existence of conservative and traditional thoughts about femininity and female gender roles which restrict body adornments and behavior of women.

This supports the arguments that salsa constitutes a separate space, apart from the general society, in which different rules regarding gender and the female body exists. Within this space, women have the opportunity to explore their femininity with less limitations. The empirical findings of this fieldwork, elucidated in this chapter, indicate that the women who I have talked to, experience a mental transformation after being involved in salsa dancing for some time. The informants were open-minded and had progressive thoughts about different aspects life. While female sexuality is a taboo in Mexican society, the dancers who I included in this study have talked were very openly about this topic and had no problems talking about it. Moreover, their feeling of empowerment that they described to gain with the loosening of their sexuality, is an important aspect in a society where women are oppressed and disadvantaged.

## CONCLUSION

The empirical chapter of this thesis, I have described how the salsa dancing women who I have interviewed in Puebla, Mexico perceive gender, the body, and sexuality and how they perform their femininity inside and outside of the space of salsa. However, only by relating these findings to the theories and concepts developed in chapter 1, conclusions can be drawn and valuable answers to the research questions can be given. Therefore, this chapter presents different argumentations that allow to respond to the sub-questions, objects, and hypotheses of the given research, and to conclusively respond to the central question of this study, namely: What impact does salsa dancing have on the perceptions about gender, the body, and sexuality of Latin-American women?

Firstly, attention will be paid to the sub-objective of determining whether being involved in salsa dancing is related to non-traditional and non-conventional ways of perceiving gender in general and femininity in specific. As established in chapter 2, according to traditional and conventional norms, notions of gender in Mexico are closely related to machismo and marianismo. As has been argued by Sanabria and Huck these cultural constructs organize and structure society in a way where men are seen as the superior gender, having the authority and power, while women are perceived as the subordinate gender, self-sacrificing themselves for their husbands and children. Accordingly, non-traditional and non-conventional ways of perceiving gender imply a different power distribution between men and women in which women take more authority over themselves and act more independently. In other words, changing the existing power dynamic requires women to take on non-traditional gender roles. Chapter 1 discusses Beggan and Pruitt's argument that the patriarchal structures of Latin American societies are reflected in the dance itself. However, while salsa is organized in line with ideas and gender roles of machismo (men lead and women follow, the man asks the women to dance, male dance teachers lead the class and the female teacher have more of an assisting role, etc.), the empirical data obtained during the fieldwork underlying this thesis has shown that women renegotiate this structure by using expressions of femininity that oppose traditional femininity as represented by marianismo. As illustrated in chapter 3 my informants are exploring a sensual and seductive side of themselves in salsa dancing, which is denied to them outside of that space. Therefore, Bock's and Borland's previously demonstrated argument that salsa dancing is a liberation from restrictive femininity towards a celebratory one, can be affirmed by the findings of my research. However, it is also important to remember the point made by Peters, who compares the performance of gender in salsa dancing with a roleplay. While femininity is celebrated in salsa dancing, this celebration does not exceed the space of salsa. The women who I have interviewed in Puebla confirm that they explore and stage a more sensual and sexy femininity while dancing, but this is not how they identify outside of the dance floor. Nonetheless, in an answer to the first sub-question of this research 'to what extent does salsa dancing affect the way in which women perceive gender and femininity', it can be said that although the female salsa dancers interviewed for this study do not transport this performance of a more liberal femininity outside of the dance, their perception of this concept and of gender in general is loosened. Thus, it can be argued that salsa dancing does not change all gender-based behavior, but it brings women into contact with more liberal ideas about gender and femininity that are not

promoted by Mexican society. The best example for this is their increased tolerance towards homosexuality, as described in chapter 3. Therefore, the hypothesis that by dancing salsa women develop a more progressive view of notions around gender and femininity which is expressed through their own performance of femininity and their acceptance of homosexuality, can be verified.

In the reflection about the second sub-objective, which is to analyzing the influence that salsa dancing has on the body politics of the female dancers, Bock's and Borland's argument, presented in chapter 1, that dance has the power to liberate dancers from restrictions of society stand central. In the case of salsa dancing in Mexico, this liberation takes place in terms of giving women the opportunity to dress and present their body in a way which is not accepted by traditional norms and values. Going against what is socially accepted, makes this practice of dressing in a more liberal manner resistance to the dominant ideas of how women should behave. However, as noted in the empirical chapter, my data indicate that the women in Puebla only dress more liberal inside of the space of salsa dancing, rather than applying it in their daily life, too. Therefore, the resistance practiced in the dance is limited to that specific space. This is very interesting, because it reveals valuable information about Mexican society. As Cowan illustrated, body politics can expose aspects of the wider social and cultural context of society. Here, the limitation of resisting bodily practices in salsa dancing, shows how strongly present and rooted the cultural notion of machismo still is in Mexican society. There is not much space for women to be more liberal in their behavior and appearance, rather Mexico remains a conservative and traditional country, with regard to gender norms and values. However, while visual actions only change within the space of salsa, perceptions about the body of the informants in this study are highly influenced by dancing salsa. Thus, to answer the second sub-question, 'to what extent has the activity of dancing salsa influenced women's perceptions about the body?', it can be said that the women to whom I have talked during my fieldwork, loosen their ideas about the body and how it is supposed to be presented according to social and cultural norms and free themselves from social restrictions of the female body. However, the extent to which these liberal and progressive perceptions are expressed, do not exceed the space of salsa and therefore it cannot be talked about true resistance to dominant beliefs about gender roles and behavior. Hence, the sub-hypothesis that women who dance salsas start to dress in a more liberal manner, showing the curves of the body and more uncovered skin can be verified if considering its limitation to the space of salsa dancing.

For the review of the final sub-objective of this research which is getting to know the impact that salsa dancing has on women's sexuality and how they conceptualize their relationships with men, it is important to recall Royce's point presented in chapter 1 that in daily life legitimate opportunities for contact between people of the opposite sex are usually rare, while in salsa dancing touching is encouraged, which, as Gotfrit notes, provokes a loosening of tight reins of sexuality for women. My informants confirmed this theory and shared in the interviews that they feel free to talk about their sexuality now and that it is easier for them to interact with men, as explained in chapter 3. This can be considered a relevant progress, since female sexuality is considered a taboo in Mexico. It can be argued that the topic of sexuality opens a window into Mexican society's gender inequality. While male sexuality is celebrated and bragged about, women are not supposed to have sexual relations for pleasure, but only for reproduction reasons. However, according to my informants, salsa dancing provides a feeling of empowerment, which makes the dancers feel comfortable to talk about their sexuality and to no longer comply with dominant norms.

Therefore, salsa dancing helps reducing the gap between man and women regarding their expression about sexuality and hence, fights gender inequality. As has been established earlier, salsa is a safe space in which women are free to express themselves however they want, but the wider society does not get affected by the practices of the female salsa dancers. If society were more like the space of salsa, it would be a safer county for women, in which gender inequality and violence against women would be less present. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Nonetheless, this study shows that there is hope, because it indicates how the perspectives of women about certain aspects regarding gender can change. Thus, if these women were to take their newly gained mindset outside of salsa dancing, turning it into activism, dance indirectly could be able to make a change. To come back to the sub-question dealt with here, ‘how has the perception of sexuality of women changed by dancing salsa?’, this thesis argues that the women to whom I have talked are being more open about their sexuality and feel more comfortable in interactions with men. While their actions seem to have not changed, the way in which they talk and think about sexuality is different and less conservative from how many non-dancers perceive this issue. Thus, the respective hypothesis, that women change their perceptions about sexuality by being involved in salsa dancing, in the sense that they are freed from the traditional idea of female gender roles and assume a more progressive position with regard to their sexuality, can be verified.

All of these reflections given in the previous three paragraphs, lead to the answer of the central issue of this thesis. The research’s main objective was to understand the impact the activity of salsa dancing has on the worldview and the self-image of Latin-American women regarding notions of gender. The problem with this objective is that it is always difficult to analyze the impact of social phenomenon, because they take place in unisolated conditions in which different factors can influence the outcome. Thus, the answer to the central question of this research, ‘what impact does salsa dancing have on the perceptions about gender, the body and sexuality of Latin-American women?’ is limited. I argue that the perceptions about these three topics of the salsa dancing women to whom I have talked during my fieldwork in Puebla are progressive in the sense that they contradict traditional beliefs and norms. These women are open minded and tolerant to alternative ways of expressing gender, using the body, and talking about sexuality. Therefore, the central hypothesis of this thesis, that, by getting involved in salsa dancing, the women’s perceptions about gender, the body and sexuality are changing towards a more self-confident image about themselves and a more open and progressive worldview, can be verified. However, it is conflicting to say that it is the impact of salsa that provokes this mindset, because (1) it could be that women who feel drawn to a more progressive thinking about gender are drawn towards salsa dancing, and (2) other factors could play a role in the creation of the women’s beliefs. It is important to note that dancing salsa is an expensive activity, because classes are not cheap and equipment is required. Therefore, almost exclusively people from the middle and the upper social classes are involved in dancing salsa. As argued in chapter 2 by Basham, patterns of machismo are less present in higher social classes, which means that their beliefs and behavior is structured by more liberal ideas that are less related to traditional norms and values. This implies that when a person is born into a family of a higher social class, her or his education is more liberal. Thus, it is not explicit that the progressive perspectives of the dancing women to whom I have talked are shaped by the activity of dancing salsa or by the education that they enjoyed already before. Consequently, it can be concluded that the dancing women’s perspectives about gender, the body, and sexuality are

progressive and are different from and even contradicting how Mexican society and most non-dancing women perceive these topics, but it is not possible to say whether women with a progressive mindset get attracted by salsa or that dancing salsa introduces them to these perspectives. A combination of both factors is more likely. Yet, in order to understand the factors that cause this differentiated and progressive perspectives about gender, the body, and sexuality, further research is needed.

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## APPENDIX

### List of Interviews

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Role of Informant</b>	<b>Date and Place</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Discussed Topics</b>
<b>Andrea</b>	University student, dances in a show team, is a dance teacher	28/06/2019, at Centro de Convenciones Puebla	30 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, femininity, homosexuality
<b>Cecilia</b>	Works in the communication department of a magazine, dances in a show team	16/07/2019, at Divara	40 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, homosexuality and minorities
<b>Cecilia</b>	Works in the communication department of a magazine, dances in a show team	22/07/2019, at dance school 'Mambo Feeling'	35 min.	Femininity, the body, sexuality
<b>Constanza</b>	University student, dances in a show team	21/06/2019, at Divara	40 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, minorities in Mexico
<b>Constanza</b>	University student, dances in a show team	01/07/2019, at Divara	30 min.	Femininity, the body, sexuality
<b>Fernanda</b>	University student, dances in a show team, is a dance teacher	28/06/2019, at Centro de Convenciones Puebla	50 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, femininity, the body, sexuality, homosexuality and minorities
<b>Julia</b>	Professional dancer, dance teacher at different dance schools	22/06/2019, at dance school 'Candela Latin Club'	40 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, femininity, the body
<b>Miguelina</b>	Professional dancer, owner of a dance school	03/07/2019, at dance school 'Mambo feeling'	40 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, homosexuality and minorities
<b>Miguelina</b>	Professional dancer, owner of a dance school	17/07/2019, at dance school 'Mambo feeling'	35 min.	Femininity, the body, sexuality

<b>Paola</b>	Engineer, dances in a show team	08/07/2019, at Café Colibrí	35 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, homosexuality and minorities
<b>Paola</b>	Engineer, dances in a show team	23/7/2019, at Divara	30 min.	Femininity, the body, sexuality
<b>Virginia</b>	University student, dances in a show team with only women	26/7/2019	45 min.	Dance in her life, women in salsa, homosexuality and minorities, femininity, the body, sexuality

## Photos

Photo 1 (accessed on December 3, 2019): <https://www.viveoaxaca.org/2017/02/CarnavalJuxtlahuaca2017.html>

Photo 2 (accessed on December 3, 2019): <https://www.instagram.com/p/B10K4DchGJx/>

Photo 3 (accessed on December 3, 2019): <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByBpkmRAmsz/>

Photo 4 (accessed on December 3, 2019): <https://www.instagram.com/p/BzTUj23h0uY/>