Amelio Robles Ávila: Gender Identity during the Mexican Revolution

Grade Level: 9-12
Courses: Social Studies, English, World History
Topics: Mexican Revolution, Gender Roles, Gender Transition

Objectives

➤ Students will analyze how Amelio Robles Ávila's successful gender transition was a product of his participation in the Mexican Revolution.
➤ Students will compare and contrast Amelio Robles Ávila's experience of the Mexican Revolution with that of the *soldaderas*, the women soldiers central to the military effort of the Mexican Revolution. Additionally, they will situate his individual experience within its broader historical and social context to recognize how unconventional it was for the time.

WCRS "I Can" and "We Will" Statements (Google Sheets) on Wisconsin Career Readiness Standards
WCRS.LIF.3: Global competence — Understand one's impact on the world and develop the ability to interact with people from other backgrounds, nations, and cultures.
WCRS.LIF.3.C: Integrate diverse cultural perspectives and informational sources, from around the world, to inform decisions and actions.
URL (Statements): https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/e/2PACX-1vQ6Przd8CkGd_bqt2wq5MNTCGxJ05oyEKqsIL_LL5WMh05SwqRj_-MNdHQwXhFvwbTfbuPmIm8vwSi1/pubhtml#
URL (Standards): https://dpi.wi.gov/cte/resources/common-career

From the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's
Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies

This lesson plan was developed by undergraduate student Boston Peters in summer 2025 under a Support for Undergraduate Research Fellows (SURF) grant through the UWM Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR), supervised by the UWM Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) Associate Director, Monica VanBladel.
This, and more teaching resources developed under the research grant, can be found on https://uwm.edu/clacs/public-engagement/teaching-resources/k-12-lesson-plans-surf-2025-26/.
Please note that the UWM CLACS website will be redesigned in 2026, resulting in a change of the website's stable URL. When this occurs, the link provided above will no longer be functional. The new website will prominently feature available educator resources, including this one.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies is a member institution of the national Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP). CLASP also develops and shares a wide variety of K-12 educator resources on its website: https://claspprograms.org/k-12-educators/.

The following lesson may include state standards and/or "I can" statements related to the lesson content. These standards/statements were initially added as an educational framework for lesson design and may not be exhaustive.

This document may include hyperlinks. A page at the end of the document has been added to provide the URL included in each hyperlink, as well as other information about where the hyperlink leads. This information is intended to assist in finding the linked webpage if the hyperlink no longer functions.

Materials: This lesson plan draws heavily on excerpts from the book chapter "Gender and Transgender in the Mexican Revolution: The Shifting Memory of Amelio Robles" (in *Women Warriors and National Heroes: Global Histories*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). These excerpts are provided at the end of this document.

- *NOTE*: Cano's chapter discusses—among other topics—the retroactive feminization of Amelio Robles' image. This lesson focuses primarily on his gender transition and how his gender identity makes him stand out among other individuals (assigned female at birth) who participated in the Mexican Revolution.

Handouts for the questions associated with the Day 1 and Day 2 readings are also included at the end of this document.

Day 1

Before beginning the lesson, it may be helpful to clarify the distinction between sex and gender. In this lesson, sex is treated as a biological category (male, female), while gender is treated as a social category (masculine, feminine, man, woman, etc.).

Introduce students to the Mexican Revolution by showing one of the following videos:

- This video is shorter and more succinct, but may have more unfamiliar vocabulary: What Was the Mexican Revolution? - YouTube
- This video is extremely informative, but much longer. That being said, 0:00-3:18 "sets the stage" quite well: The Mexican Revolution 1910-1920 (Documentary)

Ask students to comment on what they watched. Then, provide students with the following questions and show the video again.

- *What was the Mexican Revolution? When did it happen?*
- *Who were the primary parties involved? What did they want?*
- *Based on this brief introduction, do you know of other revolutions in history that may be similar to or different from this one?*

Then, lead students in a guided reading of the first three pages of the "Gender and Transgender in the Mexican Revolution: The Shifting Memory of Amelio Robles" excerpts (everything prior to the "Masculinization" section). A guided reading is recommended because of how detailed the excerpts are.

The following questions can accompany this portion of the text:

- *For what cause did Amelio Robles fight during his years in the Revolution? What social group did he want to help?*
- *Why did the Mexican Revolution (a political/economic cause) benefit from rigid binary gender? In other words, what kind of man and what kind of woman was seen as part of this new world the fighters were trying to build?*

Day 2

Introduce students to the *soldaderas* who fought in the Mexican Revolution with this short video: Las Soldaderas: Mexico's Fearless Female Fighters - YouTube Shorts

Then, you may either lead a guided reading of the "Masculinization" section of the excerpts, or have students read that section individually.
Have students answer the following:

- *Compare and contrast how Amelio Robles challenged the gender binary with how the* soldaderas *challenged the gender binary. In what ways was their non-conformity similar? In what way was it different?*

You may also include the following question for a classroom debate:

- *Who was more disruptive to the status quo of gender at the time—the* soldaderas *or Amelio Robles? Why?*

Additional Discussion Questions

Students should be prepared to reference a quote from the text (or a page/paragraph number) to support their answers.

- *Given the context provided in the reading, what do you anticipate gender roles were like at the time? (The societal expectations placed on women vs. those placed on men.)*
- *How did Amelio Robles' gender presentation after the Revolution contrast with that of the women (or* soldaderas*) who participated in the Revolution?*
- *In the reading, why might the author switch between the use of Ávila's masculine designations (Amelio Robles and he/him pronouns) and feminine designations? (Amelia Robles and she/her pronouns)?*
- *How was Amelio Robles able to obtain legal status as a male?*
- *Are you surprised that Amelio Robles' identity was—for the most part—accepted by those around him? Why or why not?*

Intended Takeaways:

1. Amelio Robles Ávila is set apart from the women (or *soladaderas*) who participated in the Mexican Revolution because his masculine expression appears to have been internally motivated (by self-understanding himself as masculine), rather externally motivated by society's rigid restrictions on feminine roles and behavior.
    - This is supported by the fact that Amelio Robles maintained masculine presentation in his personal life and *after* his participation in the armed forces, while many *soldaderas* returned to a feminine gender presentation post-revolution.
2. Gender is social. It is both informed by how a person understands themselves as well as by what larger society permits or prohibits in a person's gender expression or in gender roles.

Links and Citations

"File:Amelio Robles Ávila - colorized.jpg" colorized by Eli Erlick (https://elierlick.com/color/) and uploaded to Wikimedia by User: Your Friendly Neighborhood Sociologist, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amelio_Robles_%C3%81vila_-_colorized.jpg. Original photograph located in Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Archivo Casasola.

Cano, Gabriela. "Gender and Transgender in the Mexican Revolution: The Shifting Memory of Amelio Robles." *Women Warriors and National Heroes: Global Histories*, 2020, pp. 179–196, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350140301.ch-010.

"What Was the Mexican Revolution?" by User: fredrickscottsmith on YouTube (10 April 2025), https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Ro1-TL1n95M.

"The Mexican Revolution 1910-1920 (Documentary)" by User: The Great War on Youtube (11 October 2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuGTDYouUU8.

Below are additional resources that were referenced while producing this lesson plan.

"The Little-Known History of Amelio Robles, a Trans Zapatista Who Fought in Mexico's Revolution" by Amaris Castillo (22 January 2020) on Remezcla, https://remezcla.com/features/culture/little-known-history-amelio-robles-trans-zapatista-fought-mexicos-revolution/.

"Amelio Robles Ávila, Trans Legend of the Mexican Revolution" by Alex Velazquez (20 September 2018) on INTO (intomore.com), https://www.intomore.com/culture/amelio-robles-avila-trans-legend-of-the-mexican-revolution/.

"Amelio Robles Ávila - Nominee" written by Owen Keehnen, edited by Victor Salvo on Legacy Project Chicago (https://legacyprojectchicago.org/), https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/amelio-robles-avila.

[p.179]

Gender and Transgender in the Mexican Revolution: The Shifting Memory of Amelio Robles

By Gabriela Cano (2020)

[...] [p.181] Amelio Robles took part in the 1910 Mexican Revolution as a combatant in Emiliano Zapata's popular agrarian movement, or Zapatismo. Zapata led a rebellion of "campesinos" (poor peasants), who took up arms to defend their communal lands against the encroachments of privately owned haciendas (estates). Zapatismo emerged in the state of Morelos, where the movement was centered, and also had followers in some parts of Guerrero, Puebla, and the State of Mexico, in the country's central southern region. Robles's home town of Xochipala, in Guerrero, joined the movement with a twofold aim: to defend its traditional boundaries from the expansion of the nearby hacienda and to resolve a long-running agrarian dispute with the neighboring town.[1]

Zapatista fighters were not a professional army but rather a "people in arms"; that is, they were guerrilla groups who served a community leader skilled in combat.[2] War brought about the destruction of social and cultural structures and broke up…**[p.182]**…traditional social hierarchies. Social instability, evacuations, and constant danger were all part of daily life for the Zapatista guerrillas. This created a favorable atmosphere for Amelio Robles to adopt the desired masculine identity and appearance: the young rural woman became a male Zapatista guerrilla. Robles adopted the wardrobe, pose, and body movements typical of men in the early-twentieth century from his rural part of Mexico.[3] The transition also entitled a name change: from the feminine Amelia, which was given to her at birth, to the masculine grammatical Amelio. (In Spanish, an "o" or "a" at the end of a word indicates grammatical gender; in proper names, the feminine or masculine grammatical gender usually corresponds to the person's gender identity.[4])

Unlike other women who only passed themselves off as men while participating in the armed uprising, Amelio Robles sustained his masculinity throughout his long life and even into old age. He died at the age of ninety-four, and those who knew him in his final years remember him as an elderly man respected by his family and the wider community alike. Neighbors and family members addressed him in the masculine grammatical gender as "Mr.," "colonel," "uncle," or "great uncle" and treated him with the respect typically accorded to an elder property owner and household head. Robles's standing in his community stemmed largely from his involvement in the Mexican Revolution.

[...] [p.183] There are at least three meanings of the term Mexican Revolution: first, as a war and political conflict; second, as the drafting and institutional enforcement of laws and reforms; and third, as rhetorical trope. The revolution was a symbol of nationalism, social justice, and secularization. Throughout the century, both governments and opponents invoked the Mexican Revolution as a source of their legitimacy. More importantly for our purposes, the

Mexican Revolution celebrated binary gender as the epitome of national identity: the male peasant, worker, and soldier, and the sexually available young woman and mother.

Each of these meanings is relevant to the story of Amelio Robles. The process of his gender transition took place during the armed struggle and his constructed masculinity was accepted in the midst of the instability and violence of the war. The form of masculinity that Robles enacted had great value in the battlefields: he was courageous and capable of responding violently and immediately to aggression. His able handling of horses and firearms made him an outstanding warrior. His excessive indulgence in alcohol and his reputation for being a womanizer affirmed his masculine identity. The political influence his comrades exercised at the local and federal levels was crucial for the acceptance of his masculinity by state institutions. **[...]**

The Zapatista guerrillas fought to keep collective ownership of the land and to defend their traditional boundaries and autonomy in the face of the gathering forces of modernization and long-running agrarian disputes. They were notably active in demanding agrarian reforms, and although their political faction was eventually defeated, the revolutionary government dictated policies of land distribution and collective ownership and constructed poor peasants as one of the central symbols of the Mexican Revolution.[5] The majority of Zapata's followers were poor peasants, but some small-scale landowners also joined the movement. This was the case of Robles and other Zapatistas from the state of Guerrero who joined the Mexican revolution either to support their communities in a border dispute with a neighboring town or to open political spaces for themselves in otherwise closed systems. The Robles family owned several hectares of land for crops and cattle. We can only speculate on the reasons Amelia Robles joined the Zapatistas. However, the opportunity to leave her small village and adopt a life in which appreciation for her horsemanship and use of firearms was prevalent undoubtedly counted as one of her motives.

The passing of the Constitution of 1917 gave the country a regulatory framework but did not halt the armed conflict. The restoration of peace came about only in 1920, and it was only then that a new state apparatus could be built. Robles fought with the Zapatistas for a few years, from 1913 or 1914 until 1920 when he led the revolutionary guerrillas and enlisted as a soldier in the federal army along with other Zapatista chiefs and comrades. Zapatismo was eroding, and Emiliano Zapata was assassinated in 1919.

In the army, Robles fought with the forces of Álvaro Obregón, the military leader from northern Mexico who supported agrarian reforms as part of the revolutionary coalition, and who was elected president of Mexico in 1920.[6] Between 1923 and 1924, Robles was deployed first to the states of Tabasco and Chiapas and later to the state of Hidalgo, where he fought against the Adolfo de la Huerta rebellion, which unsuccessfully tried to oust Álvaro Obregón's government. After sustaining a bullet wound in Hidalgo, Robles was discharged from the Mexican Army and returned to Guerrero as a civilian. During his active service in the Mexican Army, Amelio Robles fought under Adrián Castrejón, a former Zapatista leader. Castrejón had a very successful

political and military career, became governor of the state of Guerrero, and remained in office from 1929 to 1933. Castrejón's influence in the army and his home state's local political networks proved decisive for Robles's masculine identity to be accepted by the local organizations and institutions of the post-revolutionary government.

In the late-twentieth century, the inhabitants of Xochipala, particularly the youngest members of the community, were unaware of Robles's gender transition. They had no inkling that "El Coronel" (The Colonel in the masculine grammatical gender) had lived his childhood and adolescence as a girl and then a young woman, conforming to the gender identity assigned to him at birth and in line with the social norms of the time. Only the older generation knew his background and, on the whole, they respected him and did not confront him (at least not in his presence). His change of identity was not an issue discussed in his family, and even his nieces were oblivious to it despite living under the same roof. Robles's masculinity was taken as a matter of fact. This acceptance was confirmed by Amelio Robles's marital relationship with Ángela Torres, openly acknowledged by the local community. It was further reinforced by the fact that the authorities gave a public school established in 1966 the name Coronel Amelio Robles,[7] in recognition of his donation of the school grounds to the community.[8] This act of largesse reaffirmed the former Zapatista guerrilla fighter's reputation as a benefactor of the people and promoter of non-religious public education—a top priority for the revolutionary and post-revolutionary governments, as the basis for society's secularization and modernization.

The federal government also legitimized Amelio Robles's masculine identity when the Ministry of National Defense (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, SDN) recognized him in 1974 as an official veteran of the Revolution, using the masculine grammatical gender.[9] This recognition and the corresponding paperwork referred to his masculine identity and name, which Robles used himself when signing letters and petitions addressed to the military authorities and veteran organizations, which responded in kind.[10] He received official acceptance of his masculine identity both locally and elsewhere in Mexico thanks to his bonds of friendship with his comrades-at-arms. Some of these men climbed the rungs of the military and political ladders and recognized Robles's masculinity. Such was the case of the above-mentioned Adrián Castrejón who addressed Amelio Robles in the masculine in official correspondence, although he still occasionally poked fun at Robles by calling him "La Coronela" in the feminine grammatical gender.

[p.186] [...]

Masculinization

Many women adopted masculine identities and wardrobes as a strategy to survive the dangers of the Revolutionary War. Passing as men gave them advantages in the army: access to weapons and horses, promotions through the military ranks, and better pay. Encarnación "La Chona" Mares wore men's clothing and pretended to be a man when joining Venustiano Carranza's forces. She aimed to avoid becoming a "soldadera" (camp follower), women who followed armies in the rear and, in the absence of professional groups, took charge of essential duties such as supplying the troops and cooking for them. They also often provided the men sexual and emotional company. The services of these "camp followers" were seldom appreciated; on the contrary, the women were frequently mistreated and abused.[13] Angelina Jiménez experienced something similar to Encarnación "La Chona" Mares, as Jiménez was given a military rank in the Constitutionalist Army, in which she fought with a masculine appearance and identity. The conclusion of the armed struggle marked the end of the masculine period for them both, and each subsequently lived traditional lives as women and mothers, forming families and taking on domestic tasks.[14]

The same happened in the case of Coronela María de la Luz Espinosa, who came from the Costa Chica region of Guerrero and, similar to Amelio Robles, fought for the Liberation Army of the South.[15] Espinosa adopted a masculine identity and appearance when she took up arms, but later abandoned this masculinity to live a domestic life, looking after her children and husband in post-revolutionary Mexico. Some parallels exist between the lives of Robles and Espinosa: both took on masculine identities, fought as guerilla combatants, and received a military rank. However, their respective processes of masculinization contrasted significantly in other respects. Espinosa's decision was pragmatic and temporary without implying a subjective transformation. In contrast, Robles underwent an internal transformation and repositioned himself within the social gender order. His masculine identity, which outlasted his period as an active soldier, expressed a vital impulse, a desire to act, be treated, and be recognized as a man in every aspect of life.

Not all female Zapatista leaders who had men under their command and had a military rank took on a masculine identity. For example, Coronela Rosa Bobadilla, …**[p.187]** …viuda [widow] de Casas who was notoriously tough and disciplinarian with her troops, maintained her feminine identity. The same was true of other women, such as the Zapatista colonels called "La China" and Pepita Neri, both of whom had a reputation for being extremely violent.[16] Their stories reveal that, because the Zapatistas lacked the traditional hierarchy and discipline of a regular army, women could take up arms and assume leadership roles without having to shed their female identities.

The specific circumstances under which Amelia Robles first took up arms are unknown due to a lack of supporting documentation. Oral accounts do exist, however. The memories of

those who lived through the Mexican Revolution in Xochipala and their descendants were recorded more than fifty years after the events, and are inevitably colored by the expectations and emotions of the present. They, nonetheless, offer some clues (though subjective) about the circumstances under which Robles joined the Zapatistas and about how Amelia Robles, who was twenty-five years old at the time, still maintained the feminine identity assigned to her at birth.[17]

According to these accounts, joining the guerrilla forces offered Robles a way out of the dissatisfaction she felt with the isolation of her home town and a chance to escape her step-father, hence it was a decision born of personal necessity rather than ideological beliefs. The problems with her step-father had worsened since he abused her sexually. These oral histories also consistently indicate that at the time of joining the Zapatistas Robles was in a relationship with Leonor López, a young woman also from Xochipala; however, no subsequent information is available about López.

Amelio Robles's gender transition is another gap in the story, but we can reasonably suppose that it happened gradually over the years of the Zapatista struggle and that his masculinity became firmly established after he enlisted in the Mexican Army, which was out of bounds for women. In 1915, Venustiano Carranza decided to cancel the military appointments of "señoras y señoritas," (ladies and young ladies), thus excluding female soldiers from the ranks.[18] This ruling did not apply to the Zapatistas who were not part of the national armed forces. At the time of joining the Mexican Army, Amelio Robles's masculine status was already firmly entrenched and recognized by her leaders and fellow comrades-at-arms. Otherwise, she would not have been accepted as a soldier or allowed to fight.

Several official documents confirm his masculine identity. **[...]**

The veteran organizations that emerged from the late 1930s also accredited his masculine status.[20] **[...]**

[p.188] The weightiest official document attesting to Robles's masculine identity is perhaps the birth certificate issued by the Civil Registry Office of Zumpango del Río, which records the birth of the boy Amelio Malaquías Robles Ávila. The particulars given—the name of the father and mother, date and place of birth—are the same as the handwritten entry in the original birth registration held by the same office.[21] It is impossible to know whether the apocryphal document was issued in Guerrero or Mexico City, or to know the identity of the intermediaries, but its existence is evidence of the networks of power and the complicities in which Amelio Robles was involved. **[...]**

Notes (#1-10, 13-18, 20-21)

[1] Edith Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles. Revolucionaria Zapatista del Sur* (Chilpancingo, Guerrero: PACMYC 2000, CONACULTA, Unidad Regional Guerrero de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, Instituto Guerrerense de la Cultura, 2007), 15–16.

[2] Rosa E. King, *Tempest over Mexico* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1940).

[3] Gabriela Cano, "Unconcealable Realities of Desire: Amelio Robles (Transgender) Masculinity in the Mexican Revolution," in *Sex in Revolution. Gender, Politics and Power in Modern Mexico*, ed. Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 35–56.

[4] I use the feminine name Amelia, and the feminine pronouns she and her when referring to Robles in early life when she lived as a girl and as a woman and reserve the masculine name, Amelio, for the longer period when he was recognized as man.

[5] Publications on Zapatismo in the Mexican Revolution include: John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968); Samuel Brunk, *Emiliano Zapata: Revolution and Betrayal in Mexico* (Alburquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Felipe Arturo Avila Espinosa, Los orígenes del zapatismo (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001). The meanings and representations of Zapatismo following Emiliano Zapata's death are the subject of Samuel Brunk's book, Samuel Brunk, *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory and Mexico's Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

[6] Robles's military career is documented by paperwork contained in two personal files: AHSDN, Cancelados, 112– 119, Amelio Robles Avila, AHTF, INAH, Gro.-06.

[7] Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles*, 17.

[8] The date is recorded on one of the walls of the former school building where the Amelia Robles' house-museum is now located.

[9] Gabriela Cano, "La masculinidad trans de Amelio Robles en sus documentos de archivo," in *Sociología y género: estudios en torno a performances, violencias y temporalidades*, ed. Karine Tinat and Arturo Alvarado (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Sociológicos, 2017), 27–49.

[10] AHSDN, Cancelados, 112–119, Amelio Robles Avila.

[13] AHSDN, Cancelados, María Encarnación Mares, C-801 and AHTF, INAH, Gro-06.

[14] Esther R. Pérez, James Kallas, and Nina Kallas, *Those Years of the Revolution, 1910–1920* (San José, California: Aztlan Today, 1974), 37–39.

[15] Anna Macías, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 42–43.

[16] Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, 170.

[17] Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles*, 31–34.

[18] *El Constitucionalista, Diario oficial del gobierno constitucionalista de la República mexicana*, March 29, 1916, 1.

[20] A portrayal of these veteran organizations can be found in Martha Eva Rocha Islas, *Los rostros de la rebeldía. Veteranas de la Revolución Mexicana, 1910–1939* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones de México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2016), 43–101.

[21] AHSDN, Certified copy of birth certificate, April 8, 1957.

Amelio Robles Ávila and The Mexican Revolution

Student Handout

Day 1: Video Intro to the Mexican Revolution

1. What was the Mexican Revolution?

2. Who were the primary parties involved?

3. Based on this brief introduction, do you know of other revolutions in history that may be similar to or different from this one?

Day 1: First Three Pages

1. For what cause did Amelio Robles fight during his years in the Revolution? What social group did he want to help?

2. Why did the Mexican Revolution (a political/economic cause) benefit from rigid binary gender? In other words, what kind of man and what kind of woman was seen as part of this new world the fighters were trying to build?

Day 2: “Masculinization”

3. Compare and contrast how Amelio Robles challenged the gender binary with how the *soldaderas* challenged the gender binary. In what ways was their non-conformity similar? In what way was it different?

Classroom Debate: Who was more disruptive to the status quo of gender at the time—the *soldaderas* or Amelio Robles? Why?
(Prepare for the debate by writing your answer and reasoning below.)