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Feminist Scholarship Review: Paradise Found: Empowering Women of the Caribbean

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feminist Scholarship Review

2005

Paradise Found:
Empowering Women of the Caribbean



The Women's Center
Trinity College

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Feminist Scholarship Review

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Paradise Found: Empowering Women of the Caribbean

Feminist Scholarship Review

The Women's Center is proud to introduce our 2005 Feminist Scholarship Review. Each year, our goal is to choose a topic of interest and importance to men and women on campus and nationwide. This year, we were fortunate enough to be approached by a Trinity College senior extremely knowledgeable about, and interested in, Cuban women's rights, and from there, we decided to create our theme around this issue: the empowerment of Caribbean women.

This tropical region is customarily known for its beautiful beaches, exclusive resorts, and abundance of culture. As Americans, we are often quick to assume that women of other nations aren't organizing to overcome their oppression, simply because we are not aware of their history, culture and current national movements. This might sound extremely ignorant, yet realistically we often take our freedom, safety, and peace for granted, and it has become somewhat of a luxury to disregard matters that are not frequently broadcast in our media. Until we embarked on this journal, neither of us had enjoyed the opportunity to explore issues concerning this area of the world. Now, we are both excited and intrigued about the prospect of learning more about the issues of Caribbean women.

In her essay, Stefanie Lopez-Boy, an accomplished Trinity senior, investigates modern and historical issues concerning the social and political roles of Cuban women. As a young Cuban woman, raised by her tradition-bound grandmother, Stefanie portrays the revolutionary changes made regarding gender equity, within the confines of tradition and patriarchy. Her piece encourages us to delve deeper and learn from women's struggles in a nation only ninety miles from the United States

Janet Bauer, Associate Professor of International Studies and Director of the Women, Gender and Sexuality Program, has spent a significant time on the island of Trinidad, working and conducting research at the Islamic Academy for Women. In her submission, she explores traditional Muslim women practices and how they are affected by modernity and culture on the island.

We hope you'll enjoy these personal accounts of women's lives in the Caribbean and take away a deeper understanding of their role in today's society. Enjoy!

Mary Jane Frisbee and Kathryn Hurley, Editors

Global Sightings: Muslim Women in Trinidad¹

Janet Bauer, International Studies and the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program

Until recently we didn't pay much attention to Muslims living next door, in the Caribbean and Latin America—not even to one of the first '*hejab*' incidents, which occurred in Trinidad in 1995. However some of the fastest growing Muslim communities (primarily through conversion and immigration) are located in this region. And, right away it's the women (or some of them) that we recognize—from their elaborate African-inspired headdresses or their Indian-inspired shawls. In their religious practices, individual Muslim women in Trinidad, like women of other religious backgrounds, range from the more "secular" to the very devout, distinctions which are often signified by their head coverings. And, women tend to select styles of '*hejab*' based on their perceived ancestral heritages.

The Muslim community of Trinidad and Tobago (TT), although representing only 6% of the nation's population, is a diverse one, including those who trace their ancestry to either the African Diaspora (Afro-Trinidadians) or the South Asia Diaspora (Indo-Trinidadians). While Islam stresses unity and many mosque associations are multi-ethnic, this Afro-Indian racialization or ethnic difference underlies the formation of the many distinct Muslim communities in TT (from the Nation of Islam to the mainline Sunni groups organized around the Trinidad Muslim League (TML) or ASJA --The Anjuman Sunnat-Ul-Jamaat Association), to name a few. To some extent the various Islamic organizations are also differentiated by their views on women and gender relationships. For example, "nonconformists" like the TML organizations have had women on their highest boards since their founding, and men and women easily interact with each other in most activities, although some of the women are in *hejab*. The Ahmadiyya give adamant support to women's education and professional development. While the Islamic Resource Organization deliberately works to counter what is perceived as Arab patriarchal traditions in Islam, there are no women at the highest administrative level of this group and women signify their membership by wearing *hejab*. ASJA women include many highly educated professionals and well-heeled members but ASJA maintains separate male and female organizations and a sense of "modest decorum" when it comes to male and female interaction.

Even though more of the highest community leadership positions are still held by men, women are important members of their religious congregations (or *umma*). Women in most (but not all) of the Islamic groups in Trinidad do maintain women's organizations that are active in charity and community service. If we were indeed to consider women's activism on behalf of women a kind of feminism, we would certainly find varieties of Islamic feminists in Trinidad today and in the past.

Here are three women active in different Muslim groups. Khadija is well-traveled

¹ This brief article is based on research conducted by the author in Trinidad and Tobago, 2004-2005.² Translation: "When you get hot below you lose your head, so keep your legs closed."

and an avid reader. She was one of the first to invite me to participate in the ASJA women's organization meetings. In contrast to teenagers and some other women I've met at ASJA events, Khadija is almost always in *hejab*. We met this time in her comfortable house in the Port of Spain area. When she was a young girl growing up in a small town, her mother held religious and other classes for young girls in her home. Her mother's activism instilled an interest and passion in Khadija as well. She considers herself fortunate to have been a member of the Young Muslim Women's Association founded by a Muslim missionary in 1950 and to have several new opportunities being made available to young people at that time. As a member of that group she was invited to attend an all-Caribbean youth camp in 1960 which stimulated her desire to serve her country and gave her a curiosity about women elsewhere. As an adult, she has had further opportunities to meet and talk with Muslim women from other countries on several trips to Mecca.

We met Zahre at the Id al-Adha (sacrifice of Abraham) commemoration at a TML (The Muslim League) Mosque. As she leaned against the wall in the kitchen, where both men and women (professors, doctor's wives, the head of the organization, ordinary women and men) were cooking lunch with the meat from the sacrifice, she talked about her long association with this group. She recounted how the women had built their own meeting house near where the current primary school stands fifty years ago, carrying mud from the river nearby. As a young girl she participated in Trinidadian carnival--before it became so risqué, back when people wore traditional costumes and were 'covered up,' not 'naked' like today. She remembers when weddings were held at home and not in the mosque but she reckons that you can't prevent young people from making changes. Earlier during prayers at the mosque, I noticed how many young girls in this group wore attire in very stylish *hejab*, eye makeup, Indian jewelry, and cell phones in their hands or in their bags. I wondered if this were traditional values inflected with latest technology--but I learned that some of the girls only wore *hejab* to mosque; some chose to wear it all the time.

The third woman was a leader of the women's group at the Islamic Resource Organization, a mainly Afro-Trinidadian association drawing on a less-affluent neighborhood in central Port of Spain. The adult women in this group are typically converts. This was true for Joan, who became Muslim 27 years ago. As a leader among the women she spoke for many around the table when she described the peace that Islam had brought to their lives--giving them a certain kind of self-assurance and respect. Yet lack of resources prevents them from making certain choices--like seeing only women doctors, not a luxury they can afford at government hospitals. Young women here are also encouraged to wear *hejab* and yet they bring an independent spirit that shines beneath it and work alongside men in the group's various *dawah* or educational activities.

While there is some feminist scholarship which engages women of the African and Indian Diasporas in Trinidad, the case of Muslim Trinidadian women has not informed comparative feminist studies of women of the Muslim world. The Trinidadian case, however, is an interesting and important one. In contrast to their sisters in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, Muslim Trinidadian women consider themselves more 'modern'. Indeed because they are living in a multicultural democracy

they have many choices (including choice of what to wear) that Muslim women elsewhere may not enjoy.

Fascinated by my work in the Iran, Meena asked me endless questions about her impressions of Iranian women's lack of opportunities, worrying that her reliance on the media for these images might have mislead her. Her fascination with how other Muslim women live originates partly out of Muslim Trinidadian women's own 'projects' or efforts to make connections to their "homelands" closer to the Middle East--in Africa and South Asia. Yes, despite their public inclusion in a diverse society that publicly celebrates the distinct religious traditions of different groups, women also find it important to explore their Muslim identities in a global perspective.

Connections abroad, however, present some of the several paradoxical challenges facing Muslim women in Trinidad today. (1) First is the quandary of how to position oneself on certain matters of dress and behavior, within the larger Muslim *umma*. In the 1950's, missionaries from South Asia and the Middle East encouraged Muslims in Trinidad to adopt conservative dress and ways of thinking more in line with religious prescriptions practiced in the Middle East. And, it is missionaries today from Ghana and Syria who continue to emphasize what many men and women here see as an infusion of "Arab/foreign cultural heritage" into Trinidadian Islamic practice. This influence has constraining implications for women's self-designed choices, ones they actively contemplate.

(2) A second challenge lies in creating greater collaboration among local and ethnically and racially diverse Muslim organizations in Trinidad that currently draw on connections to ethnic compatriots abroad in Africa or Pakistan. Increasingly it is the women's groups that reach out to collaborate with other Muslim and non-Muslim Trinidadian women's organizations. In fact there is now a national Muslim women's association that serves as a kind of umbrella organization welcoming those from different Muslim groups.

(3) A third challenge is asserting or establishing the Muslim minority's presence within a larger multicultural society. With perceived negative press attention to Muslim events (such as the recent call by a fringe community leader for segregated villages where Muslims could avoid contact with non-Muslim Trinidadians or pieces on al-Qaeda connections in Trinidad) or for some, the bacchanal nature of the *Hosay* commemoration (one of the public Muslim holidays), Muslims are perhaps both more scrutinized by others and more concerned about their own image.

The *hejab* incident of 1995 reflects the complications of being Muslim in this avowedly multicultural society. A Muslim girl who had passed the qualifying examinations to enter a Catholic secondary school was denied the right to attend wearing her *hejab*. Although this particular student won a legal battle to wear *hejab*, the school was successful blocking future students from following Summayyah's example. While girls are allowed to wear *hejab* in public, government-owned schools, they are not currently given this right when attending the state-assisted schools or private schools. Not every Muslim wears *hejab* but to have this public right was important in a country where pluralism accentuates public displays of difference as a form of inclusion.

(4) A fourth challenge emanating from the others is keeping young people involved in local Muslim organizations and making Islam a relevant part of their lives. With cell phones, computers, and airplane tickets young Muslim Trinidadians have access to a new world of possibilities beyond the islands. Those internationalized connections can reinforce or stimulate Muslim identities among some youth, while working to erode them or supersede them in other cases. It is the women who are often most visibly concerned about the communities' younger generations, and it is often the teenagers (in pink or no *hejab*) who are most deliberately trying to fashion modern and global identities for themselves. [In these regards they very much resemble Iranian youth.]

Before national independence, Muslim Trinidadians sometimes felt it necessary to suppress some aspects of their religious identity. That is no longer necessary. To the contrary, there is some pressure now to express religious affiliation through specific dress and outward appearances. To paraphrase one elderly interviewee, "Fifty years ago Muslims wore many different styles of apparel and dress was not an emblem of your devotion or lack of it. Now people make a big deal about what you wear--whether you have a scarf or a beard. However, it's not really a reflection of your morality." Amidst current pressures toward conformity, perhaps a final challenge to be taken up by women is finding a way to include and be even more tolerant of variations in practice--to allow individuals to find their own spaces of identity among or within the various Muslim communities and to embrace those 'ethnic' Muslim women who are considered secular in their observance of daily ritual practices, or who leave abusive domestic relationships, or who choose not to adopt *hejab*.

On Being a Cuban Woman: A Study of the Progression of Women's Rights in Cuba

Stefanie Lopez-Boy, '05

In many ways I was raised to be the proto-typical Cuban women. To begin with, my grandmother raised me, which means I am well versed in the art of cooking, cleaning, ironing, and entertaining. In Cuba, my grandmother stopped attending school after the eighth grade and took up a job as a secretary in her youth. On my father's side, my grandmother did not learn how to read until she met my grandfather, who was her tutor before they married. These are the pre-revolution Cuban women, or rather, white Cuban women. These are the women that stayed home, cared for the children, entertained guests. My godmother wanted to be a diplomat in her youth, but her father said that was no career for a lady. She worked in public relations instead. Coming to this country radically changed the roles my grandmothers and my godmother played as Cuban women. They were faced with the dual task of working to provide for their family *and* taking care of the children. Such is the case of women in Cuba today. Since the time my grandparents left the island, the legal status of women in Cuba has changed drastically. After Castro's socialist revolution, prostitution was eliminated (for some time), women were educated in Universities and allowed to enter the workforce more fully, and in the granted abortion rights in the 1970's. Nevertheless, there remain strong patriarchal tendencies within Cuban society that legislation has been unable to eradicate. My interest in writing this paper is to examine the disjuncture between the written laws and unwritten societal laws. To do so, this paper is organized into three sections: stereotypes and ideological conceptions; *La Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC) and the enactment of women's rights laws; and, finally, the disjuncture: law vs. reality.

Stereotypes and Ideological Conceptions

In her extensive study of the sociological condition of women, Isabel Holgado-Fernandez writes ¡*No Es Facil!: Mujeres cubanas y la crisis revolucionaria*:

“One year before the revolution, women in salaried jobs worked mainly in positions that were considered traditionally feminine: secretaries, housekeepers, telephone operators, au pairs, nurses, teachers, hairdressers, tobacco workers, textile workers...In large part, middle class women who worked were employed in family businesses as secretaries, office clerks, teachers, professors, and attorneys. [...] Black and mulatto women were excluded from work in offices or as cashiers in major stores, as well as other high-paying jobs. Most black women worked as house servants.” (83-84, my translation)

White middle-class women such as my grandmothers were socialized to be the perfect dames. Marriage was the woman's *telos* (goals) and motherhood was the ultimate occupation. Men were providers, more likely to be university educated. Dr. Julio Cesar

Gonzalez Pages, of University of Havana, notes that even today “cultural models oblige men to fit the archetype of family provider [...] His success is measured by his economic advancement, and many times it is marked by the anxiety of obtaining money.” (My translation).

The white maiden virgin of old, sexuality was also a taboo topic for women of my grandmother’s day. Women wore white to the altar because it actually represented their virginal state, not merely for tradition’s sake. Our grandmothers “did not see sexuality as a natural thing because it was shrouded in a veil of sin and shame; she would have to find its expression within the confines of marriage, which was the only permissible way to live and discover their sexuality” (Barrueta my translation). Indeed, to this day my grandmother always tells me, “Cuando se calienta lo de abajo, lo de arriba se pierde, así que manten las piernas cerradas.”² Virginity was an unspoken rule and despite their reputation for beauty and voluptuousness, good Cuban girls did not play with boys. Even today, with all the advances the government has made in sex education and the openness toward heterosexual sexuality, there is no talk of masturbation amongst women. Dr. Pages notes, “Masturbation for men in Cuba is part of a rite of passage, and when that moment comes, you can hear jocular expressions as people knock on bathroom doors such as, ‘Suelotala’³ or ‘Te voy a poner un cascabel en la mano.’⁴ [...] This kind of enthusiasm is not the same for women, who hardly ever speak of masturbation” (my translation). The repression of female sexuality coupled with the overvaluation of male sexuality creates the notion that women are objects of male admiration. Today, that translates into ‘jinterismo’ (prostitution) and the woman’s use of her charms and her body to obtain her ticket to money and escape through marriage, as we will see later.

The ultimate more modern stereotype that stems from these dualistic conceptions of femininity and masculinity is the *do everything mother* that provides for her family and is the primary homemaker. This too, has been an age old archetype of the Cuban women who “have always show a strong streak, they have rarely fit the stereotypical feminine weakness of helper mold. Yet, they always have focused on family. So Cuban feminism, tellingly called ‘movimiento feminino’, has both strength and family at its core” (Truyol 325). The mother-provider figure has become increasingly important in post-revolution Cuba where women have been forced by strenuous economic circumstances to be the main providers for their families. Adela, a 35-year old mother of two kids who Holgado-Fernandez interviews in her book remarks, “No, that’s [the home] where the Cuban woman has not found any liberation. Women are more liberated in their social responsibilities and their jobs...Men, if you get home from work a little late on day and you were unable to make him dinner, become ogres” (133). Initially, the Cuban government was hesitant to give women free reign in the job market. In 1974, the government declared “it was necessary to limit the freedom of access to some jobs for women ‘because the female body has its limitations due to the constant changes it undergoes during menstruation and childbirth’” (Holgado 118). It was not until 1992 that the government rescinded this paternalistic “protection” of women in a constitutional amendment that included “an elevation of the standing of the family in relations to the

³ Translation: “Let it go!”

⁴ Translation: “I’m going to put a bell on your hand!”

state and modification of Article 43's association of 'physical makeup' with women's right to work" (Lutjens 118).

The FMC and the Enactment of Women's Rights Laws

In order to begin a centralized, concerted effort to expand women's rights in Cuba, *La Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* emerged in August of 1960. Prior to its creation, women had participated in Cuba's revolution for independence from Spain as *mambisas*, or women soldiers. These women, "moved more fully into areas dominated by men, i.e. the military. Many women served as soldiers and achieved commissioned status in the rebel army; thus Cuban women achieved equality in unexpected areas." (Perkovich and Saini, 402) So potent was their influence over conceptions of women at the time (we are talking about here the 19th century) that "*la madre patriota* (the patriot mother) became an emblem of Cuban sacrifice and endurance. Significantly, these women warriors, *las mambisas*, were the first women in Cuba to own their own property, thereby presenting a challenge to the notion of male authority over family property" (Truyol 325). Despite the advances the *mambisas* made in their time, Cuban women maintained subservient roles after the revolution and confined themselves to "feminine jobs," such as those listed by Holgado earlier.

With the formation of the FMC and the revolution, women were encouraged "to join the labor force because it considered housewives un-integrated and thought that they would raise children that also would be un-integrated." (Truyol, 332) The government's first order of business was to reshape the current status of women in society and bring them out of the home and into the universities and the workforce. Prostitution was targeted for eradication and consequently, massive sweeps of the cities eliminated bordellos and put former prostitutes in trade schools. (Holgado, 234). Cuba was no longer America's whore and Cuban women were no longer the sexual objects of the foreigners. As mentioned earlier, the government hiccupped its way to its current position. Holgado mentions the shortcomings of early legislative efforts that reinforced stereotypes, such as "the 1982 Law of Hygiene and Safety in the Workplace, that culminated the deterministic policies of the Cuban state: women were not to be employed in positions that could imperil their physical ability to reproduce." (92, my translation) This type of legislation fits with the portrait of Fidel Castro as a father figure, caring for his children. Historically, and this was not going to change because of the revolution, woman's highest honor was motherhood. Women were afforded great maternity benefits so that they can maintain their jobs and be mothers. Prior to the hygiene law of 1982, the government passed legislation in 1974 that "in addition to medical attention during the pregnancy, allowed for a six week paid leave from work before birth and twelve weeks after, which could be extended up to the first year of the child's life." (Holgado, 91) Even the "the incorporation of women into production was not a priority until the mid-1960s, when the inherited problem of men's un- and underemployment was resolved." (Lutjens, 103)

In addition, efforts to protect women in the workforce and provide them with benefits were spearheaded by the Department of Women's affairs, which "represents the interests of women workers ... and has taken an aggressive approach to promoting women's equality in the workplace by monitoring employment and promotion decisions and by attempting to increase the number of women in management positions." (Perkovich and Saini, 427) The government created day care centers in 1961, and "El Plan Jaba" began in 1971, which imprinted a special stamp on the ration books of working women, which allowed them to cut the line at distribution centers. (Holgado, 92-93). These advancements in the work force were reinforced by advancements in women's education. In the 1960's, "girls started to learn tasks traditionally masculine such as carpentry, bricklaying and mechanics; however, boys did not receive a similar education with respect to traditionally feminine tasks such as sewing and cooking." (Barrueta). Consequently, women broke out of traditionally feminine jobs and took up "masculine" positions such as doctor, engineer, and biologist. The FMC bulletin in 2002 reported that "45% of the labor force is female, and this figure has been steadily increasing in the recent years, despite the economic country's difficulties. Likewise, the number of women college graduates in 2001 represented 62% of the total graduates." (Boletin No3, June, 2002) When the human rights rapporteur visited the island, she was pleased to find that "70% of judicial professionals and 60.2% of judges in Cuba are women. Cuba is one country where the progress of women has resulted in the need to consider quotas for men in certain university disciplines, such as medicine." (Human Rights Report) Despite the overwhelming presence of women in the work force, sexual harassment laws are still lacking. In fact, it is not even recognized as a conceivable problem since "each workers' center has a commission which takes into account all characteristics of a particular post when selecting people for employment so that difficult situations will not arise." (Human Rights Report)

By the same token, sexual education and reproductive choices have also opened up for Cuban women. "Pristine princesses" are relics of the past, and while the idea of the virgin bride and the good girl are still quaint, the reality is that today's Cuban woman is sexually aware and sexually liberated. Monika Krause, the former director of social programs on sexual education, notes, "For a large part of the male population, sexuality is a mechanical function and a demonstration of their masculinity. If a woman becomes unexpectedly pregnant, he feels his reproductive power reaffirmed and he simply sends the woman to the hospital to get an abortion, which is a free and routine surgery anyway." (Holgado 193, my translation). Talking about sex openly is no longer taboo and the government has even created a body to disseminate materials that help parents breach the subject of sexuality with their children. CENESEX (The National Center on Sexual Education) was created in 1977 to "promote equality between the sexes and to break sexist stereotypes" (Holgado 193 my translation). So far so good. Today, Cuban girls are raised with different precepts about their sexuality. While my grandmother was a virgin till marriage, terse about sexual involvement, and deferent to my grandfather, today's girls are taught to be "respectful, honest and sincere...no more reserve and submission." (Barrueta, my translation).

Although the Cuban government asserts that rape is rare and not a serious concern, there exists a solid infrastructure that women can appeal to in case of rape, and the crime carries heavy penalties. Mainly concerned with curbing prostitution, “on 5 February 1999, Law no. 87 introduced amendments to the Penal Code, which... increase the legal protection for women and girls and severely increase penalties for ‘lascivious conduct’ including exploitation of the prostitution of others” (Human Rights Report). To the Cuban government, prostitution is abhorrent to the morals of a socialist society and a danger to the public order. First, these women make their money outside of government’s control, which takes away from the power of the state. Second, prostitution, which re-emerged with the re-opening of tourism, stinks of former imperialist days when Cuba was the U.S.’s party island. Beyond anti-prostitution laws, rape laws enforce extensive penalties with the lowest prison sentence for a rape charge without physical abuse set at four years, and the longest sentence for rape with physical abuse at thirty years. (Human Rights Report) People known to victims perpetrate most rapes, and the FMC has mechanisms to help prosecute and convict rapists. According to the Human Rights Report, between 1996 and 1998, 70 to 80 percent of the perpetrators were sentenced of all reported rapes.

The Disjuncture: Law vs. Reality

As evidenced in the US, legislation can only go so far. The early implementation of pseudo-separate spheres laws such as the governments’ initial categorization of jobs into “feminine and masculine” in the 1970’s presented a setback to reshaping the mindset. Moreover, the inculcation of the woman as mother/worker is transmitted over generations. Due to the housing shortage, many women live with their extended families, so the principal care of children is in the hands of grandmothers. Elena a 32-year-old museum custodian asserts, “If it were not for my mother, I would not be able to work. [...] In Cuba, grandchildren belong more to their grandmothers than to their mothers. When my daughter has children, I know it will be the same for me.” (Holgado, 148: my translation) While the government has built day care centers for women, they are underfunded and inconvenient for those who work evenings. So, if a woman cannot put her child in day-care, she is forced to turn to her extended family for support. Holgado continues, “the social and familial role of the third generation of women, essentially of grandmothers, has been revalued since the onset of the Special Period:⁵ [...] grandmothers or another elder female relative substitutes for a working mother’s maternal and domestic functions.” (147, my translation)

Legally, men and women must share domestic burdens. In practice, the women bear the brunt of the work at home. Just as women get paid maternity leave, “when family emergencies arise, or when family related matters require attention, it is only women’s, not men’s time at work that becomes dispensable. Women, not men, get time off work to care for family or stand in food lines.” (Truyol, 332) This is one of the major complaints of the FMC in terms of the advancement of women in Cuban society. The

⁵ “The Special Period in times of Peace” began in Cuba at the beginning of the 1990’s with the fall of the Soviet Union and continues, in lesser degree, to this day. It is marked by severe shortages in every basic necessity from food to petroleum to sanitary napkins.

FMC identifies the government's efforts at maternal support as insufficient and "the persistence of sexist stereotypes, the overburdening of women with domestic chores" with the stagnation of women's progress in society. Moreover, the extreme shortages of the Special Period and the legalization of the dollar in 1992 have forced many women to prostitute themselves out of necessity. Underlying the economic reasons for '*jineterismo*' are social concepts about the beauty and sensuality of Cuban women, especially *la mulatta*. According to Lutjens, "Cuban women still adhere to traditional standards of beauty that have been abetted, not thwarted, by state policy providing hairdressers, manicurists and fashion shows." (115) Cuban prostitutes are not necessarily uneducated country girls. These women "are educated professionals who work as prostitutes at night in addition to their jobs." (Perkovich and Saini, 434). The most over-represented group within these circles, of course, is the black woman and the *mulatto* because "they are underrepresented in the exterior of the country, so they do not have family to send them remissions in dollars." (Holgado, 236: my translation)

For the government, as said before, these women are morally abhorrent. In order to combat prostitution, they established centers "where women with certain risk indicators could be placed for rehabilitation. These women are brought before the courts and can be sentenced to up to four years confinement in these centers, where they are required to work, mostly in agricultural and horticultural sectors." (Human Rights Report) What the government fails to realize is that these are not deviant Jezebels out to give Cuban women a bad name; many are single mothers or young women out to make money to buy basic necessities such as cooking oil and soap. Adriana, a 20 year-old *jinetera* remarks, "there are many *jineteras* that do this to survive, out of necessity, to maintain their families, or because they have children and the father cannot/does not support them. He may have left to the U.S. and left her alone" (Holgado 246 my translation). Moreover, *jineterismo* has created a parasitic network of men and women that help connect *jineteras* with their clients. Holgado describes it as "a solid structure that perpetuates the supply and demand, which includes taxi drivers, hotel doormen, bellhops, restaurant maitre-d's, waiters, and the photographers that have immortalized their beauty in catalogues..." (239). The solution to this problem is not a legal one, but an economic one. If these women were provided with adequate support from the government, good salaries, decent rations prostitution would not be necessary. Absent an economic improvement, it will remain a way for Cuban women to utilize their exotic sexuality to survive.

Further exacerbating the plight of single mothers is the lack of child support laws. Fortunately, this is at the forefront of the today's debate. As Dr. Pages notes, "today the debate is focused on paternity laws, and the possibility that men could feel more responsible for all the activities they execute in the public and private sphere." Legally, women have recourse to judiciary tribunals to claim child support money from their husbands, and the FMC has helped settle many cases concerning payments. However, as Adela a 35 year old mother of two notes, "the father of my eldest son would give me 15 pesos a month, that did not suffice to buy anything, but that is what the tribunal decided, even that is unfair to women: 15 pesos of the 340 he would make a month. [...] With 15

pesos *no resuelvo nada*.⁶ (Holgado, 165) For single mothers who do not prostitute themselves, another alternative is a marriage of convenience. Many women, who do not marry foreigners to escape the country, will find a Cuban partner that can *resolve* for them in some way or another. Lilia, a 29-year-old housewife notes, “people get together more for money than for affection. There are women who get together with men that can *resolver* for them. [...] Nowadays, we are living in the era of self-interest.” (Holgado, 170)

Loveless marriages, housing shortages, and poverty are the components for an equation for domestic violence, a social phenomenon little recognized by the state. The prevailing sexist views are “exemplified by incidents of domestic violence. The primary causes of domestic violence are the attitudes of subordination and sexist views that men continue to hold, despite the progress women are making in the workforce” (Perkovich and Saini 435). Of all the different forms of violence against women, “psychological violence is the most common form of violence against women. [...] Specialists are concerned that domestic or interfamilial violence is not defined as a crime in itself, nor mentioned specifically in the Civil, Family, or Penal Codes.” (Human Rights Report) The failure to recognize and address this problem stems partly from the fact that, as Dr. Silvia Esther Garcia Mendez concluded from a study she performed on couples that had reported abuse to the Popular Council of the Municipality of Old Havana, there is no specific profile for an abuser. Certain factors seem to be predominant, however. Specifically, she notes “in all the couples studied, with the exception of one, strong religious beliefs were present, especially in Afro-Cuban cults, which have strong *machista* conceptions at their core” (my translation). With these beliefs, comes the internalization of certain stereotypes by both men and women. Mendez continues, “the majority of the female population has had a rigid and inflexible education in terms of strict sexist stereotypes, where the woman is always in a subordinate position to the man, and accepts male violence and dominance” (my translation).

The modern Cuban woman stands today as a bastion of social contradictions. Sexually liberated, she has become the object of foreign desire and admiration. She can pawn herself for convenience, or she can choose to remain single and support herself with work. Well-educated and professional, she is the paragon of motherhood and housewife. The alarming divorce rates demonstrate her propensity for independence and her intolerance of male misbehavior. The alarming abortion rate demonstrates the glitch in the government’s sex education system and her sexual freedom. Talking to my mother’s boyfriend, he complained that Castro has messed up “our women” and turned them into prostitutes. He says (and I translate), “The Cuban woman used to be the lady of the Caribbean. She was maintained and respectable. Now look what he has done to her.”

⁶ I did not translate this because I feel this term merits some explanation. *Resolver* is a uniquely post-revolutionary term used to mean *getting by* or *putting together disparate means to allow survival*. Whether it be scraping up money to buy a liter of milk or repairing your bicycle tired with scraps of old rubber to get to work everyday, what you do to keep yourself afloat is *resolver* literally, resolve...problems.

To conclude, Fidel Castro's government has overall been a mixed bag for Cuban women. Free education, abortion rights, and ascension into the workforce have brought women freedoms unmatched in other Caribbean nations. Yet, poverty and the resultant rise in prostitution, the "separate spheres" mentality, and lack of support for single mothers create for Cuban women a paradoxical situation.

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