

Smart. Strong. Sexy?

As Latinas reach higher rungs on the corporate ladder, we can't seem to shake that ever-present *stereotype* of the curvaceous bombshell. Is it the way we dress—or something more complicated?

BY MONICA RHOR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLENN GLASSER

By any barometer, Nefertiti Jáquez, Audris Ponce and Carmen Mojica are measurements of success. Intelligent, educated, and accomplished, these three Latinas epitomize achievement built on hard work and high ambition. Jáquez, who is in her late 20s, is a television reporter with KPRC-TV in Houston and studied political science and public policy at Brown University. Ponce, a 20-year-old University of Houston student double-majoring in political science and communications, earned honors in high school, volunteers with UNICEF and writes for a Latino student publication. Mojica, a multitasking 25-year-old model, artist and author of *Hija de*

Mi Madre, teaches children in after-school programs and is a trained doula (labor coach).

Yet even professional Latinas like these still face the challenge of an old stereotype: the spicy sexpot outfitted in body-hugging clothes. It's an image many Latinas say hurts them in the workplace. In fact, just as women entering the business world in the 1980s felt they had to dress a certain, more "masculine" way—pantsuits, shoulder pads, silk bows around the neck (think of the 1988 film *Working Girl*)—in order to be taken seriously by men, today's professional Latinas feel they need to downplay any hint of a curve, whether they want to or not. "I don't want to dress frumpy.

I want to feel good,” says Mojica, an Afro-Dominican who lives in the Bronx, N.Y. “But if you dress sexy, all the attention is shifted from your intelligence to your body.”

It seems almost shocking in this day and age that women still need to worry about being respected for being what Mojica says she is: “Professional and intelligent and strong.” But in recent months, three headline-making stories have illustrated just how much difficulty we still face when it comes to others focusing more on our appearance than our ambition. Last June, Debrahlee Lorenzana says she was fired from Citibank for being “too sexy.” A few months later, Inés Sainz, a popular reporter with Mexico’s TV Azteca, became the focus of criticism after some New York Jets football players allegedly harassed her at a team practice session; much of the media coverage of the incident

conservatively,” says the Mexican American Ponce, adding, “It bothers me because it seems like girls who are not Latina can get away with being cutesy. I can’t do that.”

The sexpot stereotype that still dogs us today dates all the way back to the 1920s, when “star promoters underscored the idea of the curvaceous, sexualized Latina,” says Mary Beltrán, an associate professor of media and cultural studies and Chicano and Latino Studies at the University of Wisconsin. Think back to Lupe Vélez, a 1930s film star known as the Mexican Spitfire—and then trace that line all the way up through Eva Mendes’s portrayal of a hypersexualized man-eater in the 2008 remake of *The Women*.

Even as more multidimensional portrayals of Latinas as lawyers, doctors and professionals are surfacing in pop culture, the old images still linger. “We don’t see as

emerge in a seemingly innocuous compliment. Aurelia Flores, a 39-year-old corporate lawyer and founder of *powerfullatinas.com*, experienced a taste of that early in her career—she was often mistaken as a secretary by clients who said she was “too pretty” to be a lawyer.

At one gathering, Flores was pulled into a group photograph with male colleagues and remembers wondering: “Is this a chorus girl shot or am I being recognized as one of the lawyers working at this law firm?”

As a result, Flores, who is Mexican American, a Fulbright Scholar and a graduate of Stanford Law School, learned to dress with care, staying away from low-cut blouses, tank tops or anything that might be considered unprofessional.

Often, the stereotype becomes a fault line blurring fiction and reality that can trip up real-life Latinas working to carve out careers. “I’m so

proud to see these figures like Sofia Vergara [of *Modern Family*] breaking into the mainstream, but it feels like she still has to subject herself to a stereotype to succeed,” says Ponce, whose aspirations include becoming an immigration lawyer. “I want girls to know that you don’t have to dress a certain way to be successful.”

In the end, Jáquez, the daughter of Dominican immigrants, believes the Latina bombshell

stereotype must ultimately be erased by Latinas themselves.

“It’s up to us to redefine ourselves as women,” says Jáquez, who has worked in three major news markets at an age when most TV reporters are still paying dues in backwater towns. “We have a long way to go in Hollywood, in politics, in day-to-day life. We can let someone tell us who we are, or we can show them who we are. I choose not to buy into it.” ■



In the News
(left) Debrahlee Lorenzana says she was told her body was “too distracting” to her male colleagues at Citibank; (right) Reporter Inés Sainz’s outfits made more headlines than the catcalls she received from football players.



centered around Sainz’s form-fitting clothes, rather than on the players’ boorish behavior. And then in September, University of Florida professor Timothy Taylor was fired for saying—at a lecture on sexual harassment!—that Latinas dress more provocatively than American women.

So what’s a serious-minded Latina to do? The numerous Latinas we spoke to all have reached the same conclusion: “I have to dress more

many blatant stereotypes today, but there is still an undercurrent belief in [them],” Beltrán says.

Sometimes, the stereotype can surface in a single word—such as when Jáquez has been described as “exotic.” “I don’t like that word,” says the Rhode Island-born journalist. “I don’t like to feel like I’m ‘the other’ because I don’t see myself as different than anyone else.”

Other times, the stereotype can

PHOTOGRAPHS: FROM LEFT: AP PHOTO/RICHARD DREW; AP PHOTO/PAUL SPINELLI; OPPOSITE PAGE: KEYSTONE-FRANCE/GAMMA-KEystone VIA GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; STEPHEN LOVERKIN/GETTY IMAGES;

Sizzle Sisters

EVEN STARS WHO HAVE OWNED THEIR SEXUALITY HAVEN'T ALWAYS HAD IT EASY.



Rita Hayworth



Raquel Welch



Salma Hayek



Eva Mendes



Sofia Vergara

Born Margarita Cansino, Hayworth was one of the first Latinas to reach the ranks of Hollywood stardom, in the 1940s. On screen, Hayworth smoldered in classics such as *Gilda* and *Blood and Sand*, in which she played sensual femme fatales. A publicity photo of her posing seductively in a negligee became one of World War II's most sought-after pinups.

STEREOTYPE STRUGGLE: Hayworth often complained about the personal travails caused by her sexy image, famously noting, "Every man I have ever known has fallen in love with Gilda and awakened with me."

Jo Raquel Tejada catapulted to stardom on the strength of an animal-skin bikini. Welch wore the skimpy garment in a publicity photo for the 1966 movie *One Million Years B.C.* It immediately became an iconic image of sensuality, and Welch became one of the world's best-known sex symbols.

STEREOTYPE STRUGGLE: "Americans have always had sex symbols. It's a time-honored tradition and I'm flattered to have been one. But it's hard to have a long, fruitful career once you've been stereotyped," Welch said in a *Biography* magazine interview in July 2002. "That's why I'm proud to say I've endured."

The Mexican actress first caught the attention of American audiences when she starred opposite Antonio Banderas in *Desperado* and for her duet with a snake in *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Hayek's curvy body and abundant sex appeal helped her rise to the top of Hollywood's list of leading ladies, and gave her the pull to move to roles behind the camera.

STEREOTYPE STRUGGLE: Hayek, who produced and starred in the Oscar-winning *Frida* and the TV series *Ugly Betty*, has said she wants to create strong roles for Latinas. "The way to fight a cliché is not by creating another one. What breaks the cliché is the emergence of strong individuals," Hayek told Oprah Winfrey in 2003.

Born in Miami to Cuban parents, Mendes has made her mark as a smoldering love interest in dramas such as *Training Day* and comedies like *Hitch*. She also drew notice for her super-sexy Calvin Klein ads and a PETA anti-fur campaign.

STEREOTYPE STRUGGLE: "I'm definitely responsible for the image that I put out there. But it does become frustrating, because I don't want sexy to be my defining characteristic," Mendes said in the August 2010 issue of *Allure*. "I'd love for my ambition and will and intellect and sense of humor to define me as well."

On *Modern Family*, this Colombian actress puts a satiric spin on the "hot Latina" stereotype. Vergara built her career portraying overtly sexual sirens, but her TV character takes the cliché and turns it inside out.

STEREOTYPE STRUGGLE: Vergara, who dyes her natural blonde hair a brunette shade, acknowledged that the darker locks and her voluptuous figure have helped boost her career. "No matter what I wear, I look like a stripper. That said, I'm grateful I have [my 34DD breasts] and, honestly, they've helped me a lot in my career," Vergara told *Self* last year. "And I've always felt sexy." —M.R.

We want to hear your thoughts on this issue. Go to Latina.com/ourissues/stereotypes and chime in.