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The Woman Question in Revolutionary Cuba: Is Marxism Really Working for Women?

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Abstract

Since the 1959 revolution, there has been substantial advancement towards women's equality in Cuba. But the progress is incomplete. Though Marxists argue that this indicates that the revolution's work is not yet complete, I take a different stance: the fact that the problem is not solved means that a targeted attack on women's oppression is needed.

Cuba has adopted a traditional Marxist or Marxist feminist approach to women's equality, which helped produce some positive changes for women. However, the limitations of the theory – namely, the ideas that women's equality should be subsumed to a larger Marxist revolution and that patriarchy is a historically specific situation that would dissolve with the change to a communist mode of production – mean that Cuba cannot adequately address gender inequality. Because Cuban leadership prioritizes the revolution and does not believe that patriarchy needs to be directly attacked, women's oppression continues. Even though they acknowledge that the progress is incomplete for women in Cuba, leaders stand by Marxist theory – the only way for the “remnants” of past societies to disappear is to keep the revolution pressing forward.

Contrary to the position of the Cuban state, I argue that more revolution alone will not generate full women's equality. I present evidence in the areas of health, work, and politics that illustrate that patriarchy persists. Rather than dissolving with a change in the material base, Cuba's patriarchy has evolved into Marxist machismo. Women's equality cannot be a secondary goal of the Cuban revolution: in order to achieve full equality in Cuba, a women's movement that directly attacks women's oppression as women is imperative.

Keywords

feminism, Cuba, Marxist feminism, Socialist feminism, revolutionary feminism, Cuban Revolution, Social Sciences, Political Science, Nany Hirschmann, Hirschmann, Nancy

The Woman Question in Revolutionary Cuba: Is Marxism Really Working for Women?

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Abstract

Since the 1959 revolution, there has been substantial advancement towards women's equality in Cuba. At the same time, the progress is far from complete. Though Marxists could argue that this indicates that the revolution's work is not yet complete, I take a different stance: the fact that the problem is not solved means that a specific, targeted attack on women's oppression is needed.

Cuba has adopted a traditional Marxist or Marxist feminist approach to women's equality, which helped produce some positive changes for women. However, the limitations of the theory - namely, the ideas that women's equality should be subsumed to a larger Marxist revolution and that patriarchy is a historically specific situation that would dissolve with the a change to a communist mode of production - mean that Cuba cannot adequately address gender inequality. Because Cuba has advocated these Marxist views and operates only within this frame, the policies and programs for women's equality are insufficient. But it is more than that - at this point in the revolution, the strict espousal of the Marxist view actually impedes women's rights. Because they keep looking at the revolution first and because they do not believe patriarchy needs to be directly attacked, Cuban leadership has allowed women's oppression to continue in Cuban communism. Even though they acknowledge that there is work left to be done for women in Cuba, Cuban leadership stands by the Marxist theory - the only way for the "remnants" of past societies to disappear is to keep the revolution pressing forward.

Contrary to the position of the Cuban state, I argue that women's oppression as women has not ended as a result of fifty-four years of Marxist revolution, and more revolution alone is not going to be the solution. I present evidence in the areas of health, work, and politics that illustrate that patriarchy is still alive and well in Cuba. It appears that rather than dissolving with a change in the material base, Cuba's patriarchy has evolved into a Marxist machismo. And because of this, I argue women's equality can no longer be a secondary goal of the Cuban revolution: in order to achieve equality in Cuba, an autonomous women's movement that directly attacks women's oppression as women is imperative.

Table of Acronyms

Acronym	Spanish	English
CNC	Comisión Nacional de Candidaturas	National Candidate Commission
CTC	Conferación de Trabajadores Cubanos	Cuban Workers Union
FMC	Federación de Mujeres Cubanas	Federation of Cuban Women
MINSAP	Ministerio de la Salud Pública	Ministry of Public Health
ONE	Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas	National Office of Statistics
PCC	Partido Comunista Cubano	Cuban Communist Party
PP	Poder Popular	People's Power (assemblies)

Section 1 – Introduction

I spent the fall of 2011 living in Havana. When people ask me to describe my experience in Cuba, I can only think of one word – contradictory. Cuba’s literacy rate is above 99%, and the classes I took at the University of Havana were on par with my courses at the University of Pennsylvania. Yet the students had no resources, no computers, and no textbooks; everything was taught by lecture, without slides, handouts, and notably to me, without air conditioning in the tropical classrooms. Cuba identifies as a developing Latin American nation, and Havana feels similar to other cities in the Caribbean and Central America. But there are no beggars and violent crime is almost non-existent. Cubans are incredibly politicized – there is propaganda everywhere teaching them about the embargo, they attend mandatory classes in university with the Federation of University Students (FEU), and they receive constant messaging about communism and the revolution – but I did not witness or even hear about one protest during my four months on the island.

But the contradiction that stood out most to me was Cuba’s treatment of women. On the one hand, women’s equality seemed to be a major goal (and point of pride) of the revolution. My classes at the university had more women than men. In my several visits to Havana’s advanced hospitals, I learned firsthand that there are more female doctors than male doctors on the island. My two closest Cuban friends, both of whom were straight men, intended to get masters degrees in gender studies. I met women who were professors, filmmakers, and tour guides. But at the same time, I was struck by how much Cuban women filled a traditional, demeaning role. I could not walk down one city block without getting catcalled. Patrons standing in line to get their daily

rations of bread were almost always women. All of the maids and food servers at our student residence were female.

Returning home to the United States, I decided to investigate the situation of women in Cuba. In specific, I wanted to know what the revolution had achieved for women and how it had failed, and I wanted to understand the role of the state's overt and steadfast Marxism in this process. The results of this inquiry are presented here.

Cuba is an anomaly in the world. For over 50 years, the small island nation has remained communist, impressively resisting global trends and the pressure of its large, hostile, capitalist neighbor. It has withstood the death of two of its revolutionary heroes, plans of the United States to overthrow or kill Fidel Castro, and the demise of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic crisis. Moreover, it has been largely isolated from the rest of the world. In this situation, it is tempting to make generalizations about Cuba and communism as a whole. Many have looked to Cuba as proof that communism can and will succeed, and many others see it as evidence that Marxism cannot function. Hoping to prove a theoretical point, most analyses lack a nuanced understanding of Cuba – it is either all good or all bad.

Analyses of gender equality in Cuba tend to fall into this trap. Unfortunately, the situation is not so simple. Fifty-four years of Marxist revolution in Cuba have produced profoundly mixed results for women. The story about Cuban women since the 1959 Cuban Revolution is not just a simple story of success or failure; it is a story of progress and setbacks, massive changes and the persistence of old problems. In short, as a result of the Cuban Revolution, Cuban women have made great strides towards equality in many realms, but critical problems persist.

These mixed results pose a particularly interesting question in light of the declared Marxism of the Cuban state. As described in detail below, numerous theories have been put forth about what Marxism means for women and how it can and cannot provide gender equality. In this thesis, I analyze the situation of women in Marxist Cuba from both an empirical and a theoretical standpoint.

Cuba has tackled women's inequality using a traditional Marxist or Marxist feminist strategy. Although Cuba's Marxist ideology and this Marxist feminist strategy have produced some advances for Cuban women – for example, the free provision high-quality general and reproductive health care – the shortcomings in this theory render the strategies Cuba employs to address gender inequality inadequate. In particular, this Marxist viewpoint suggests that the women's struggle should be subsumed to a larger social transformation and that patriarchy is only a part of a superstructure that sits on the capitalist base – and these limitations have allowed women's oppression as women to live on and even prosper under communism. In other words, these flawed Marxist assumptions are at the root of the incomplete progress for women in Cuba.

Based on my empirical research, I argue that another theory, Socialist feminism, can provide a more informative framework for understanding the partial advancement of Cuban and a more instructive strategy accomplishing gender equality in Cuba. The evidence I present in the areas of work and political participation suggest that patriarchy is not just part of a superstructure that rests on a material base of capitalism, but rather a independent oppressive system that has been permitted to thrive under communism. Because patriarchy is surviving and evolving in Cuban communism, I contend that full women's equality in Cuba can only be achieved through feminism, a frontal attack on patriarchy.

To make this argument, I begin in Section 2 by discussing the political theories about women and Marxism, focusing particularly on the differences Marxist feminism and Socialist feminism. From there, I review the previous application of these theories to the Cuba case.

In Section 3, I provide general information on the situation of Cuban women before the revolution in order to provide a base against which it is possible to measure the successes and failures of the Cuban revolution. In other words, this section provides historical grounding for the sections to follow.

In Section 4, I introduce Cuba's national women organization, the Federation of Cuban Women. I argue that the approach taken by this organization mirrors the Marxist feminist approach of the state and therefore produces a mix of successful and ineffective programs for the advancement of women's equality in Cuba.

In Section 5, 6, and 7, I perform an in-depth empirical study of women's health care, work, and political participation in Cuba. In Section 5, I discuss health care, which I find to be one of the Cuban revolution's greatest successes with regards to women's advancement. In Section 6, I analyze women's involvement in work and production in revolutionary Cuba. In Marxist feminist theory, work is conceived as the centerpiece to women's equality, but in the Cuban reality, I find a mix of success and failure. In particular, I argue that women's participation in paid production and the services needed to facilitate such participation have not been prioritized by the revolution. I also uncover evidence of patriarchal norms in the home and the workplace that restrict women from advancing farther in Cuban society. In Section 7, I study the issue of women's political participation in revolutionary Cuba. As was the case in the work section, I present strong evidence that patriarchal values about a woman's place in society have hampered women's progress within the communist nation.

Finally, in Section 8, I return to the theoretical framework and argue that Cuba's Marxist feminist approach to women's rights is causing women to advance in Cuban society in some regards but holding women back in other regards. Because the Marxist feminist strategy is insufficient to achieve full gender equality and patriarchy is still strong in Cuba, I argue that Socialist feminism is a better tool for understanding the situation of women in Cuba and developing a strategy for full equality. I conclude by calling for a feminist movement in communist Cuba.

Of course, when dealing with a communist country as isolated as Cuba, there are inevitable problems with the availability of sources and data. For my empirical research, I have relied heavily reports by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC by its Spanish acronym) and the National Office of Statistics (ONE by its Spanish acronym). The one major problem with the FMC and ONE reports is that they are produced by the Cuban government; there could be bias in the data, and the Cuban government could be adjusting the data to influence their appearance inside and outside the country. However, these reports provide the only comprehensive quantitative data on women in Cuba. The vast majority of scholarly articles by Western academics I read about women in Cuba also relied on this data.

In order to neutralize the potential bias in the Cuban data, I have supplemented the quantitative data from the FMC and ONE reports with a wide array of qualitative studies by Western academics and international organizations about the situation of women in Cuba. Works such as Lois Smith and Alfred Padula's Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba, Margaret Randall's Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later, Oxfam's *50 Years Later: Women and Social Change*, and countless other journal articles have built my understanding of the situation of women in Cuba beyond just the statistics in the government reports.

Section 2 – Theories Regarding Women in Marxism

Among those who support Marxism as an ideological-political system, there is a large divide about whether Marxist revolution alone is sufficient to achieve women's equality with men. Opinions on this question can be grouped into two major camps: (1) the Marxist Feminists, who, based largely on the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, contend that women's integration into production in a Marxist revolution will produce changes in culture and society including women's equality, and (2) Socialist Feminists, who believe that patriarchy and capitalism both oppress women as independent but interwoven systems, and therefore women's equality can only be achieved by complimentary revolutions against capitalism and patriarchy. In other words, Socialist feminists believe that Marxist revolution alone will fail to produce women's equality unless it is combined with a direct attack on patriarchy.

The Traditional Marxist Analysis of Women

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote mostly on workers in capitalism, not women. When considered, women are acknowledged as a group oppressed across history by capitalism; their freedom is said to evolve via a Marxist revolution and their integration into production. According to Marxist principle of historical materialism, communism, the new mode of production, will produce massive changes in how humans conceptualize the world around them. Following the Marxist logic, a transition to Marxism will change culture, and in turn, the patriarchal family and its ideology will naturally fall. As summarized by Diana Coole in Women in Political Theory, "once economic conditions change, so will the sexual ideology that rest upon

them; without private property, all the trappings of female debasement will atrophy.”¹ In other words, the communist revolution and putting women into the workforce is seen as a panacea or catalyst – after that point, all other forms of oppression (including women’s oppression by men) will logically fall.

Though Marx and Engels did not dedicate very much attention to women, this Marxist work “integration” strategy for women’s equality is most clearly articulated in Engels’s 1884 work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*.² In this piece, Engels goes beyond just explaining how women will be liberated; he spends the majority of the work explaining how women’s oppression came to be, thus contributing greatly to women’s rights by denaturalizing the second-class status of women in society. Engels contends that women’s oppression is a result of history: women were actually superior during primitive times precisely because they ruled the home where production took place. However, the advent of “history” brought production beyond the home, which was in men’s “realm.” As such, men were automatically in charge of production beyond domestic life, and this made men the economic controllers of women and society as a whole. For Engels, woman can be understood as man’s proletariat: she relies on him economically, he needs her for production (of humans), and she is held in this position because he “owns” production and property.

From this place – woman as man’s proletariat – arises the solution: let woman work in the Marxist society so she has no financial reliance on man, and she will be liberated. In other words, women’s exclusion from production across history is the cause of their oppression, so women’s integration into production can remedy this. Because women traditionally take care of

¹ Diana Coole, *Women in Political Theory: From Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*, 2nd Edition, (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1993), 157.

² For a recent publication see: Engels, Friedrich. *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. (New York: Penguin Groups, 2010).

the home and this makes women men's proletariat, it is also necessary and natural to socialize childcare and housework. This is expected to happen automatically when women are fully integrated into the public workforce. In other words, Friedrich Engels recognizes that women are oppressed by society, but he expects this oppression to simply "fall away" as a result of women's work and the revolution.

The idea that women's integration into production is the solution to women's oppression rests on Marxism's historical materialism and teleological conception of class conflict. The premise that culture and ideology around women and women's rights can be changed simply by a shift in the mode of production (the result of a class revolution) relies on the opinion that production shapes human consciousness and society. And it is the class conflict, resulting in communist society and new modes of production, which produces the change for women. In other words, as in most Marxist analyst, class takes precedence; women are not liberated by a women's movement, but rather by a class-based revolution.

Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism simply adopts traditional Marxism's conception of women's liberation and makes a political theory out of it. Rather than critiquing Engels's ideas about women's liberation, Marxist feminism provides a more complete, modern articulation of what Engels wrote in the 19th century.

Thus, following in the footsteps of Marx and Engels, contemporary Marxist Feminism mainly discusses women's work. In addition to the integration of women into production, there has been a lot of debate about the socialization of traditional private women's work. Specifically, Marxist Feminists have discussed the potential merits of socializing or paying wages for

childcare and domestic work. While Marxist Feminists have not reached a consensus of wages for “women’s work”, it is essential to recognize that they have focused primarily on work and how to integrate women into the workforce.

Despite its promise of women’s integration into production and new societal structure, Marxist feminism has been met with harsh criticism. The first and most salient criticisms of Marxist feminism is that it is one-dimensional: it assumes that women’s work alone can “fix” centuries of women’s oppression. While Marxist Feminism does recognize patriarchy and women’s proletariat status to men, the solution has been expected to naturally emerge (or evolve) from women’s integration into production. According to Rosemarie Tong, “[a] main criticism of Marxist feminism has been ... its simplistic conception of the family and preoccupation with the nature and function of women’s work as the only or best means of understanding and ending women’s oppression.”³ In other words, is it really all about production? Is women’s integration into production enough to make patriarchy fall?

Second, and along the same lines, Marxist Feminism considers the liberation of women only within the context of a gender-blind, class-based revolution, almost as a mere byproduct of the larger revolution. Diana Coole labels this as reductionist: “the treatment of women by Engels and his successors has often presented sexual relations as simply determined by economic ones, implying that women’s fight should be within the proletarian fraternity and that socialism will automatically emancipate them.”⁴ Women’s liberation is not at all distinct from the Marxist revolution; class-based revolution is central, primary, and critical, and women’s liberation is, at best, a component or result of it.

³ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009): 114.

⁴ Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 159.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist Feminists like Alison Jaggar seize on these weaknesses of Marxist Feminism to construct a slightly more nuanced, multidimensional analysis of how Marxism can liberate women. Focusing especially on the two criticisms analyzed above – (1) that Marxist Feminism focuses only on work and (2) that Marxist Feminism is reductionist in using communist, class-based revolution to solve all problems – Socialist Feminists discuss instead the interplay between patriarchy and capitalism as two independent but mutually supportive structures that must both be overthrown. In this “dual systems” theory, Socialist Feminists such as Heidi Hartmann contend that women are not just oppressed by capitalism, but they are also oppressed by patriarchy. As such, revolutions against patriarchy and capitalism are both necessary. While Marxist Feminists acknowledge patriarchy but expect it to naturally dissolve with the communist revolution, Socialist Feminists contend that an additional revolution – a women’s revolution – is necessary to make patriarchy disintegrate.

Significantly, Socialist feminists believe that patriarchy can persist under Marxism; the destruction of capitalism does not guarantee the destruction of women’s oppression as women. For example, Socialist Feminists think that Marxism’s solution to women’s subjugation – women’s large-scale introduction to the production – can coexist with women’s continuing oppression at home. This creates the so-called double day: women work in public with men, then return home and work again on domestic and childcare tasks. Because socialization of “women’s” work does not follow “naturally” from the Marxist revolution, a direct attack on patriarchy is needed.

Applications of Marxist and Socialist Feminism to the Cuba Case

Various feminists, political theorists, and Latin Americanists have applied Marxist and Socialist feminist thought to Cuba. The majority of these works were produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with more recent studies focusing on the lack of a feminist movement and Cuba's survival of the Special Period.⁵

In "Women's Equality and the Cuban Revolution" (1986), Isabel Largaia and John Dumoulin provide the best example of a Marxist feminist reading of the women's rights in Cuba. Citing various revolutionary laws, programs, and statistics, the authors contend that the Marxist revolution has already produced profound changes for Cuban women. Though they acknowledge some remaining areas for improvement, notably the patriarchal family, they remain steadfast in their assertion that Marxist ideology will eventually destroy these values, which are remnants of the capitalist past. As is typical of Marxist feminists, Largaia and Dumoulin's study of Cuba perceives women's emancipation and communist revolution to be one in the same, explicitly dismissing the (Socialist feminist) possibility of a separate women's movement:

The struggle for women's equality in Cuba is conceived to be an integral part of an overall process of social transformation, socialist revolution, and the building of a classless society. There is no conception of meaningful progress through the isolated struggle and independent action of intellectual elites.⁶

Moreover, they find the destruction of private property and women's integration into paid production to be the source of women's liberation. They state:

⁵ The Special Period refers to the 1990s, when Cuba suffered a crippling economic crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union. Many believe that Cuba could not survive in a post-Soviet world.

⁶ Isabel Largaia and John Dumoulin, "Women and the Cuban Revolution," in *Women and Change in Latin America*, ed. June Nash and Helen Safa (South Gadley: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), 344.

The breaking down of private ownership of women's labor power was perhaps the point of departure, the necessary precondition for large-scale participation in social production...women grew aware of their independence and worth as human beings. It comes as no surprise, then that Cuba women in the 1980s cannot see their emancipation as women as divorced from the structural change in the revolutionary process.⁷

Thus, Largaia and Dumoulin provide an archetypical Marxist feminist analysis: it finds paid production to be at the crux of a comprehensive communist revolution.

Many others have looked to Cuba as an example of Socialist feminism, recognizing at once the progress after the Marxist revolution and the remaining need for a women's movement. In their 1979 article "Emerging From Underdevelopment: Women and Work in Cuba," Carollee Bengelsdorf and Alice Hageman argue that the persistent sexual division of labor in Cuba evinces the prevalence of patriarchy in revolutionary society.⁸ Citing laws restricting women to certain types of jobs, women's responsibility for the home and double day, and women's absence from management positions in the workforce as modern Cuban manifestations of the sexual division of labor, the authors contend that the transition to Cuban communism did not resolve the fundamental distinction between men's work and women's work that keeps women in a subjugated position. They conclude with a firmly Socialist feminist stance:

The Cuban experience demonstrates that the systematic destruction of the bases of capitalism does not, in and of itself, spell the end of the patriarchal nexus that provided these bases with sustenance. It demonstrates, in human terms, the complexity of rooting out the

⁷ Largaia and Dumoulin, "Women and the Cuban Revolution," 349.

⁸ Carollee Bengelsdorf and Alice Hageman, "Emerging from Underdevelopment: Women and Work in Cuba" *Race & Class* 19, no.4 (1978): 367-377.

paraphernalia of patriarchy. And it demonstrates, as well, that it is only when the fundamentals of capitalism are gone, that a frontal attack on the oppression of all women can be launched.⁹

In other words, they find Marxism alone to be lacking for women and assert that a feminist revolution is necessary.

Along similar lines, Lourdes Casal argues in “Revolution and *Conciencia*: Women in Cuba” (1978) that the lack of change in the conception of woman in Cuban society shows that a Marxist revolution alone has not completely “solved” the problem of women’s oppression.¹⁰ She explains, “In the Cuba case transformation at the cultural and ideological level with regard to the status of women have experienced limited success.”¹¹ In other words, Casal argues that the superstructure of patriarchal norms resting atop the capitalist material base have not crumbled as a result of the Cuban revolution. Following the logic of Socialist feminism, she argues that the Cuban revolution must launch a “struggle in the ideological realm” to abolish the “ideology of male supremacy.”¹²

A final prominent example of the Social feminist theory applied to the position of women in Cuba is Margaret Randall’s *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop of Feminist Agenda* (1992).¹³ Although she previously took the Marxist feminist side in works like *Women in Cuba: 20 Years Later*, in which she presents the Cuban revolution as a cure-all for the problems of Cuban women, she uses *Gathering Rage* to argue that the people’s revolutions in Nicaragua and Cuba failed to sufficiently address women’s issues. In her view,

⁹ Ibid., 362.

¹⁰ Lourdes Casal, “Revolution and *Conciencia*: Women in Cuba,” Chap. 8 in *Women, War, and Revolution*, ed. Carol R. Berkin and Clara M. Lovett (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980): 183-204.

¹¹ Ibid., 201.

¹² Ibid., 185.

¹³ Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

Cuban and other revolutionaries have viewed women's liberation as a resultant and non-integral part of the transition to Marxism; this occurs because revolutionary leaders consider patriarchy to be superstructural and therefore less important than economic issues. However, relegating women's issues to a later agenda allows patriarchy to survive, so a feminist discourse is indispensable. Extending beyond the scope of Bengelsdorf, Hageman, and Casal's arguments, Randall contends that feminism is necessary not only to free women, but also to maintain socialist society. In other words, she believes that Marxism cannot survive without feminism because patriarchal structures must be challenged and women will not continue to support the revolution unless the revolution supports them.

I agree with the arguments put forth by Bengelsdorf, Hageman, Casal, and Randall about the continuation of patriarchy in revolutionary Cuba and the fundamental need for a feminist movement. In particular, I concur with Randall's assertion that Cuban leadership has allowed women's issues to be delayed and subsumed by other revolutionary concerns and Casal's claim that the attack on cultural manifestations of patriarchy has been weak and unsatisfactory. In the sections that follow, I will explain how these very problems have manifested within the women's organization (FMC), health care, the workforce, and Cuba's politics. But in order to ground these analyses in a historical context, I will first turn to the situation of women in prerevolutionary Cuba.

Section 3 – Women in Prerevolutionary Cuba

Cuba has been in the midst of a state-led Marxist revolution for the last fifty-four years. This ongoing revolution has produced profound changes for Cuban society, including (or perhaps especially) Cuban women. In order to understand the specifics of women's equality in communist Cuba and evaluate how the revolution has or has not improved women's lives, it is necessary to first review the situation of women in pre-1959 Cuba.

It is difficult to find comprehensive information on the status of women in Cuba before the revolution, but some basic information is available. In terms of political rights, women got the vote in 1934 under an interim government led by President Ramón Grau San Martín.¹⁴ In 1940, a new constitution included an article requiring equal rights for women in the workplace.¹⁵ This law – which gave women nursing breaks, paid maternity leave, and more – was the “most progressive in the women's hemisphere.”¹⁶ However, the law was not enforced strictly.

In 1953, Cuba's 256,000 working women constituted about 13.0% of the total workforce.¹⁷ Information about where these women worked differs widely: Lois Smith and Alfred Padula, citing official Cuban statistics, claim “more than half of them [worked] in white-collar jobs, mostly as teachers, social workers, clerks, and public employees”,¹⁸ but Margaret Randall asserts “seventy percent of these women worked as domestic servants.”¹⁹ Regardless of where they worked or what kind of work these women were doing, this rate of workforce

¹⁴ Lois Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (ONE), *Mujeres Cubanas: Estadísticas y Realidades 1958-2008*, 2008.

¹⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 20.

¹⁹ Margaret Randall, *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later*, (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981): 23.

participation was “relatively high” in comparison with other countries in Latin America at the time.²⁰

Many women (and men) in prerevolutionary Cuban were uneducated. This is evident in the high rate of illiteracy: 20% for women in 1953.²¹ According to official Cuban statistics, only about half of Cuban children ever got the chance to enroll in primary school.²² Nonetheless, among the children who did go to school, girls were very well represented. In the 1950s, girls went through every level of education at comparable rates to boys.²³ This fact is most striking at the university level, where 45% of students in the 1956-7 school year were female.²⁴ As such, educational attainment before 1959 appears to have been more of a national or class problem than a gender problem.

Access to medical care, especially women’s health services, was limited before the revolution. In 1958, there were about 30,000 hospital beds in the entire country, which had a population of nearly 7 million.²⁵ In terms of women’s health, this paucity of medical facilities meant that women’s reproductive issues were not treated by medical professionals. For example, only half of women gave birth in hospitals, leading to a maternal mortality rate of 120 per 100,000 live births.²⁶ Women in cities had access to a variety of contraceptives, but abortion was illegal except in case of rape, probable birth defects, and when necessary to save the mother’s life. Nonetheless, illegal abortions were widely available in cities and rural areas.²⁷ All in all, it

²⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 19.

²¹ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 50.

²² *Ibid.*, 45-46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

²⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 89.

²⁵ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 67

²⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

appears that access to medical services in Cuba was quite limited before the revolution, so women managed their concerns outside the realm of professional healthcare.

All aspects of women's lives in prerevolutionary Cuba – from work to political rights and health care – were conditioned by the dominant cultural ideology: machismo. By understood as the Latin American patriarchy, machismo can be defined as “the idea that men are superior to women and should dominate them socially, economically, physically, and sexually.”²⁸ In pre-1959 Cuba, machismo was often expressed in terms of men's control of women's sexual and social lives; for example, a young woman was always accompanied by a chaperone and was “valued” in society according to her virginity. Men, on the other hand, had to be overtly sexual and dominate in society in order to protect his “manly honor.”²⁹ Quite obviously, this sexual and social double standard subjugated women in prerevolutionary society. As I will discuss in the sections on work and political participation, rooting out this culturally engrained machismo has been one of the biggest obstacles to full women's equality in Cuba.

²⁸ Fleites-Lear, Marisela. “Women, Family, and the Cuban Revolution,” in *Cuban Communism 1959-2003* ed. Irving Louis Horwitz and Jaime Suchlicki, 11th ed (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995): 297.

²⁹ Nicola Murray, “Socialism and Feminism: Women and the Cuban Revolution, Part I,” *Feminist Review* 2 (1979): 60.

Section 4 – The Federation of Cuban Women

About a year and a half after the triumph of the revolution, the Cuban government began to alter the aforementioned situation of women in Cuban society. The mechanism for change was the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC by its Spanish acronym), which the Cuban government created in August 1960. The organization was formed by simply combining preexisting women's groups, but it quickly grew into a mass organization. By 1974, the FMC had 1.9 million members, or 74% of the female population. According to the most recent counting (2009), the FMC is 4.2 million members strong, which represents a massive 88.1% of Cuban women.³⁰

With this incredibly high membership, the Federation of Cuban Women is the actor for Cuban women in revolutionary society. It is the voice of millions of women, the arbitrator of women's issues, and the mechanism for change. Many experts on women in Cuba, even those who are critical of the Federation of Cuban Women, agree. For example, Ilja Luciak writes, "it was an important voice for Cuban women and the key organizational force behind the many positive changes in the daily lives of Cuban women."³¹ Similarly, Julie Shayne states, "the FMC became the center of women's power within post-1959 Cuba."³² In other words, the dominance of the FMC in the arena of women's equality in Cuba is undeniable.

Goals and Evolution of the FMC

At its founding, the Federation of Cuban Women had one goal: to mobilize women to support the revolution. The organization was born out of counterrevolutionary fear and was a

³⁰ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 84.

³¹ Ilja Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007): 15.

³² Julie Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminism in Chile, El Salvador, and Cuba*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996): 139.

pragmatic mechanism to generate support for the revolution by showing women that they had a stake in the new system.³³ To this point, Vilma Espín, FMC director for almost 50 years and former wife of Raul Castro, said that her organization's early goals "unify [women], and to mobilize them, so we could constitute a powerful force that could defend, support and fight for the revolution."³⁴ It is important to stress that this support for the revolution was the sole objective of the FMC; the nascent organization did not consider women's equality as one of its goals. Espín confirms this:

When I talk about how the federation was created, I always emphasize that at the time we didn't talk about women's liberation. We didn't talk about women's emancipation, or the struggle for equality. We didn't use those terms then.³⁵

In short, the during the first decade or so of the revolution, the FMC existed only to engender women's support of the revolution and did not address women's emancipation.

The FMC's projects during the 1960s reflected this emphasis on supporting of the revolution. First, the FMC gave rank and file women a political-ideological education in monthly FMC meetings, which included study circles about history and politics. Second, the FMC actively recruited women to volunteer in various health, farming, and education campaigns to help build (and feel part of) the new socialist society. And third, the FMC helped destroy what was understood as remnants of bourgeois capitalist society. In specific, the organization created educational opportunities to retrain and resocialize those most marginalized during the 1950s –

³³ Jean Stubbs, "Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power," in *Women and Politics Worldwide*, ed. Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury, (New Have: Yale University Press, 1994): 194.

³⁴ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 17.

³⁵ Vilma Espín, "With No Preconceived Structure or Agenda" in *Women in Cuba – the Making of a Revolution within the Revolution: From Santiago de Cuba and the Rebel Army To the Birth of the Federation of Cuban Women* ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2012): 225.

domestic workers, prostitutes, and peasant women. As such, early FMC projects were focused wholly on building the foundations of the Marxist revolution.

As the organization and the revolution matured, the FMC began to shift some of its attention to women's liberation. Vilma Espín considers Fidel Castro's speech at the 1974 FMC Congress to be the critical moment when women's equality became a goal. She writes,

Fidel also addressed the question of equality for the first time. In the congress discussions we hadn't discussed it in the clear way Fidel did, when he said there was a *battle for equality*...the concept of the struggle for equality helped us take on all kinds of backward, non-revolutionary notions that remained in our society.³⁶

Thus, from the mid-1970s onward, the organization's goals were two-fold: (1) to support the revolution and (2) to achieve women's equality.

As a result of this shift in goals, the 1970s and 1980s were a period of increased activism on behalf of women by the FMC. In contrast to the 60s, which were dominated by programs designed to support the revolution, the FMC activities in the later decades addressed a wide array of gender problems including but not limited to household duties, workforce integration, and political leadership. For example, from 1975-1985, the FMC program focused on three campaigns: (1) sex education which encouraged male responsibility in the domestic sphere, (2) political participation and leadership of women, and (3) protocol for and monitoring of discrimination against women in the workplace.³⁷ Though these goals may seem standard for a women's organization, they are a marked step beyond the door-to-door volunteer and member recruiting that the FMC did during the first decade of the revolution.

³⁶ Espín, Vilma, "With No Preoccupations," 273.

³⁷ Stubbs, "Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power," 196.

Unfortunately, this activism came to halt during the 1990s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cubans endured what is euphemistically known as the Special Period: a decade of severe economic depression with shortages of food, gas, and other basic products. Colette Harris offers this description of the 1990s:

Goods of any kind have virtually vanished from the stores. Those few still open have little to sell. The Cuban peso for a while became almost valueless and as a result salaries were almost useless. They served only to purchase those few goods the state still supplies and which are obtained through ration cards.³⁸

In light of this struggle – and the overwhelming need to simply survive and maintain the regime – the FMC had to alter its stance. Beginning in 1990s, the FMC focused on defending the revolution and protecting past gains rather than starting new initiatives.³⁹ There is not much information on how the FMC has acted after the economy began to recover, but various sources suggest that the FMC has reasserted itself as an advocate for women.

The FMC and the Cuban Government

The FMC has a complex and close relationship with the Cuban government. In many ways, the FMC effectively acts as a women's bureau in the state and party. There are no special offices within the government to oversee women's issues, mostly because the Federation of Cuban Women crowds out other groups by filling all the functions that an official government agency would. Indeed, the United Nations even considers the FMC to be Cuba's official

³⁸ Colette Harris, "Socialist Societies and the Emancipation of Women: The Case of Cuba," *Socialism and Democracy* 9, no. 1 (1995): 105.

³⁹ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 24.

“national mechanism” for women. Nonetheless, the FMC is technically a non-governmental organization, independently financed through member dues. FMC leadership asserts that the organization maintains a “positive distance” from party and state, thus acting on its own revolutionary principles.

In many ways, the question of the relationship of the FMC and the state comes down to how and what the two bodies communicate – does it convey the state’s messages to the people or the people’s concerns to the state or both? Many scholars, including Ilja Luciak, Nicola Murray, Carollee Bengelsdorf, and Margaret Randall, maintain that the state simply uses the FMC as a mechanism to communicate and implement policy. In Luciak’s words, “The FMC effectively served as a transmission belt for the party.”⁴⁰ As will be demonstrated in coming sections, there are myriad examples of the FMC administering government work, such as managing daycares, recruiting volunteers for the literacy campaign, and assuring that pregnant women get medical care. Across the many decades of revolution, the FMC has routinely implemented state policies.

However, others have argued that the FMC not only transmits state policies to the people but also transmits the people’s opinions to the state. In other words, some see the FMC as a grassroots organization that communicates the needs of the masses to the government. Jean Stubbs contends:

The agenda of the federation soon went beyond enlisting the support of women for ‘the revolutionary cause’ to *lobbying the state* and mass campaigning on issues of particular concern for women...this structure has permitted the federation to become a major force in political and social

⁴⁰ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 15.

life, enabling the leadership to communicate policy decisions to the rank and file *while tapping their concerns* [emphasis mine].⁴¹

In this understanding, communication between the state and the FMC is two-way: both groups give and receive policy recommendations.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to understand exactly how the FMC could communicate the opinions of the masses to the state. Even those who contend that the “FMC’s role has been to exert constant pressure for policy changes” offer no information on the mechanisms, forums, and people involved in the FMC’s lobbying.⁴² The avenues for communicating FMC opinions to the state seem at best unofficial, limited, and restrictive.⁴³ For example, the FMC’s quinquennial congresses are often considered a key method for communicating women’s interests to the government – “[they are] their best chance to influence policy, because Fidel Castro and other high-ranking policy-makers inevitable attended.”⁴⁴ In this model, the FMC creates a “thesis” or set of policy recommendations for the congress, and Castro and other leaders attend, speak, listen, and then taken action based on what the women said. The process is unsatisfactory because the conferences only take place every five years and women are only permitted to announce their problems, not take part in forming the actual policies after the congress. Thus, it appears that communication between the Federation and the state is largely one-way: the state communicates its directives to the FMC, and the FMC has little power to communicate its constituents’ concerns to the state.

As the issue of communication between the state and the FMC illustrates, the FMC’s *quasi*-governmental status affords few opportunities to effectively organize for women’s

⁴¹ Stubbs, “Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power,” 194.

⁴² Candace Johnson, “Framing for Change: Social Policy, the State, and the Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas,” *Cuban Studies* 42, no. 1 (2011): 37.

⁴³ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

equality. The Federation reaps neither the benefits of being inside the state nor the advantages of operating outside the government – if it were officially a state agency, the Federation would be able to play an active role in forming policy, and if it were truly independent, it would be able to criticize the state and address problems that the state leadership refuses to take on. Stuck in-between, the FMC can do neither. This situation is obviously favorable to the state, as it “gained access to an support from millions of women without having to concede specific powers in return,”⁴⁵ but it is detrimental to the progress of women in Cuba.

Feminine, Not Feminist

FMC does not identify with feminist goals. Like the state and the party, the FMC dismisses feminism as a bourgeois western concept that is not in line with the greater goals of the revolution. Vilma Espín explains her disdain for the feminist movement as follows:

We hate the feminist movement in the United States. We consider what we are doing part of the struggle. And for that reason we feel we are more developed. We see these movements in the United States which have conceived struggles for equality of women against men! ... That is absurd! It doesn't make any sense! ... Our work is to make everybody advanced. Then we everyone has a high level of consciousness nobody will have to think in terms of equality.⁴⁶

In other words, feminism is understood as divisive because it focuses on only one group in society. Thus, the FMC goes so far as to say that feminism is counterrevolutionary: feminism

⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁶ Max Azicri, “Women’s Development Through Revolutionary Mobilization: A Study of the Federation of Cuban Women,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 31.

“promote[s] difference, which is antithetical to unity....disruptive to the large revolutionary struggle. In other words, feminism is seen by the party as incompatible with nationalism.”⁴⁷

By refusing feminism as an organization, the FMC assures that feminism is suppressed in Cuba. This is because it is the only women’s organization in Cuba. No feminist groups or unique women’s organizations can exist for two reasons. First, the FMC has always called for the cohesion of the women’s movement into one organization. Ilja Luciak succinctly explains: “the official FMC position always advocated against diversification of the women’s movement...[and] reflected the call to unity emphasized by the regime.”⁴⁸ This resistance to breaking up the women’s movement is often validated by the argument that a larger, unified organization is a more powerful organization. In an 2003 interview, Nieves Alemañy, a FMC administrator, representative in the People’s Power National Assembly, and a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, explained, “The more the women’s movement divides itself, the weaker it is, since so many little groups remain without national structures [and] have little strength in the community. When we make a proposal, the whole world hears us because we speak for the women of the country.”⁴⁹

Second, no other women’s organizations can exist because the government forbids the “duplication” of any NGO missions. This means that any new organization must get a “negative certificate” from the Ministry of Justice that states that no other NGO has the same goals.⁵⁰ If the function is duplicative, the new organization has no choice but to associate with the previous organization.⁵¹ Any new organization also needs the sponsorship of a “state reference institution” that can oversee the NGO’s work and affirm that the organization works for some state goal. As

⁴⁷ Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 151.

⁴⁸ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁵¹ Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 146.

Marisela Fleites-Lear summarizes, “no organizations can be created for individuals outside the state and the party system, or at least not without the authorization of these organizations.”⁵²

Between the FMC’s resistance to dividing the women’s movement and the state’s insistence of monitoring NGO goals and activities, no feminist movement has successfully operated in revolutionary Cuba.⁵³

A Critical View of the FMC

Like the state and the party, the FMC espouses a Marxist feminist view of women’s equality. To the FMC, women’s equality can only be achieved in the context of and unified with the broader social revolution of Marxism. Patriarchy and other barriers to women’s liberation are expected to dissolve as the transformation to a communist mode of production progresses, and as indicated above, no feminist movement is necessary or permitted.

This strictly Marxist feminist standpoint has limited the ability of the Federation of Cuban Women to organize for women’s equality in two important ways. First, it causes the FMC to primarily focus on supporting the revolution. Because the FMC position is that liberation for women is achieved as a result of the socialist revolution, supporting the revolution is supporting women’s equality. The broad revolution must come first in order for women’s liberation to follow. This is exactly the situation that Heidi Hartmann recognized when she famously

⁵² Fleites Lear, “Women, Family, and the Cuban Revolution,” 289.

⁵³ The case of Colectivo Magín, a women’s organization dealing with communications and women in the media, is a well-documented example of the FMC and Cuban government restricting and terminating the activities of an independent women’s organization. For more information, see “Deactivating and Preempting Independent Women’s Groups: The Case of Magín” in Ilja Luciak’s *Gender and Democracy in Cuba* (25-28) or “Feminist Consciousness and Mobilization” in Julie Shayne’s *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in Chile, El Salvador, and Cuba* (145-150).

declared, “Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism.”⁵⁴ in other words, Marxist feminism subordinates feminism to Marxism, just as Marxism subordinates the struggles of women of all classes to those of proletarian men. Margaret Randall repeated this sentiment in regard to the Cuban case in particular: “The idea of a revolution within the revolution, as proclaimed in the Cuban experience, will inevitably keep the first in the shadow of the second.”⁵⁵

In practice, this Marxist feminist understanding of the relationship of the revolution and equality means that policies targeted at women’s liberation are consistently viewed as secondary or simply neglected. This is especially true because the FMC largely implements a party agenda that may or may not address the concerns of Cuban women. The FMC usually acts to support the revolution and only gets the chance to address women’s inequality at the whim of revolutionary leadership.

Certainly, feminists like Margaret Randall recognize that Marxism itself addresses some of women’s needs and interests, and the chapters that follow will show various ways in which the Cuban revolution in particular resulted in advances for women in health care in particular, as well as some more limited advances in work and participation. But the neglect of many other of women’s rights and needs in favor of broadly Marxist goals is especially clear in the periods of instability in the Cuban revolution – the 1960s and the 1990s. In both periods, the government faced political and economic hardships, and in both cases, the FMC relinquished the goal of women’s equality and concentrated solely on preserving the Marxist state. To give a concrete example, women’s representation in the government fell substantially during the 1990s because women were expected to provide for the home in difficult circumstances and did not want more responsibility. Though under more prosperous conditions this would have been subject to a

⁵⁴ Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981): 2.

⁵⁵ Randall, *Gathering Rage*, 117.

major FMC campaign to support women in the home and encourage women to run, the FMC instead helped with “defense and production for reasons of national political expediency.”⁵⁶ If the revolution always comes first, as is abundantly clear in the periods of economic and political instability, then persistent problems in gender equality are indefinitely ignored – all in the name of Marxism.

Second, the Marxist feminist stance of the FMC means that the organization often fails to acknowledge that gender inequality, sexism, and patriarchy can persist and even flourish under Marxism. Because the Federation so adamantly argues that gender inequality will disappear as part of the larger revolution, it is unwilling to recognize and attack patriarchy in a socialist state. Instead, women’s inequality in Cuba was always explained as the remnant of capitalist society that could only be ameliorated by continuing the socialist revolution. Margaret Randall explains:

Residual sexism was how the Cubans referred to whatever discrimination against women was still apparent. The word *residual* seemed to indicate something very small, the mere shadow or taint of old ways. It was something left over. It would disappear. The classic Marxist concept was that equality would come as a result of more egalitarian economic relations.⁵⁷

However, as the following sections discussing work, political participation, and health care will show, male supremacy in Cuba is more than just residual. It is still prevalent – whether it is displayed in the form of a husband who expects to be served in the home even though his wife works or the huge gender gap in representation in the two highest bodies of the Cuban Communist Party.

⁵⁶ Stubbs, “Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power,” 196.

⁵⁷ Randall, *Gathering Rage*, 132-133.

Here, the FMC's resistance to feminism is critical. Because issues of gender inequality are viewed only through a revolutionary Marxist lens and not a feminist lens, there is no analysis of the exploitation of and discrimination against women because of their gender. Though feminist critique could be useful in understanding how machismo culture has persisted, the FMC and the state steadfastly dismiss feminism as bourgeois, extreme, and divisive. And because the FMC blocks other women's organizations from forming, there is no actor in Cuba that can take a feminist stance and agitate for aggressive anti-patriarchal changes. The only avenue for progress seems to be the Marxist one: more revolution.

As discussed above, the FMC is a complex organization with certain downfalls. Though its refusal to take a feminist stance and its deference to revolutionary leadership has allowed women's oppression to persist in Cuba, as I will discuss in the sections on work and political participation, the FMC has still achieved a tremendous amount for Cuban women. One key example of the success of the state and the FMC in promoting women's equality is the Cuban health care system.

Section 5 – Health Care

Since the very beginning of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro and his comrades have emphasized the importance of revolutionizing health care. Cuba has been largely successful in providing this basic need, and the free, high-quality medical services are “one of the principal achievements of the revolution.”⁵⁸ All citizens of Cuban society, including women, have benefited from the improvement in general medical care. The achievements in medical care have also spread into the reproductive health arena – taking women’s unique health needs into account while allowing women to make their own reproductive choices. By providing free health care, the revolutionaries have not only won the support of millions of Cubans, but also fulfilled the Marxist imperative to have a healthy, sustainable workforce.

Bringing Care to the Masses

One of the first priorities of the revolution was to bring health care to the masses. Before the revolution medical care was distributed along class and geographic lines; as Virginia Olesen explains, there was an “inequitable distribution [of health care] heavily favoring the affluent middle classes in urban Havana with consequent inadequate care for rural Cubans and the impoverished classes of the cities.”⁵⁹ In order to ameliorate this problem, the revolutionaries immediately initiated several programs to bring care to Cuba’s poor and rural communities. Beginning in 1960, graduates of medical school were required by law to volunteer in the countryside for one full year. The government also established hundred of “polyclinics”

⁵⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 57.

⁵⁹ Virginia Olesen, “Confluences in Social Change: Cuban Women and Health Care,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 17, no. 4 (1975): 404.

throughout the countryside. These small outpatient medical facilities, which can address general health issues, dental care, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology, allowed peasants access to basic health services they had been denied before the revolution.⁶⁰

During the early 1960s, the government also made huge strides towards nationalizing and socializing health care. Within two years of the Castro's successful takeover, all health care services were absorbed by the revolution's new Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP). As Smith and Padula explain, "health care was now the right of all citizens and the responsibility of the state."⁶¹ In the 1970s, this duty of the state was enshrined in Article 49 of the constitution: "Everyone has the right to have health care and protection. The state guarantees this right."⁶² The clause goes on to promise a wide range of services including hospitals, clinics, dental care, health education, preventive care, and more.

To a large extent, the state has fulfilled this Marxist and constitutional promise. Health care has been a priority for the state, even in periods of economic crisis. As a result, the revolutionaries have largely fixed the unequal distribution of medical care, and "every individual has access to physicians and hospital care on (mostly) equal terms and conditions."⁶³

General Health Benefits

Various indicators point to the fact that the government's dedication to health care has paid off. In terms of medical care and health indicators, Cuba is now on par with developed nations rather than its developing counterparts in Latin America. The leading causes of death are

⁶⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 59.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶² "Republica De Cuba / Republic of Cuba - Constitucion Politica De 1976 / Politic Constitution of 1976." <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Cuba/cuba1976.html> (accessed 1/12, 2013).

⁶³ Candance Johnson, "Women, Policy Development, and the Evolving Health Frame in Cuba," *Canadian Women's Studies* 27, no. 1 (2009): 64.

no longer infectious diseases, but rather diabetes and stroke.⁶⁴ Because tropical diseases like dengue and malaria were virtually eliminated, recent medical campaigns have focused on issues like obesity, smoking, breast cancer, and sex education.

The most comprehensive way to quantify this change in health care is to analyze data on Cuban life expectancy. As Table 5.1 illustrates, life expectancy for men and women has consistently risen over the course of the revolution. Women's life expectancy has grown from about 58 years in the early 1950s to about 80 years in 2007. Men's life expectancy has mirrored this growth, increasing from about 53 years to 76 years over the course of the last fifty years. As Graph 5.1 illustrates, the increase in life expectancy is especially pronounced at the beginning of the revolution, when health services were provided to the masses for the first time. In the first period (1955-1969), the life expectancy rose above by more than 13 years for both men and women. Over the course of the entire period for which data is available, life expectancy for women rose by an average of approximately .39 years annually.

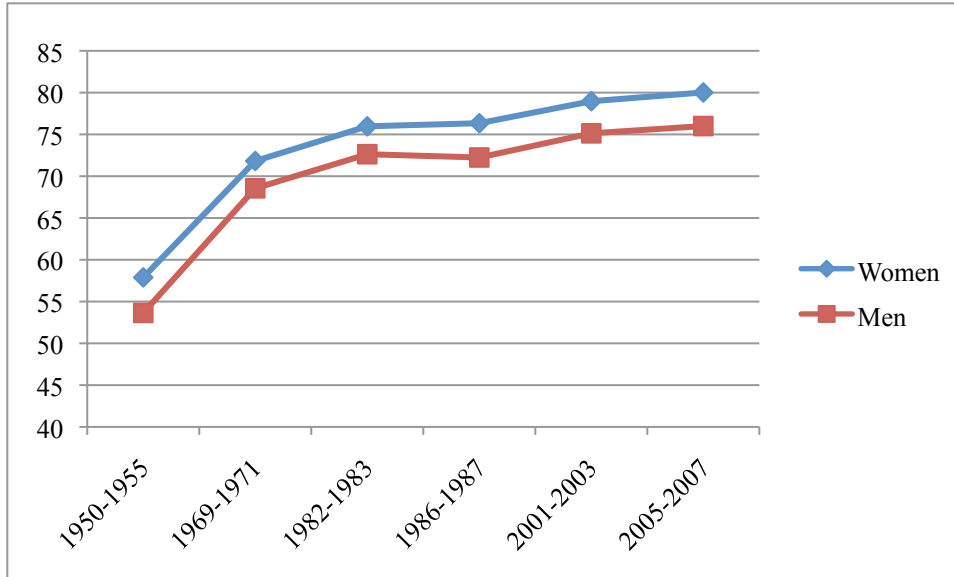
Table 5.1 – Life Expectancy in Men and Women, 1950 – 2007

Year	1950-1955	1969-1971	1982-1983	1986-1987	2001-2003	2005-2007
Women	57.89	71.82	75.97	76.34	78.97	80.02
Men	53.64	68.55	72.63	72.24	75.13	76.00

Source: Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (ONE), *Mujeres Cubanas: Estadísticas y Realidades* (2008): 16.

Graph 5.1 – Life Expectancy in Men and Women, 1950 – 2007

⁶⁴ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 60.



Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 16.

Reproductive Health

In addition to the general health provisions, the revolution has made great strides in reproductive health, especially maternal care. One of the major tenants of this program has been to educate women about pregnancy. The Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) produces pamphlets on reproductive health, and sex education has been (slowly) introduced into the schools. Women are encouraged to attend classes during pregnancy that cover a range of topics from miscarriage to natural childbirth and the importance of certain medical tests during pregnancy. In the 1970s, about seventy percent of women attended this type of class.⁶⁵ The FMC has also been very actively involved in educating women about pregnancy. The neighborhood FMC meetings frequently feature health discussions, as does their magazine, *Mujeres*. FMC cadres also visit the homes of pregnant women to make “sure the mother kept her prenatal

⁶⁵ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 72-73.

appointments and got to the hospital on time. They also reminded the woman not to smoke, drink, or engage in other unhealthy behavior.”⁶⁶

The government has also pushed for women to be cared for by a doctor during the entirety of their pregnancies, culminating in giving birth in the hospitals. In addition to the aforementioned visits by FMC cadres to the homes of pregnant women, the revolution has initiated a variety of innovative programs to this end. For example, the FMC and MINSAP run a network of Maternity Homes, or comfortable health facilities for rural women in their final month of pregnancy.⁶⁷ Because it can be difficult for rural women to access hospitals for delivery, these homes are constructed close to hospitals to provide care for women at the end of their pregnancies to assure that women give birth under the supervision of a medical professional.⁶⁸ This drive for adequate medical attention has been very successful: in the 1992, women made an average of fifteen visits to their doctors over the course of their pregnancies and 99.8% of births occurred in hospitals in 1992.⁶⁹

As a result of this focus on women’s pregnancies, maternal and infant health indicators have improved significantly over the course of the revolution. The maternal mortality rate, defined as the number of deaths related to pregnancy or childbirth per 100,000 live births, has fallen from 125.3 on the eve of the revolution to 29.4 in 2008.⁷⁰ As Table 5.2 illustrates, the infant mortality rate also dropped precipitously over the course of the revolution. Though the rate was nearly forty infant deaths per every 100,000 live births at the beginning of the revolution, the infant mortality rate is now only about five per 100,000 live births. For the sake of comparison,

⁶⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 77.

⁶⁷ Oxfam, *50 Years Later: Women and Social Change in Cuba* (2011): 41.

⁶⁸ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 75.

⁶⁹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 77-78.

⁷⁰ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 56.

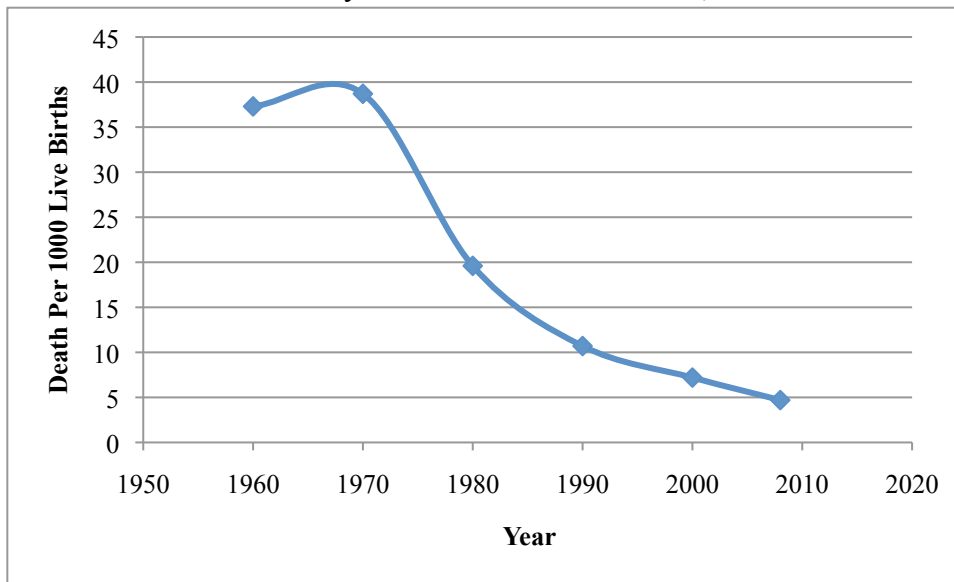
in the US in 2004, the maternal mortality rate was 9.9 deaths per 100,000 live births and the infant mortality rate was 6.84 deaths per 1000 live births.⁷¹

Table 5.2 – Infant Mortality Rate Per 1000 Live Births, 1960-2008

Year	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2008
Deaths per 1000 live births	37.3	38.7	19.6	10.7	7.2	4.7

Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 60.

Table 5.2 – Infant Mortality Rate Per 1000 Live Births, 1960-2008



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 60.

In addition to providing numerous services for pregnant women, the revolutionary leadership has provided free access to birth control and abortion, thereby increasing a woman’s ability to control whether or not she has a child. Though the embargo limited the supply of contraceptives in the beginning of the revolution, various methods of birth control are now readily available for free.⁷² As Table 5.3 shows, birth control use is becoming more and more common. Since the beginning of the revolution, intrauterine devices (IUDs) have been a preferred method of birth control. This trend continues to today, with over half of Cuban women

⁷¹ Johnson, “Women, Policy Development, and the Evolving Health Frame in Cuba,” 64.

⁷² Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 71.

using IUDs to prevent against pregnancy. Sterilization and the pill are the other most common forms of birth control.

Table 5.3 – Birth Control Usage, 1993-2008

Type	1993	2000	2008
IUD	40%	60%	52%
Sterilization	21%	20%	19.8%
Pill	2.5%	6.8%	10.4%
Injection	1%	2%	3.6%
Condoms	4%	9%	12.6%
Other	1.5%	2.2%	1.6%
Total	70%	73%	77.6%

Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 63.

Abortions are now free and legal in Cuba, but this has not always been the case. Before the revolution, abortion was illegal except “to save the life of the mother, when the pregnancy was the result of rape, and to avoid birth defects due to hereditary sickness or contagious disease.”⁷³ Interestingly, this law stood – and was enforced – for the first half-decade of the revolution. Smith and Padula write, “for reasons that have never been fully explained, the Castro government actively opposed abortion for several years.”⁷⁴ This resulted in a large number of abortion-related deaths on the island – 84 in 1964 alone – so MINSAP institutionalized abortion in 1965. As a result, the number of abortion-related deaths fell to 23 in 1971.⁷⁵

First-term abortions are now available for free. Later term abortions are also available, though they require the permission of the hospital director.⁷⁶ As Margaret Randall explains, “[abortions] are carried out under the same hospital conditions as all other medical treatment.”⁷⁷ This availability of abortion and state support for a woman’s right to choose stands in stark contrast to the capitalist countries in Latin America, where abortion is often illegal or very

⁷³ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 71.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷⁵ Olesen, “Confluences in Social Changes,” 405.

⁷⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 74.

⁷⁷ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 69.

restricted. For example, in Chile, abortion is illegal and punishable by five to ten years in prison, even when the mother's life is in danger or the pregnancy is the result of rape.⁷⁸

The abortion rate has been high throughout the Cuban revolution. As the Table 5.4 shows, abortions peaked in 1990: almost 150,000 were performed, meaning that nearly 44% of pregnancies ended in abortion. Cuba's high abortion rate has been the cause of controversy and concern, and when the rate rose in the 1980s and 1990s, MINSAP, the government, and even Fidel Castro expressed concern. To alleviate this problem, the state attempted to educate the population about and encourage the use of other forms of birth control.⁷⁹ Abortion rates have since fallen substantially – between 1980 and 2008, the number of abortions per 1000 women was cut in half. The most recent data shows that there are about 37.8 abortions per 100 pregnancies in Cuba.

Table 5.4 – Abortions, 1970-2008

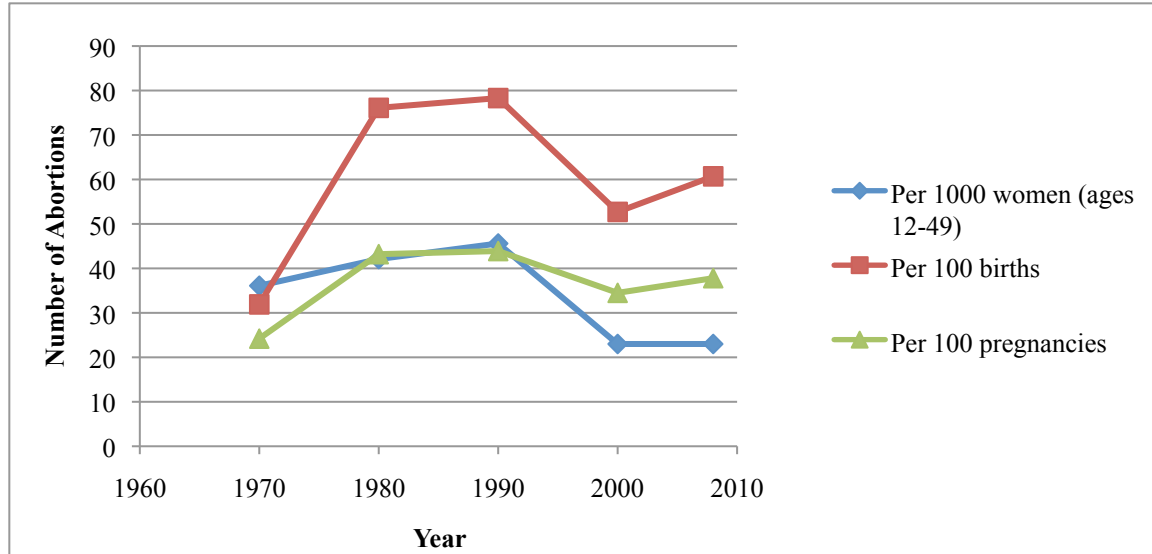
Year	1970	1980	1990	2000	2008
Total number	70521	103974	147530	76293	74843
Per 1000 women (ages 12-49)	36.1	42.1	45.6	23.0	23.0
Per 100 births	31.9	76.1	78.3	52.7	60.7
Per 100 pregnancies	24.2	43.2	43.9	34.5	37.8

Source: Reproduced from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 63.

Table 5.4 – Abortions, 1970-2008

⁷⁸ Nelson, Aaron, "Taking Calls, and Risks, in Chile," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2013, accessed March 31, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/world/americas/in-chile-abortion-hot-line-is-in-legal-gray-area.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

⁷⁹ Johnson, "Framing for Change," 41.



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 63.

Cuba's Success for Women (and For All) in the Health Care Arena

As this data shows, the accessibility and quality of health care has improved significantly as a result of the Marxist revolution. I concur with Lois Smith and Alfred Padula's conclusion that "for women, the new health system was arguable the most successful innovation of the Cuban revolution."⁸⁰ The government guarantees free medical services from dental care to childbirth, and this has undeniably improved the quality of life for women in Cuba.⁸¹

The revolution deserves especially high marks for its unbiased provision of women's health care. Although the high-quality maternity education and medical services for pregnant women could easily be interpreted as pro-natalism, the availability of free birth control and abortion show that Cuba is not encouraging women to have children or not have children. Instead, the revolutionary government allows women to make their own reproductive choices and ensures that women get adequate care – regardless of their choice. For example, the state provides both free childbirth and abortion, both in medical facilities and both performed by

⁸⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 81.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

trained doctors, and as a result, the mortality rates of mothers and women receiving abortions have fallen significantly. Other scholars have confirmed that Cuba is neutral but supportive on women's health issues; for instance, Margaret Randall writes,

No state ideology regarding population has ever been imposed on the people...the size of the family is the decision of the husband and wife as part of their human rights. The state's duty is to provide the citizen with the means for having as few or as many children as they wish.⁸²

As such, Cuba has adopted a stance towards women's health effectively addresses all of women's reproductive concerns without patronizing women or skewing their reproductive choices. This is a difficult balance to maintain, and achieving this position is one of Cuba's strongest accomplishments for women's equality.

In the revolution, women are benefited by the provision of medical care not only because they receive excellent, free general and reproductive care, but also because the state replaces the woman as the caretaker of the sick. In other words, because women are often presumed to be caretakers, guaranteed free care from the state relieves women of their "duty" to care for her children and the elderly. As a 2008 Oxfam report on Cuban women succinctly explains, "[Health] is especially important because of the role that women play in caring for the health of their children and entire families."⁸³ Women are doubly benefited – as individuals and as assumed caretakers – by the health revolution in Cuba.

Of course, the state is also doubly benefited by providing health care to the masses. First, the free and high-quality health care has been "an important source of popular support for the

⁸² Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 68.

⁸³ Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 40.

Castro government.”⁸⁴ This support has helped the Marxist nation survive for more than a half-century. Second, the availability of medical care ensures that Cuba has a healthy and sustainable workforce, which is central to the Marxist revolutionary project.

Although health care is an (almost) unqualified success of the revolution, the next two sections – work and political participation – will show that Marxism has not always provided so well for women.

⁸⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 57.

Section 6 – Work: Women in Production

In prerevolutionary Cuba, the ideal was for men and women to be divided into separate spheres: women's domain was the *casa*, or the home, and men's domain was the *calle*, literally the street but broadly encompassing all public life and production. In Marxist and Marxist feminist theory, this type of restriction on women entering paid production is a principal cause of their oppression; women are subjugated because they are financially dependent on men and unable to realize themselves through labor. As such, it logically follows that “women's participation in the labor force was the key to their emancipation.”⁸⁵

The Cuban Revolutionary government has adopted this strict Marxist ideology and repeatedly stressed women's participation in the workforce. As a result, Cuba has achieved commendable gains in terms of women's work, with women rapidly entering the labor force supported by innovative collectivization of domestic tasks. But the progress has fallen short. Far from being the linchpin for achieving equality, women's work elucidates the barriers to women's liberation on the island. In particular, the history of women in the Cuban labor force shows the tendency to favor the revolution over women's emancipation and the continuation of patriarchal norms – both of which hinder women's progress towards equality in Cuban society.

Before the Revolution

In order to fully understand the revolutionary changes in the Cuban workforce, it is necessary to establish some facts about pre-1959 Cuba as a reference point. Though some women worked, men dominated the “productive” sphere. According to the 1953 census, women

⁸⁵ Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 4.

constituted approximately 13.0% of the island's total labor force.⁸⁶ Looking at the same fact from a different angle, 22.5% of urban women and 12.5% of rural women were “economically active” compared with 84.1% of urban men and 90.8% of rural men.⁸⁷ Women were participating in paid production, but not nearly at the same rate as men.

This low rate of participation can be partially traced to the strong cultural ideals that restricted women to the home. Men were expected to earn a wage for their families, while women were assumed to take on all responsibilities relating to the home and children. The women and families who deviated from this social norm and participated in the labor force in prerevolutionary Cuba did so mostly out of financial need. That is to say, women's work was a differentiated by class: the wealthy women who could afford not to work did not work, while poor women had no choice but to join the labor force.⁸⁸ Carollee Bengelsdorf describes Cuba's poor prerevolutionary female workers as follows: “[they were] the wives and daughters of the unemployed and underemployed, of working men and campesinos [farmers], [who] worked when the survival of their families depended upon it, in whatever jobs they could get.”⁸⁹

These lower class women were “lowest ranks in the reserve labour army” and had very few professional options.⁹⁰ As shown in Table 6.1, women were highly concentrated in light industry, education, social work, and domestic service. Education and domestic service were very feminized, with women constituting 84.3% of primary school teachers, 89.8% of secondary school teachers, and 89.4% of domestic servants. They also held a slight majority in Cuba's

⁸⁶ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 25.

⁸⁷ Casal, “Revolution and *Conciencia*,” 189.

⁸⁸ Interestingly, this picture of women's work in pre-1959 Cuba largely resembles Fredrich Engels's model of female labor in capitalism. As he predicted in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), women joined the Cuban labor force along class lines. The demands of capitalism drew working class women “out of the home onto the labor market and into the factory” (Engels quoted in Jaggar 66), while bourgeois women stayed in their homes.

⁸⁹ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, “Emerging from underdevelopment,” 363.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

tobacco industry. These professions were understood as “women’s work” – somehow inherently suited for feminine qualities.⁹¹ Domestic work, education, and social work were suitable for women because of the assumed female proclivity for caretaking, and tobacco industry valued “a woman’s ‘lighter’, more ‘delicate’ touch.”⁹²

Table 6.1 - Occupations of Economically Active Women 14 years and Older, 1953

Profession	Women as a percent of the total
Total	13.0%
<i>TEACHERS, PROFESSORS, AND SCIENTISTS</i>	
Total	81.9%
Primary school teachers	84.3%
Secondary, trade, and art school teachers	89.8%
Agronomists, biologists, mathematicians, physicists, naturalists	11.7%
<i>DOCTORS AND MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS</i>	
Total	13.4%
Doctors	6.5%
Dentists	18.2%
Professional Nurses	30.9%
<i>FOOD AND TOBACCO WORKERS</i>	
Total	24.4%
Tobacco workers	51.5%
<i>ARTISTS, WRITERS, TRAINERS, AND ATHLETES</i>	
Total	14.5%
Artists and art professors	11.5%
Athletes, coaches, and sports officials	2.1%
<i>SERVICE WORKERS</i>	
Total	54.7%
Domestic servants	89.4%

Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 25.

⁹¹ Again, it is interesting to compare Engels’s theory to the practice in Cuba. Engels predicted, “Capitalism would abolish sex differences and treat all workers equally” (Hartmann 4). However, working women in capitalist Cuba did not achieved equality with their male counterparts; men and women were concentrated in different industries. If women and men workers were already equal – and just oppressed by capitalism – then why could men and women not hold the same jobs, mixing equally in all professions?

⁹² Carollee Bengelsdorf, “On the problem of studying women in Cuba” *Race & Class* 27, no. 2 (1985): 42.

Prostitution, which is not listed in the table above of professions recognized by the 1953 census, was another major industry for women in pre-1959 Cuba. Margaret Randall estimates that “there were some 100,000 women forced into prostitution”⁹³ in Cuba before the revolution. Since, according to the 1953 census, there were 2.84 million women in Cuba, this means that about 3.5% of Cuban women were prostitutes. Carollee Bengelsdorf asserts that Havana alone had over 250 brothels in 1957.⁹⁴

Thus, when Castro took power in 1959, he inherited a workforce with a small, segregated contingent of women. As will be explained in the following three sections, fifty-four years of Marxist revolution has variably impacted this workforce: while some characteristics have been profoundly altered by the revolutionary policies, others have remained relatively untouched.

Integration into the Revolutionary Workforce

In 1959, the very first year of the revolution, Fidel Castro gave a speech to the women of Havana. In this speech, he adopted the Marxist doctrine on women’s work, explaining that women needed to leave the domestic arena and enter production in order to benefit themselves and build socialist society. For the last fifty-four years of revolution, the government has maintained this traditional Marxist position, consistently emphasizing the importance of women’s integration into the workforce.⁹⁵

Early Projects

⁹³ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 125.

⁹⁴ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, “Emerging from underdevelopment,” 364.

⁹⁵ Muriel Nazzari, “The ‘Woman Question’ in Cuba: An Analysis of Material Constraints on Its Solution” *Signs* 9, no. 2 (1983): 246.

The uneasy fit between gender and Marxism characterizes Cuba from the earliest days of the revolution. Even though leaders made statements about the value of women working from the beginning, in fact integrating women into paid production was not a goal of the first five or ten years. Fidel Castro inherited massive male unemployment from the Batista regime, and this was deemed a priority.⁹⁶ The official statistics report that in 1953, 8.4 percent of all workers and 9.0 percent of male workers were unemployed,⁹⁷ but other estimates claim that unemployment and underemployment reached as high as 28 percent in 1958.⁹⁸ Rectifying this situation was a primary goal of the first years of the revolution, and women's large-scale integration into production had to wait.

Thus, women's work was "channeled in a way to avoid their competing with male workers."⁹⁹ Rather than immediately pushing for full women's integration into production the Federation of Cuban Women focused on (1) organizing women to volunteer and (2) training women to later enter the workforce. Women were organized to volunteer in brigades, which helped support revolutionary goals by building schools and hospitals, serving as trained medical practitioners, assisting in important harvests, and much more. Beyond just serving revolutionary goals, volunteering was seen as beneficial to women; it was a stepping stone between the home and paid work. Vilma Espín, head of the Federation of Cuban Women explains,

Voluntary work opened new prospects for many women who want to contribute to the process... Many of these women engaged in productive activity for the first time. Voluntary work was beginning to fulfill its

⁹⁶ Nazzari, "The 'Woman Question' in Cuba," 253-254.

⁹⁷ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 26.

⁹⁸ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, "Emerging from Underdevelopment" 363.

⁹⁹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 97.

purpose: opening new horizons for women, showing them it was possible to take part, creating a new consciousness.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, volunteer projects gave women marketable skills for their later integration into paid labor.

A successful example of FMC-organized volunteering is the FMC-ANAP Brigades. Created in 1966 in collaboration with the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), this program organized groups of women to volunteer to help with certain harvests. A 1975 FMC documents explains the program as follows:

The FMC-ANAP Brigades were organized in 1966 with the main goal of contributing to the political and ideological development of peasant women while at the same time helping to resolve the need for labor in planting as well as harvesting crops at certain times of the year. The brigade has developed in a spirit of collectivity and the work accomplished is of political, economic and social importance.¹⁰¹

That is to say, the FMC-ANAP program was beneficial to both women and the revolution. As with other brigades, it was an educational intermediate point for women between the home and paid work: women only volunteered at certain times of the year and were not committed to full-time labor. And of course, it also helped the nation reach crop targets and become more self-sufficient.

During the transition period at the beginning of the revolution, the FMC also initiated training programs to prepare women for their eventual integration into socialist production. In particular, the FMC focused on giving society's most disadvantaged women – peasants,

¹⁰⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 96.

¹⁰¹ FMC's *Thesis on Peasant Women and the Role of the FMC*, presented at the FMC's 2nd Congress in 1974 and reprinted in Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 58.

prostitutes, and domestic servants – the tools for more productive and fulfilling careers. In these programs, women were taught a practical skill, like sewing or taxi driving, as well as more general education including reading and writing and political ideology.

The most famous example is the Ana Betancourt Schools for Peasant Women, which “brought tens of thousands of peasant women from the countryside to Havana for training.”¹⁰² From 1960 to 1976, the yearlong program taught women how to sew and gave them a diploma in dressmaking. But it was much more than just sewing: the program gave them a sixth grade education,¹⁰³ political knowledge, “courses in physical education, singing and dancing, hygiene, and first aid,”¹⁰⁴ and access to doctors.¹⁰⁵ Upon completion of the program, the newly trained women were requested to spread what they had learned: each woman was given a sewing machine and told to teach ten women in her hometown.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the Ana Betancourt Schools for Peasant Women gave women a marketable skill that could provide their economic liberation, as well as knowledge of politics and culture and the ability to reproduce what they had learned.

Beginning to Integrate

By the mid-1960s, the problem of male unemployment had been solved, and the government started to urge women to join the labor force. Leaders made speeches, put up billboards, and sent FMC volunteers door to door to encourage women to enter production. They did this for two principal reasons: (1) the economy needed more workers to meet development goals, and (2) Marxist ideology dictated that women should be incorporated in order to liberate

¹⁰² Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 37.

¹⁰³ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 56.

¹⁰⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 38-39.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 57.

women. In other words, revolutionary leaders wanted free women from their oppressive, domestic tasks, but they were also keenly aware of the fact that their planned economic development required the efforts of all of Cuban society, not just the men.

In 1965, Fidel Castro called for the entrance of women into mass production, citing that it would be beneficial to women and to all of society to have women contribute to the economy. Speaking of women's integration into paid production, he says,

This does not mean simply that society wishes to help women, not only that. Society has a duty to help women, but at the same time society helps itself considerably by helping women, because it means more and more hands joining in the production of goods and services for all people.

That is to say, women are necessary for the nation's economic development.

He continues, stressing the economic value of women's integration,

Society profits from the work of every woman...we have learned, for example, that the entire nation profits from the incorporation of thousands, of hundreds of thousands, say of a million women into production; if each other of those women produces a value of a thousand peso per year, a million women means a thousand million pesos in created wealth.¹⁰⁷

That is to say, women's mobilization helped women as individuals; but it also helped the Cuban economy, and thereby the state and the revolution.

Given these economic and ideological imperatives, Cuba has tried to encourage its female population to enter the workforce. This goal has been met with mixed success. In terms of

¹⁰⁷ Fidel Castro, "Communism cannot be built in one country in the midst of an underdeveloped world," in *Fidel Castro Speaks* ed. Martin Kenner and James Petras (New York: Grove Press, 1969) 207-208.

sheer number of women in the labor force, the growth has been remarkable. According to the most recent data, 1,934,100 women now work, an incredible increase over the 244,400 of prerevolutionary times. This means about 1,689,700 women have joined the workforce since the revolution began, or looking at it from a slightly different angle, nearly seven times more women work now than did in 1953. As Graph 6.2 shows, the growth was greatest during the 1970s: the number of women more than doubled from 1970-1981. This probably corresponds to the efforts of the FMC and government to recruit women after male unemployment was resolved.

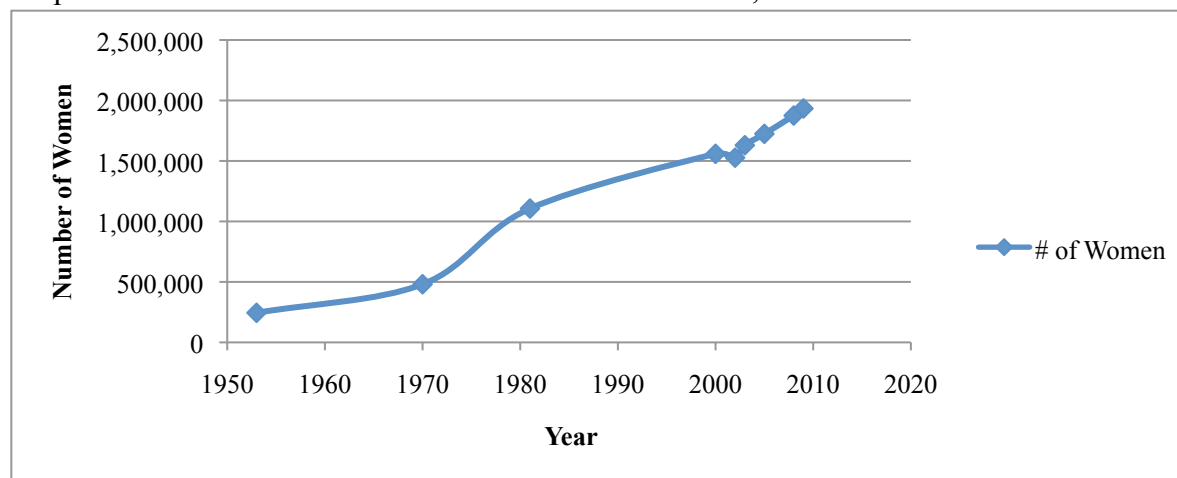
Table 6.2 – Number of Women in the Cuban Labor Force

Year	1953	1970	1981	2000	2002
# Women Working	244,400	480,600	1,106,600	1,559,000	1,527,100

Year	2003	2005	2008	2009
# Women Working	1,630,100	1,724,000	1,875,300	1,934,100

Source: Data from Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (ONE), *Mujeres y Hombres en Cuba, Edición Marzo 2011* (2011): 68; ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 27-28.

Graph 6.2 – Number of Women in the Cuban Labor Force, 1953-2009



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres en Cuba*, 68 and ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 27-28.

Participation rate – defined as the working population divided by the working age population – also shows significant growth in women’s workforce integration over the course of

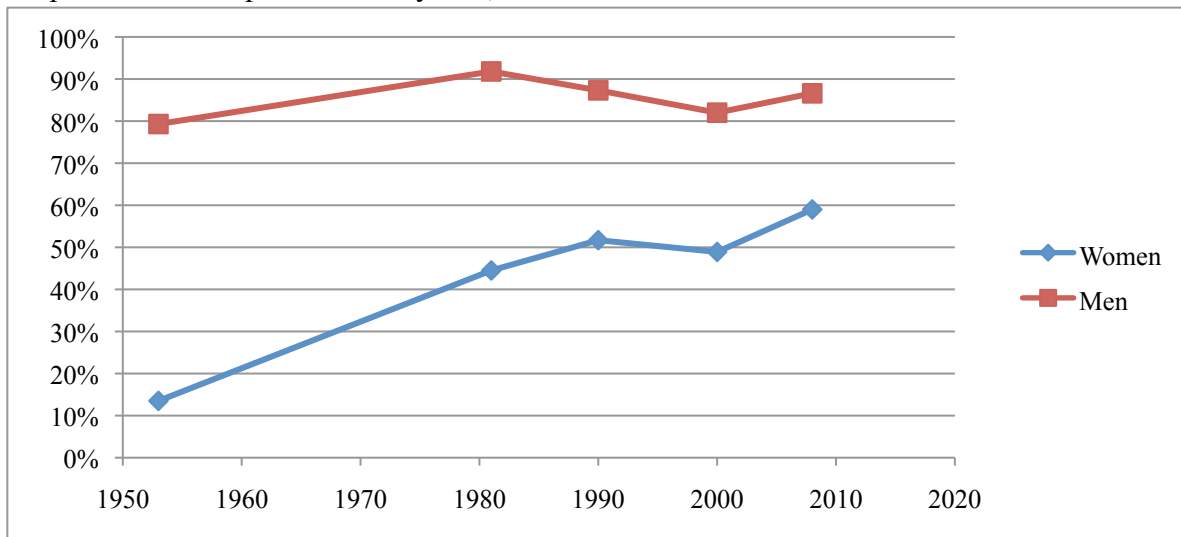
the revolution. As Table 6.3 indicates, only 13.5 percent of women worked in 1953, compared to 59.0 percent in 2009. In other words, more than one in two women now works, but before the revolution, only about one in seven or eight women worked. So Marxism does appear to have had an effect, but this effect is not unambiguous.

Table 6.3 – Participation Rate by Sex, 1953-2008

Sex/Year	1953	1981	1990	2000	2008
Women	13.5%	44.5%	51.7%	48.9%	59.0%
Men	79.3%	91.8%	87.3%	82.0%	86.6%

Source: Reproduced from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 26.

Graph 6.3 – Participation Rate by Sex, 1953-2008



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 26.

The bulk of this growth occurred in the 70s and in the last fifteen or so years. Though it is not in Table 6.3, Fidel Castro cited the participation rate of women in 1970 as 24.9 percent in a speech.¹⁰⁸ From 1970-1981, this percentage jumped 20 points to 44.5 percent. The slump in both the men’s and women’s participation rate in the 1990s reflects the economic hardship faced by Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this decade, which is known as the Special Period, Cuba faced shortages of jobs and basic goods. There is sustained growth again after the

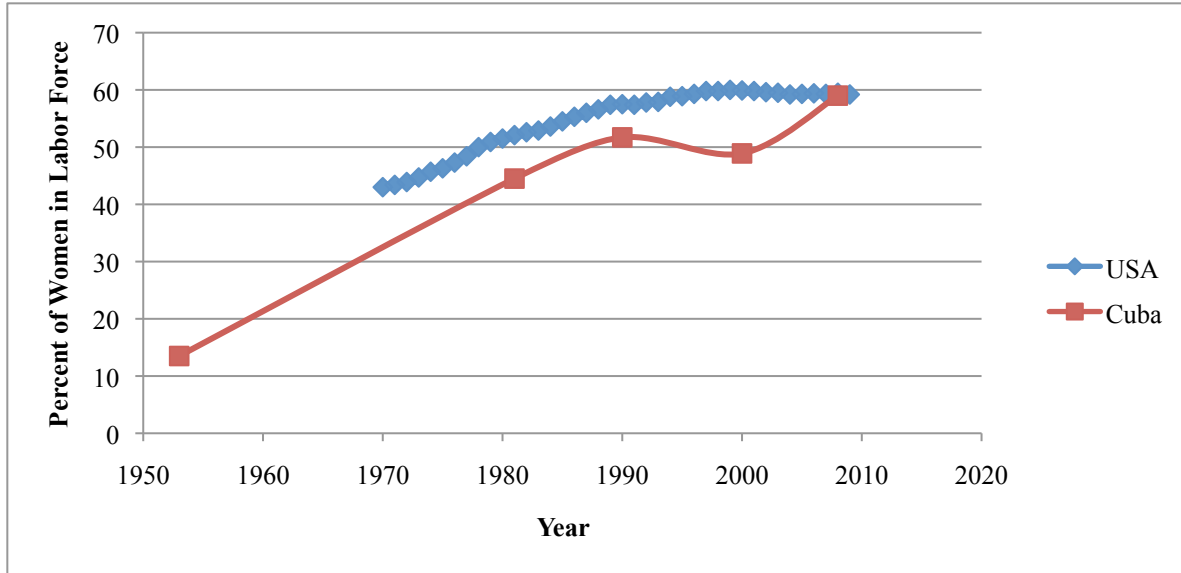
¹⁰⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 101.

Special Period, with women's employment increasing by more than 10 percentage points (from 48.9% in 2000 to 59.0% in 2008) in only eight years.

Though Table 6.3 and Graph 6.3 show that there has been a significant increase in the percentage of women who work, they also show that the progress is not yet complete: women still work at lower rates than men. According to the most recent data, 86.6 percent of men work, compared with only 59.0 percent of women. The gap between men's and women's participation rates has been closing over the course of the revolution, but the data show that progress is slowing. From 1953 to 1990, this gap shrank from 65.8 percent to 35.6 percent. Between 1990 and 2008, the disparity between men's and women's participation rates only closed from 35.6 percent to 27.6 percent.

Interestingly, Cuban women's labor force participation lagged behind that of U.S. women for the majority of the revolution. Though data for the US only goes back to 1970, Graph 6.4 shows that American women worked at slightly higher rates than Cuban women until 2008 when both rates were more or less 59 percent. In the future, Cuba's percent of women working could surpass the United States': Cuba's participation rate has been trending upward for the last decade, but the US's has been stagnant or even falling. A variety of factors well beyond the scope of this thesis could explain such variability, but, at the minimum, it is clear that while the Cuban revolution has produced significant advances for women, it has not produced the full-scale gender equality that Marxism presumes will follow from the end of capitalism.

Graph 6.4 – U.S. and Cuba Women's Participation Rate



Source: Data from U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Women in the Labor Force: A Databook Report 1026 (2010): 8 and ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 26.

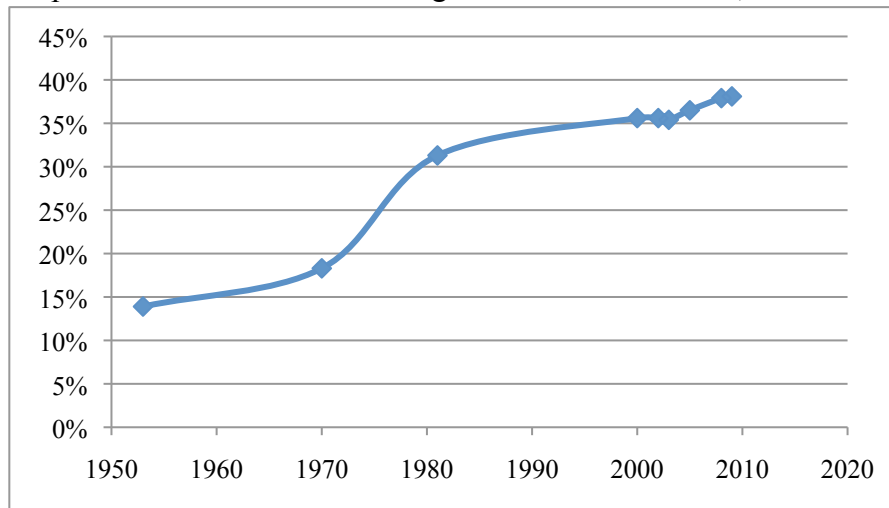
Data on women as a percentage of the total workforce similarly shows this ambiguity. As Table 6.5 shows, since 1953 women have grown from 13.9 percent to 38.1 percent of the labor force, an increase of 24.2 percentage points. This data also shows the impact of Cuban policies regarding women in the workforce: though there is little growth in the 1960s, when male unemployment was a priority, there is huge growth in the 1970s, when the FMC and government began pushing for women’s integration to accelerate economic development. Although Table 6.5 and Graph 6.5 show substantial growth, however, the integration process is not complete. For the last decade, women have hovered around 35 to 39 percent of the labor force. In simple terms, women still are not half of the labor force.

Table 6.5 – Women as a Percent of Total Labor Force, 1953-2009

Year	1953	1970	1981	2000	2002	2003	2005	2008	2009
Women as % of workforce	13.9%	18.3%	31.3%	35.6%	35.6%	35.4%	36.5%	37.9%	38.1%

Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres en Cuba*, 68 and ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*., 27-28.

Graph 6.5 –Women as a Percentage of Total Labor Force, 1953-2009



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres en Cuba*, 68; ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas: Estadísticas y Realidades*, 27-28.

Incomplete Integration

What accounts for the ambiguous results concerning women's integration in the Cuban workforce? Since the beginning of the revolution, Fidel Castro and other revolutionary leaders have espoused the traditional Marxist view that women's integration into paid production is the key to their liberation, and at least since the mid-1960s, they have made a sustained effort to push women into the workforce. As the data above show, they have made impressive progress on this front; before the revolution only a small minority (13 percent) of women worked and now a substantial majority (59 percent) of women work. Since the beginning of the revolution, over 1.5 million women have joined the labor force, which means that over 1.5 women became financially independent from their husbands and realized their greater potential. This is an undeniably significant step towards women's equality.

At the same time, the quantitative and qualitative data above reveals a problem in Cuba's workforce integration strategy. The Cuban government has always stressed women's participation in the workforce as the foundation for women's equality, and yet, this integration

has never been prioritized. Women's mobilization has consistently come second to other revolutionary goals.

The first half-decade or so of the revolution illustrates this point. Although Castro gave speeches adopting the Marxist ideology that essentially equate women's work with women's equality as early as 1959, the government and the FMC did not encourage women to work until the mid-1960s. Why? There was another, more important goal that conflicted with women's working; namely, resolving men's unemployment. Even when the revolution decided to integrate women in the mid- and late-1960s, it was motivated by a desire to accelerate national economic growth. In other words, women's work was not a primary objective in and of itself, but rather a means to achieve a more important revolutionary goal – economic growth.

Prioritizing other goals over women's working – or treating women's participation in the workforce as a means to reach another goal – may have (at times paradoxically) impeded women's integration into the labor force. Though it is impossible to know for sure, it seems likely that women would be more than 38 percent of the labor force if this had been a primary goal of the revolution instead of a secondary or side objective. Though making women 50 percent of the labor force might be considered a formidable challenge due to deep-seated cultural norms, past revolutionary achievements were at least as impressive– from eradicating illiteracy in one year to surviving economic destruction after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such successes in other areas suggest that Cuba could have achieved the objective of women's full participation in the workforce if it were made a priority. That it was not prioritized, I suggest, in keeping with the Socialist feminists discussed earlier in this thesis, is a function of the role of patriarchy in Cuban society.

Material provisions for working women

The evidence for the role of patriarchy begins with considering material provisions for working women, including day care centers, boarding schools, and grocery services, none of which have been prioritized in the revolution. In traditional Marxist and Marxist feminist thought, the collectivization of women's domestic tasks is an expected and critical part of the equation for women's liberation. It would not only free women to work by relieving them of their domestic burden, but also transform housework and childcare in recognized, public, and productive labor.¹⁰⁹ As progressive theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman envisioned at the turn of the twentieth century, a society in which women can become full economic partners requires a revisioning of the household so as to professionalize and collectivize the tasks traditionally performed by each woman in her individual home.¹¹⁰ But this collectivization often goes rather unexplained in the theory; like other aspects of traditional Marxist thought about women's equality, it is expected to simply come about.

Unfortunately for the women of Cuba, the collectivization of women's domestic burden is an expensive, difficult task. The revolutionary government and the FMC have tried to provide services to reduce women's domestic burden, and "efforts were undertaken to promote the material conditions without which Castro felt it would be impossible to liberate women."¹¹¹ But providing day care centers, meals, laundry services, cleaning, and more for an entire population requires significant investment. As discussed below, these projects have not been prioritized in Cuban policies and budgets, and as a result, the collectivization of domestic work in Cuba is lacking. Women are still left with the majority of the responsibilities for the home and children, which only perpetuates patriarchal values about women's and men's places in society.

¹⁰⁹ Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 108.

¹¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*. (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007).

¹¹¹ Harris, "Socialist Societies and the Emancipation of Women," 94.

Commitment to Collectivization

To understand this failure to incorporate women fully by collectivizing household production, we must first recall that from the start of the revolutionary process, Fidel Castro, Vilma Espín, and other revolutionary leaders expressed commitment to collectivizing traditional women's tasks. Following Marxist and Marxist feminist doctrine, they believe that collectivizing these chores is a necessary step toward integrating women into the workforce and breaking the oppressive, economic ties within the family. For example, Fidel Castro said the following at the 1966 FMC National Plenary:

In order to have one million women working in production, we must have thousands of children's day nurseries, thousands of primary boarding schools, thousands of school dining halls, thousands of workers' dining hall; thousands of centers of social services of this type must be set up, because if not, who is going to cook for the second- or third-grade child when he comes home for lunch? Who is going to care for unweaned infants, or babies of two, three four years of age?... Everywhere women are working it has been necessary to make a special effort to establish day nurseries, set up boarding school and all of the necessary institutions so that these women could be free to work.¹¹²

In other words, since the 1960s, the government has understood and expressed that women's liberation and integration require the reduction of women's domestic burden through collectivized services.

¹¹² Fidel Castro, "The Revolution Within the Revolution" in *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, ed Elizabeth Stone (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981): 52-53.

This national commitment to providing adequate services for working women is also enshrined in the Cuban constitution. Article 43 of the 1976 constitution¹¹³ guarantees that the government will do everything in it's power to allow women to work and achieve equality:

Women enjoy the same economic, political, social, and family rights as men. In order to guarantee these rights and especially women's incorporation into the labor force...paid maternity leave will be granted to them before and after delivery, the state will organize institutions such as day care, semi-boarding schools and boarding school and will make all other efforts directed toward creating all the conditions which propitiate this principle of equality.¹¹⁴

This suggests a high level of commitment to satisfying the Marxist goal of socializing domestic chores. But whether this commitment is real or simply rhetorical is the bigger question. What does the concrete evidence show about Cuba's commitment?

Day Care Centers and Other Services for Working Women

One of the earliest revolutionary initiatives was the establishment of free day care centers for the children of working mothers. The program was started by the FMC in 1961 at the urging of Fidel Castro. At the FMC founding in 1960, he noted, "There are women working who have no place to leave their children. There aren't enough children's circles. The state and the municipality can't change this themselves...the Revolution is counting on the women of Cuba to

¹¹³ The Cuban constitution was heavily amended in 1992. This dedication to collectivization of domestic tasks remained. In the 1992 version, the only differences are that (1) it is Article 44 instead of 42 and (2) it is said to benefit working families, not just women.

¹¹⁴ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 45.

do this, and on the Federation of Cuban Women.”¹¹⁵ The FMC assumed this responsibility and administered the day care system until 1971, when the FMC passed the responsibility to the Ministry of Education.¹¹⁶ This service has always been low-cost or free. Initially, day care costs were based on parents’ incomes, then they were made gratis in 1967, and finally, the sliding scale based on parents’ incomes was reinstated in 1978. Children of working mothers are given priority for day care slots.¹¹⁷

As Table 6.6 indicates, the day care system grew rapidly until the 1990s, when the number of day cares leveled off around 1,110. The current capacity of the 1,110 day cares on the island is 151,122 children.¹¹⁸ By providing this service, the FMC and the government help over 100,000 women, freeing them to enter paid production.

Table 6.6 – General Indicators of Day Cares

	1961	1970	1980	1990	2000	2008
Number of day care facilities	37	606	832	1,116	1,119	1,110
Average yearly attendance (children)	1,690	33,719	59,312	108,376	122,182	110,541
Mothers helped	2,012	32,307	82,951	145,248	136,956	119,602

Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 44.

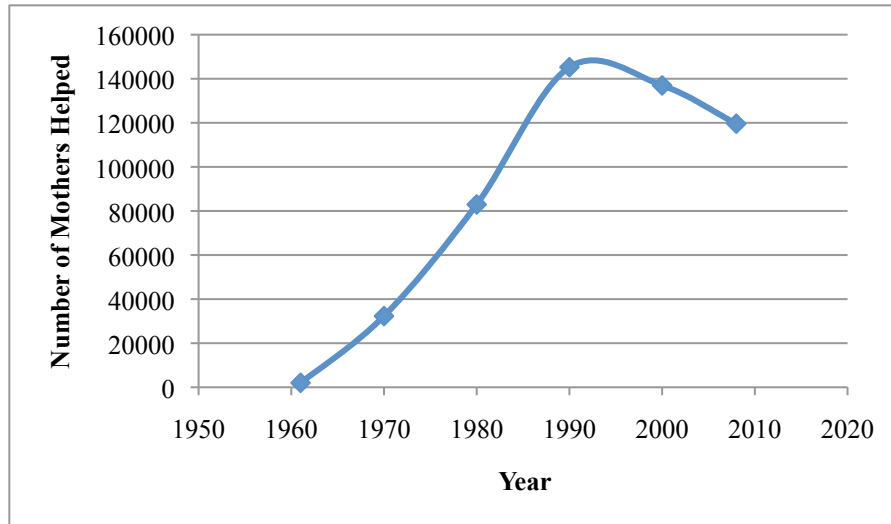
Graph 6.6 – Women Helped by Day Cares

¹¹⁵ Espín, “With No Preconceptions,” 247.

¹¹⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 193.

¹¹⁷ Nazzari, “The Woman Question in Cuba,” 256.

¹¹⁸ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 44.



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 44.

Over the course of the revolution, the quality and range of services provided by the day cares has improved. In the 1960s, the FMC simply pulled together whatever was available to care for children while mothers worked. In regard to this early period, Vilma Espín write, “we had very little experience when we took those first steps. There were no trained personnel, very few preschool teachers at all.”¹¹⁹ But the program has since grown tremendously, and the day cares have been able to provide more and more services for the children and mothers. The care is comprehensive: “the child is fed, clothed, and receives complete medical attention, including dental treatment, and, if necessary psychiatric services, as well as the initial stages of a scientific education.”¹²⁰

Is it significant that all these services are provided *by women*? According to Bengelsdorf and Hageman, the overwhelming majority of childcare workers are female because women are assumed to have some “natural” predilection for care and nurturing.¹²¹ Vilma Espín, director of the FMC, gave credence to this idea, stating, “The most important requirement for *a person* who

¹¹⁹ Espín, “With No Preconceptions,” 247.

¹²⁰ Randall, *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later*, 29-30.

¹²¹ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, “Emerging From Underdevelopment,” 367.

works with children, we said, was that *she* love children. A child needs a lot of affection [emphasis mine].”¹²² It was simply assumed that women could provide better care. The gender composition of childcare services is likely to stay the same, as staff training programs are only available to girls.¹²³ This is not a problem in and of itself—as long as child care workers are paid equitably with construction workers and receive the same benefits—but it fits a pattern of patriarchal sex segregation that runs as a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) theme of Cuban post-revolutionary society.

In addition to day care centers, the revolutionary government has attempted to provide services that replace women’s traditional domestic chores such as shopping, cooking, and laundry. In order to relieve working women of the need to go grocery shopping, the FMC started Plan Jaba (translation – the Shopping Bag Plan) in 1971. In this innovative program, women dropped off their bags at the grocery store and had their rations filled while they working. Along similar lines, workplaces and schools began to provide cafeterias to replace women’s cooking role. Cafeterias quickly became common, and by the 1980s, they were present in a majority of workplaces. The revolution also tried to provide laundry services through the workplace. It might seem a socialist feminist’s dream!

However, once again this commitment appears to be more rhetorical—or ideal—than real. The FMC government projects either did not have the scale to reach all Cuban women or lacked the quality necessary to effectively replace women’s labor. For example, the impressive day care system described above could only served five to ten percent of all working women. According to the most recent data, 119,602 mothers were helped by the day care system,¹²⁴ but

¹²² Espín, “With No Preconceptions,” 249.

¹²³ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 133.

¹²⁴ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 44.

there were over 1,875,300 women working in Cuba.¹²⁵ Of course, not all women working are mothers with children in the day care age range, but the fact that the day care system only has the capacity to serve 5.7 percent of working women is not promising.

Another example of a good policy that is poorly enacted is the workplace laundry services. In 1985, there were only about 600 laundry services on the island.¹²⁶ And because the project is inefficient and inconsistent, women cannot rely on it to perform their traditional chore of washing clothes. Consider Carollee Bengelsdorf's 1978 account of how the laundry system was running:

Although the service is improving, smooth operations are still difficult, especially outside Havana. In Santiago, for example, the time from delivery to return ranges from five to fifteen days, largely due to shortages of vehicle for transport. In a society where no one has a closet full of clothes, a laundry service that takes this long does not eliminate laundry from housework, and therefore from women's chores.¹²⁷

In other words, because of the scarcity of basic goods in Cuba, including clothing, families could not leave their clothes with a laundry service for such a long time. Women still were responsible for washing clothing.

Even the country's highest leaders have acknowledged that the collectivization of women's domestic chores is far from complete. For instance, in 1965, Fidel Castro set the goal of having one million women join the workforce by 1970. Only a year later, he backed away from that challenging, saying,

¹²⁵ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 27-28.

¹²⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 136.

¹²⁷ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, "Emerging from underdevelopment," 372.

It will not be possible to have one million working in production by 1970... It is impossible to construct the required thousands of children's day nurseries, school dining halls, laundries, workers' dining halls, boarding schools, in four years. In fact, merely to meet present needs, great effort is necessary on all fronts.¹²⁸

In other words, Castro admitted that the lofty goals to socialize all of women's tasks were difficult to fulfill, and the integration of women to paid production would be hindered as a result. Castro suggests that collectivization would be impossible because of economics, but I disagree: full collectivization was not feasible because Cuba has limited resources *and the leaders decided the limited resources should be invested in a different project*. Instead of investing in day care centers and laundry trucks, the Cuban revolutionary leadership chose to invest in other expensive endeavors like sending thousands of troops to Angola and building hundreds of polyclinics around the island. The fact that the Cubans prioritized other projects over these pressing concerns for women suggests that the Cuban government either did not understand or did not care about the plight of Cuban women. Either way, the government was clearly not committed enough to women's liberation to prioritize it.

The Family Code

Because the government was not aware of the need to prioritize the collectivization of domestic tasks or did not care enough about this "women's" issue, the government offered a new solution to domestic burdens that went in a different direction. Specifically, rather than the state

¹²⁸ Fidel Castro, "The Revolution Within the Revolution," in *Women and the Cuban Revolution: Speeches and Documents by Fidel Castro, Vilma Espín, & Others* ed. Elizabeth Stone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981): 53.

absorbing all of women's traditional tasks, men would equally share the housework within each family. This solution was codified in the 1975 Family Code, which mandates equality between men and women in relationships. Whereas collectivization of household production brought the family into the public sphere, the Family Code brought the state, in the form of law, into the family and the private sphere.

Though the entire law covers divorce, legitimacy of children, education, and more, Article 24 through 28 are of particular interest. In these five articles, the Cuban government explains that husband and wife must equitably share all duties associated with family life: both spouses are obligated to "care for the family they have created...they must participate, to the extent of their capacity or possibilities, in the running of the home, and cooperate so that it will develop in the best possible way."¹²⁹ These clauses also explicitly connect sharing domestic duties to the opportunity to work outside the home; men and women are entitled to work outside the home, and both spouses "have the duty of helping each other and cooperating in order to make this possible."¹³⁰ In short, Articles 24 through 28 of the Family Code suggest that men and women should equally work inside and outside the home.

The Family Code is very difficult to enforce, however. Technically, spouses can divorce each other for failing to fulfill the guidelines of the Code. This is not very effective, of course, since any woman who divorces her husband for failing to help in the home will be left to manage the home by herself. Because the enforcement mechanism is weak, moreover, the lasting impact of the Family Code is not a sweeping change of family life, but rather the articulation of "a societal norm and has become a tool for education and change."¹³¹ The 1975 Code recognized

¹²⁹ Article 26, *The Family Code* in Elizabeth Stone, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 146.

¹³⁰ Article 28, *The Family Code* in Elizabeth Stone, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 146.

¹³¹ Debra Evenson, "What Difference Does a Revolution Make? Women in Socialist Cuba," *Law & Inequality* 4 (1986): 312.

equality within the home as the revolutionary paradigm, but it did not effectively impose that standard on Cuban men and women. Once again, just as the government provided too few laundry trucks to make the collectivization of laundry useable to the vast majority of Cuban women, in the Family Code the government publicly took a stand on gender equality as essential to and for the success of the Cuban revolution, but failed to enact it in any sort of meaningful commitment. Whether this is a case of egalitarian rhetoric misleading us away from a sexist reality, or whether it is a case of governmental incompetence, or whether it simply shows that Marxism as a system actively depends on women's second class status and the exploitation of their labor, the end result is the same.

The Persistence of the Double Day

Despite the advances of the Family Code and the attempts to collectivize women's traditional household production, evidence suggests that Cuban women are still responsible for household chores and childcare. Even working women are expected to perform their traditional roles, meaning that many women work a so-called "double day."

This has held true over the course of the revolution. A 1979 study found that various groups devoted significantly different amounts of time to housework each day: non-working women devoted over nine hours, working women devoted just under five hours, and men devoted less than hour.¹³² In other words, women in the 1970s were doing five to ten times as much housework as men. A 2002 study by the Oficina Nacional de Estadística (National Office of Statistics, ONE by its Spanish acronym) confirms that women are still spending more time

¹³² Nazarri, "The Women Question in Cuba," 256.

doing unpaid domestic labor.¹³³ Women in Old Havana spent 3.55 hours a day doing household chores, but men dedicated only 1.17 hours. In a rural area (Granma), women recorded 5.59 hours of domestic labor and men recorded 2.25 hours. Though this data shows that the number of hours of daily housework and the gap between women's and men's domestic labor have both decreased, it also reveals that women are still performing two to three times as much housework as men.

The fact that women still bear the majority of the domestic burden is a result of both traditional cultural norms and official policies. On the cultural side, women were simply assumed to take complete responsibility for the home – whether or not they were working. In Cuban culture, “old strictures prohibited men from doing the smallest domestic chore and taking active part in the care of their children.”¹³⁴ This norm was reinforced by revolutionary policies that gave women – and not men – certain caretaking privileges. This, of course, was contradictory with the Family Code: men were obligated by law to perform domestic duties, and yet, other laws allowed only women to do certain domestic tasks. For example, in 1975, the government decided only women were allowed to pick up sick children from day care. When FMC leadership brought attention to this discriminatory practice in the mid-1980s, some Cuban ministers and FMC delegates resisted allowing men to pick up children out of fear that men would use the excuse of a sick child to skip work and womanize. The policy did change, but day cares also started building infirmaries on-site to avoid either parent having to pick up a sick child.¹³⁵ The government only invested in effective socialization when the domestic tasks inconvenienced men, not women. In other words, rather than allow men to take on a primary or

¹³³ Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 33.

¹³⁴ Largaia and Dumoulin, “Women’s Equality and Cuban Revolution,” 351.

¹³⁵ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 134-135.

even equal role as child caretaker, institutions were changed: citizens and the government alike were hesitant to give up the traditional role of woman as a homemaker.

The Double Day and Workforce Integration

These failures of the Cuban government to adequately provide services that replace women's domestic labor — their failure to address the problem of women's household labor and the resulting fact that women still have primary responsibility for this labor — has negatively impacted women's workforce integration. Not only is it more difficult for women to *enter* the labor force, but, equally important, to *stay* in the paid workforce. From the 1960s until present, women have routinely cited their housework as a reason to leave or never enter paid production.

Early in the revolution, the high turnover rate of women in the workforce was a major problem. As Table 6.7 shows, many women entered the workforce, but a majority of them also dropped out. For example, from 1969-1974, there is a 200,000 women increase in the labor force. But it is estimated that 700,000 women had to be recruited to produce such growth. In other words, 500,000 women dropped out of the labor force in those five years, just as the Cuban government was beginning to aggressively support women's work.

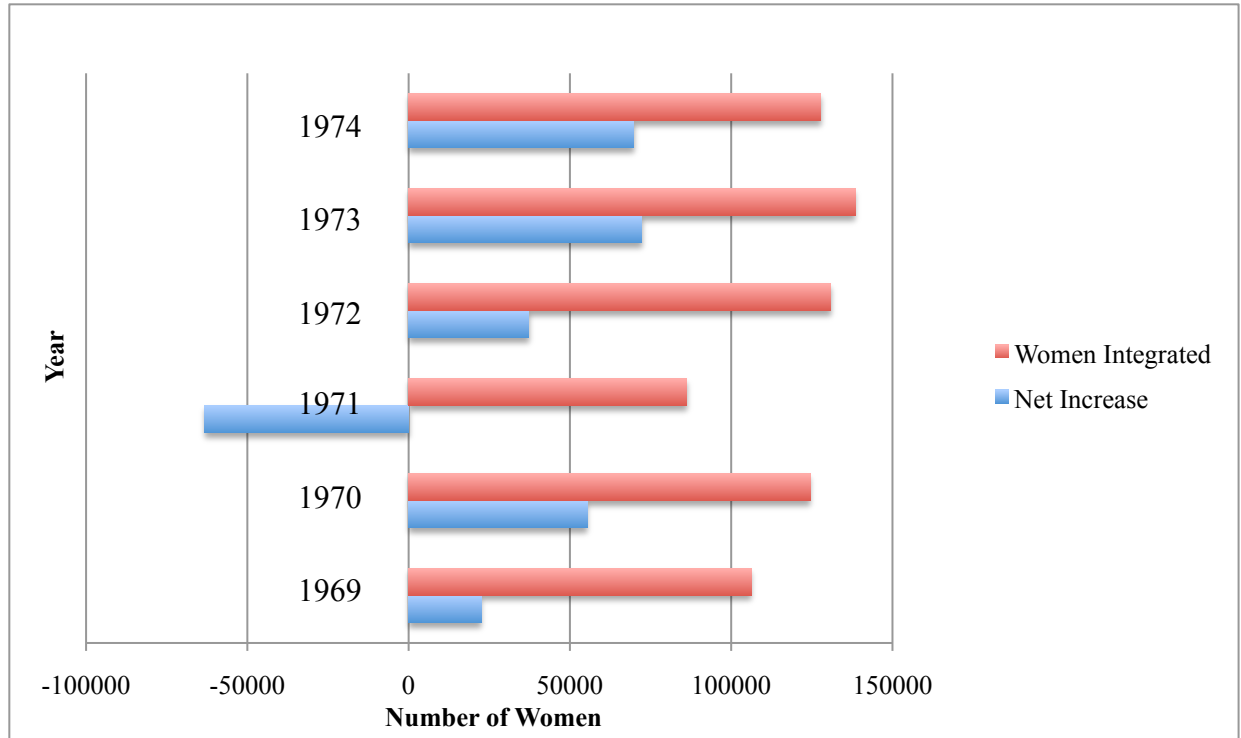
Table 6.7 – Women Entering and Leaving the Workforce, 1969-1974

Year	Women Integrated	Net Increase
1969	106258	22477
1970	124504	55310
1971	86188	-63174 ¹³⁶
1972	130843	37263
1973	138437	72279
1974	127694	69748
Total	713924	196903

¹³⁶ The following note accompanies this statistic in Margaret Randall's *Women in Cuba*: "This figure does not correspond exactly to 1971 because it includes dropouts that date back to 1967. In 1971, there was an updating of the records for all women who had dropped out of the work force; during this process, many administrators informed the National Bank of Cuba of definitive drop-outs not previously reported."

Source: Data from PCC, *Objective and Subjective Elements Which Prevent Full Participation of Women. Analysis of the Present Problems of Working Women*, 1975. Reproduced in Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 140.

Graph 6.7 – Women Entering and Leaving the Workforce, 1969-1974



Source: Data from PCC, *Objective and Subjective Elements Which Prevent Full Participation of Women. Analysis of the Present Problems of Working Women*, 1975. Reproduced in Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 140.

When the FMC performed a survey on this incredibly high turnover, the problem was clear: more than anything, women were dropping out of the workforce because of their double day. Two of the most commonly cited reasons for leaving paid production were “inability to cope with domestic and family chores [and] lack of effective services to lighten this domestic load.”¹³⁷ Other problems included lack of consumer goods in Cuba, managers who did not understand women’s needs, unsatisfactory work conditions, and lack of understanding of women’s role in society.

¹³⁷ Nicola Murray, “Socialism and Feminism: Women in the Cuba Revolution, Part 2,” *Feminist Review* 3 (1979): 100.

Three decades later, women were still citing their domestic burden as a reason not to enter the workforce. Data in Table 6.8 about Cuba’s not economically active population (NEAP) from 2002 shows that 43.5 percent of all non-workers cited housework as their reason for not entering paid production – 42.3 percent of which was constituted by women, compared to only 1.3 percent by men. In other words, women were over 97 percent of those who did not work due to “housekeeping.” Additionally, the data shows that the majority of non-working women – 64.8 percent – perform domestic duties instead of working. In short, this recent study shows that women still manage the home instead of entering the labor force.

Table 6.8 – Distribution of the Not Economically Active Population by Category and Sex

	Men	Women
Retired or Pensioned	13.5%	10.2%
Receives external economic support	0.8%	0.3%
Housekeeping	1.3%	42.3%
Students	7.5%	8.0%
Disabled or unable to work	1.5%	0.9%
No activity	6.0%	2.2%
Hospitalized	0.4%	0.3%
Other situation	3.8%	1.2%
Total Not Economically Active Population	34.7%	65.3%

Source: Data from Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 32.

The Effects of Material Burdens on Women in Cuban Communism

As traditional Marxist and Marxist feminist theory prescribes, the Cuban government has made an impressive effort to socialize women’s traditional domestic burdens. Through innovative programs, the revolution has provided upwards of 100,000 women with low-cost day care services every year since 1990. A host of programs – from laundry services to boarding schools and cafeteria – were initiated by the government with the idealistic intent to free women

of their traditional housework and allowed them to enter paid production. To the same end, the government passed the extremely progressive Family Code, which has somewhat contributed to changing perceptions about men's and women's roles in the home.

But these measures are gravely inadequate. As I have shown, not only did the government not commit sufficient resources to make a number of these services practically available to large numbers of Cuban women, but it failed to enforce key provisions of the Family Code. Where it did provide resources, such as infirmaries in child care centers, it did so in a way that seemed to communicate a greater concern for men's economic labor than for women's. As a result, even after a half-century of collectivization efforts, women do more much domestic work than men, which restricts their ability to enter and remain in the labor force.

The limitations of Cuba's attempt to reduce women's domestic chores center on a few key failures. First of all, like many other "women's issues," socializing domestic labor has not been prioritized by the revolution. Although the revolutionary leaders have repeatedly declared their dedication to collectivization, the government's investment of resources has not matched this rhetoric. The effort to provide collectivized services seemed at best half-hearted and at worst just lip service to women's equality. The process of converting private housework into public labor is costly and complex, and as the shortage of day care centers and other services explained above reveals, the revolution has often chosen to devote Cuba's limited resources to other projects.¹³⁸ As Lois Smith and Alfred Padula note, "year after year the revolution's goal for the provision of services to working women went unmet while other initiatives of greater interest to male elites, such as foreign military adventures, took priority."¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Nazarrri, "The Woman Question in Cuba," 257.

¹³⁹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 132.

As Fidel Castro said nearly five decades ago, collectivization of domestic labor to liberate women cannot occur until there is “the necessary material base” and “the necessary social development.”¹⁴⁰ Focusing on the case of day cares, he continued, “At this stage of scarcity of cement, machinery, and construction equipment... [day care centers] cannot be perfect. These problems will have to be solved in many areas of the country, little by little... a whole series of economic steps must be taken.”¹⁴¹ In other words, Fidel Castro publically announced that services for working women would have to be relegated to a lower place on Cuba’s list of goals while the country developed economically. This type of excuse has allowed revolution leadership to indefinitely defer investment in the collectivization of domestic tasks, and as the data above shows, this has hindered women’s ability to work outside the home.

Of course, part of the problem is that Cuba does face economic scarcity. Cuba exists in a context of capitalist countries hostile to it, the United States trade embargo being the most significant. The resulting paucity of material goods on the island has undoubtedly contributed to the postponement of the collectivization of domestic tasks until some abstract future. But not all of this can be chalked up to hostile capitalist nations, for it is clear that the Cuban government has invested well in other revolutionary tasks such as helping in other communist revolutions around the world. Cuba has been dedicated to internationalism and sends thousands of volunteers and troops around the world, and yet, it is impossible to help women at home. This indicates that the revolution does not quite understand or care about the unjust workload shouldered by women.

Not adequately addressing women’s domestic burden has allowed patriarchal values regarding women in the home persist in Cuba. Because families cannot rely on the government’s

¹⁴⁰ Castro, “The Revolution Within The Revolution,” 52.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

socialized services, the status quo has not changed, and women are obliged to care for their homes and families. Though the Cuban government could argue that the 1975 Family Code directly attacked this problem, the law's impact was severely limited by the ineffective enforcement mechanism. Even for the period after the Family Code was enacted, the data presented above are conclusive: women still spend more time doing domestic tasks, and this responsibility restricts their workforce participation rate.

The simple fact that women devote more time to housework reflects that the patriarchal norm regarding women's primary responsibility for the home has not yet receded. Even women who entered the workforce, which fulfills the main requirement in the Marxist model for equality, are still doing more household tasks than men, still working a double day. This sexual division of labor in the home implies that women occupy a lower place on the gender hierarchy: not only do they still serve men in the home, but also those who do not work are dependent on men's wages.

Moreover, non-economically active women are devalued in society for only performing these domestic duties. Because Marxist theory and Cuban leadership put so much emphasis on workers in paid production, those who stay outside of industry are seen as not contributing. Discussing women's work in the house before the revolution, Castro simply proclaimed, "[women] did not have a productive place in society."¹⁴² Thus, because Cuban leaders "could not accept that domestic work was a critical aspect of national production," housewives and their work were trivialized.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ibid., 50.

¹⁴³ Smith and Alfred, *Sex and Revolution*, 139.

The Stratification of the Cuban Workforce

Thus the situation of Cuban women is quite ambiguous. Despite insufficient support services, hundreds of thousands of Cuban women have entered the labor force since 1959; but significant numbers have been left out, and this is due to large part because of the government's inadequate efforts to bring them in. In evaluating how women's equality relates to women's work in Cuba, however, it is necessary to discuss not only whether women have entered the workforce and how the government has supported them, but also what positions women fill once integrated into paid production. Do they all work in certain feminized industries? Are women managers and directors, or do they constitute the lowest ranks in the labor force? Data on the Cuban workforce shows mixed answers to these questions; progress has been made toward creating a more egalitarian, fairly distributed workforce, however, women are still concentrated in certain industries and somewhat underrepresented in leadership positions. This stratification of the labor force reveals that – at least to some extent – patriarchal norms about women's capabilities in production are still at work in communist Cuba.

Horizontal Stratification of the Cuban Workforce

For many years, women in Cuba were legally restricted from entering specific fields. The first laws of this sort were Resolution 47 and Resolution 48, which went into effect in the late 1960s. Resolution 47 stipulated 437 jobs reserved only for women and Resolution 48 stipulated 498 jobs reserved only for men.¹⁴⁴ The jobs for men only included underwater work, physical work, work at heights (scaffolding), work in certain temperatures, and much more.¹⁴⁵ The two laws worked in tandem, excluding each gender and in turn singling out the other. While

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

historically such exclusionary measures have tended to discriminate against women—for example, excluding them from higher paying jobs, while “excluding” men from lower status and lower paying jobs—in Cuba it is interesting to note that these laws detrimentally affected men as much as they affected women. Many men – 25,000 of them – were forced to leave the jobs that Resolution 47 deemed “feminine.”¹⁴⁶

However, women were seen as the particular and appropriate targets of such legislation. For instance, the 1976 Cuban constitution reaffirmed these restrictions by decreeing the government had the right and duty to assure that women worked in “appropriate” areas. Article 43 reads:

Women enjoy the same economic, political, social, and family rights as men. In order to guarantee these rights and especially women’s incorporation into the labor force, *the state will see to it that women receive positions compatible with their physical constitution* [emphasis mine].¹⁴⁷

The article seems contradictory – women have equal rights with men, but the state needs to make sure that women work in specific jobs. But more significant is the language of Article 43, which seems to suggest that these restrictions of women’s professions were founded upon conceptions about women’s biology. Most commonly, the restrictions dealt with the protection of women’s reproductive organs; “by and large, the classification is based on possible dangers inherent in a given job for future childbearing.”¹⁴⁸ This is problematic because it equates women and mothers

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴⁷ Reproduced in Randall, *Women in Cuba: 20 Years Later*, 45.

¹⁴⁸ Bengelsdorf, “On the problem of studying women in Cuba,” 44.

– “the possibility that a woman may choose not become a mother remains alien to Cubans.”¹⁴⁹

Moreover, it suggests that women’s basic function in society is primarily to reproduce; although women can and should work, this work should not disturb women’s primary function of childbearing.

Over the course of the revolution, the lists of jobs forbidden for women was slowly shortened through legal reform. For example, in the 1970s Resolutions 51 and 40, which replaced Resolution 47 and 48, forbid women from entering only about 300 careers. Additionally, women working in “men’s work” were not required to leave their jobs,¹⁵⁰ and women could obtain a doctor’s permission to work in a position that was on the forbidden list.¹⁵¹ According to Carollee Bengelsdorf, by 1985 the number of prohibited jobs for women had “been whittled down to about twenty-five positions.”¹⁵² When the constitution was amended for the first time in 1992, the phrase about appropriate work was completely removed. Today, there are no legal gender restrictions preventing women from working in traditionally masculine professions.¹⁵³ But horizontal segmentation of the workforce remains.

Although legal job discrimination has slowly disappeared in Cuba, working women in Cuba tend to be crowded into typical “feminine” careers. This segregated occupational structure is a problem that the revolutionary government inherited from the previous regime; however, fifty-four years of revolution have had little effect. In Lourdes Casal’s words, “the occupational distribution of women in the labor force still leaves much to be desired.”¹⁵⁴ In general, women still tend to work in health, education, social work, services, and light industry. With the

¹⁴⁹ Casal, “Revolution and Conciencia,” 198.

¹⁵⁰ Bengelsdorf, “On the problem on studying women in Cuba,” 44.

¹⁵¹ Evenson, “Women’s Equality in Cuba,” 319.

¹⁵² Bengelsdorf, “On the problem on studying women in Cuba,” 44.

¹⁵³ OXFAM, *50 Years Later*, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Casal, “Revolution and Conciencia,” 191.

exception of light industry, “these sectors represent an extension of the domestic space and of the reproductive and care-giving roles that are traditionally assigned to women.”¹⁵⁵

Data presented in Table 6.9 and Graph 6.9 from Cuba’s National Office of Statistics confirms that the occupational distribution of Cuba’s workforce by gender has not changed much since the revolution. In terms of Cuba’s broad productive categories – industry, agriculture, and services – women are, according to 2002 data, overrepresented in services, slightly underrepresented in industry, and very underrepresented in agriculture. Significantly, this recent data mirrors the prerevolutionary results – women are distributed among these three sectors in the same way that they were before the revolution. As Graph 6.9 elucidates, the upward trend in each category (colored lines) parallels the increase in women as a percent of total or combined workforce (black bolded line). In other words, the distribution of women among these three sectors has not changed substantially over the last half-century.

Table 6.9 – Women as a percent of total workers in economic sector¹⁵⁶

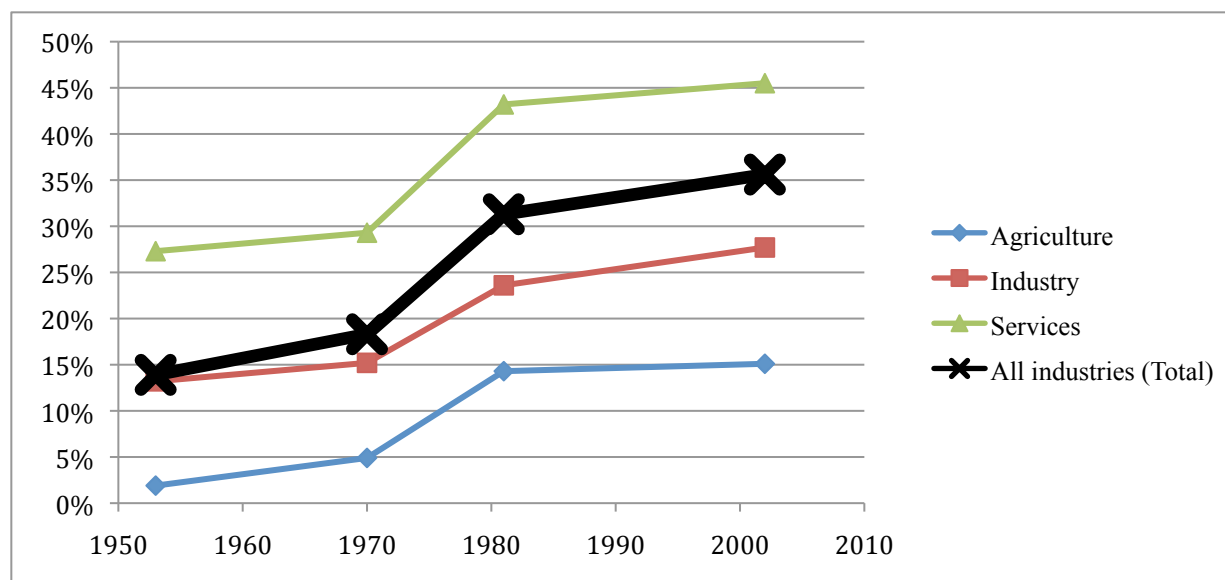
	1953	1970	1981	2002
Agriculture	1.9%	4.9%	14.3%	15.1%
Industry	13.2%	15.2%	23.6%	27.7%
Services	27.3%	29.3%	43.2%	45.5%
All industries (Total)	13.9%	18.3%	31.3%	35.6%

Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 27.

Table 6.9 – Women as a percent of total workers in economic sector

¹⁵⁵ Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 35.

¹⁵⁶ The numbers (percentages) are the percentage of workers in that field who are women. For example, the 1.9% is a result of the fact that there were 721,000 agriculture workers in 1953, and 13,700 of those workers were women.



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 27.

The data presented in Table 6.10 and Graph 6.10 on more specific types of economic activities confirms that women have not succeeded in breaking down gender barriers and entering “masculine professions.” For example, in 2008, women were nearly 40 percent of the labor force, but they constituted less than 20 percent of positions in the “male” fields of agriculture, hunting, forestry, and fishing; mining; and construction. Instead, women remain overrepresented in all types of services – from hotel to banks to social work. Though longitudinal data is not available, the information in Table 6.10 shows that women’s representation in each field has held relatively constant since 2000. The only exception is financial services, professional services, and insurance, where women have increased their representation by almost 8 percent between 2003 and 2008.

Table 6.10 – Women as a percent of total workers in each economic activity¹⁵⁷

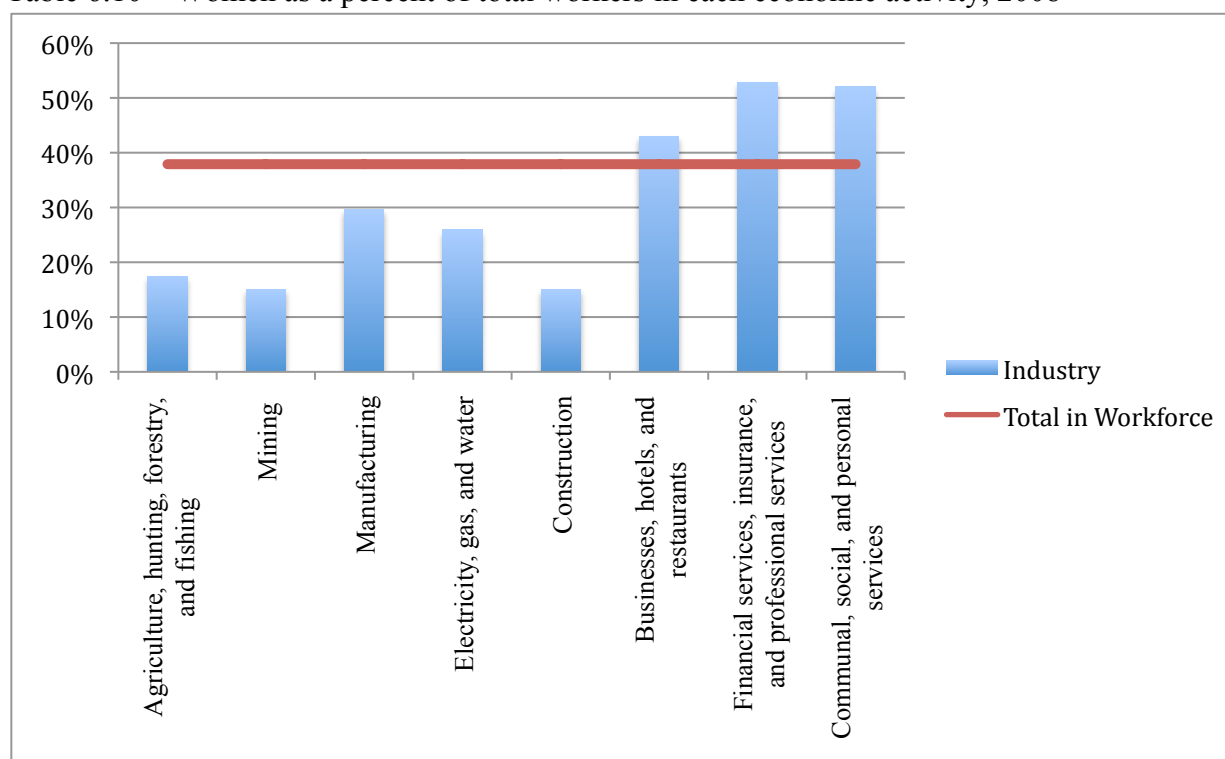
	2000	2003	2008
Agriculture, hunting, forestry, and fishing	18.6%	15.1%	17.4%
Mining	16.1%	17.3%	15.0%

¹⁵⁷ Again, these numbers are the percentage of workers in a certain field who are women. In other words, each number represents the amount that each industry’s workforce is female.

Manufacturing	32.9%	32.6%	29.6%
Electricity, gas, and water	24.9%	26.0%	25.9%
Construction	17.2%	15.7%	15.0%
Businesses, hotels, and restaurants	45.4%	42.1%	43.0%
Financial services, insurance, and professional services	44.1%	45.1%	52.9%
Communal, social, and personal services	52.3%	50.4%	52.0%
All economic activities (total)	35.6%	35.4%	37.9%

Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 28.

Table 6.10 – Women as a percent of total workers in each economic activity, 2008¹⁵⁸



Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 28.

Table 6.11 – Doctors by Sex

	1953	1980	1990	2000	2009
Total Doctors	6201	15247	38690	65997	74552
Male Doctors	5798	9753	19845	31535	31305
Female Doctors	403	5494	18845	34462	43247
Women as a percent of total	6.5%	36.0%	48.7%	52.2%	58.0%

¹⁵⁸ Again, these numbers are the percentage of workers in a certain field who are women. In other words, each number represents the amount that each industry's workforce is female.

Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 58.

Although the majority of Cuban women stayed in “feminine” fields after the revolution, some women have moved into “masculine” work. The expansion of women beyond their traditional employment is most pronounced in science, research, medicine, and technical areas. As of 2007, women constituted 64.6 percent of the technical and professional workforce and more than half of the country’s scientific researchers.¹⁵⁹ For instance, women have made significant inroads in the medical profession. As Table 6.11 indicates, women were only 6.5% of doctors in prerevolutionary Cuba, but they now constitute 58% of doctors on the island. This noteworthy increase is especially impressive given the growth of the medical profession itself: the number of doctors in Cuba (male and female) in 2008 was more than 12 times than in 1953, which is 1100% growth over 55 years. In order to achieve the kinds of gains they have made in a growing industry, women have entered the medical profession at very high rate: there are now more than 1000 times as many female doctors than there were in 1953. In every time block represented above, more women have entered the field than men. Medicine has been not devalued as a result of its feminization: “medicine continued to be the most prestigious career in Cuban society.”¹⁶⁰ However, despite advances in these fields, these doctors represent a very small proportion of Cuba’s female workforce. This is an elite group of successful women, but, as explained above, the majority of working women are still concentrated in typical feminine, undervalued professions. As such, this data on women’s success in medicine should not be misinterpreted as evidence that all women have been very successful in breaking out of gender norms in the Cuban workforce.

¹⁵⁹ Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 35.

¹⁶⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 58.

Vertical Stratification of the Cuban Workforce

Despite the fact that in medicine and science some women have achieved elite status, more significant is women's absence from management positions within the workforce. In Cuban labor statistics, the workforce is divided into five levels, with "dirigente" (manager) as the highest level. According to a 2008 report by the National Office of Statistics (ONE), managers are:

the workers who plan, organize, coordinate and direct under their supervision...the activities of organizations, companies associations, departments, sections, for example: ministers, presidents, vice-presidents, directors, department chiefs, managers, administrators, and others [translation mine].¹⁶¹

In other words, they are workers in management positions who direct others. And the data shows that they are not women. In simple terms, the women of Cuba are still hitting a glass ceiling.

As Table 6.12 indicates, women have not held management positions at a rate proportional to their workforce integration. This problem was significantly worse earlier in the revolution: for example, in 1980, women already constituted 27.2 percent of the workforce, and yet they only held 13.4 percent of management positions. Since 2000, women in management has only lagged behind their participation rate by about 5 percent. The most recent data shows women are 32.5 percent of "dirigentes" and 38.1 percent of all workers. Even with this improvement, women are underrepresented in management positions.

Table 6.12 – Women in management positions and total workforce, 1970-2009

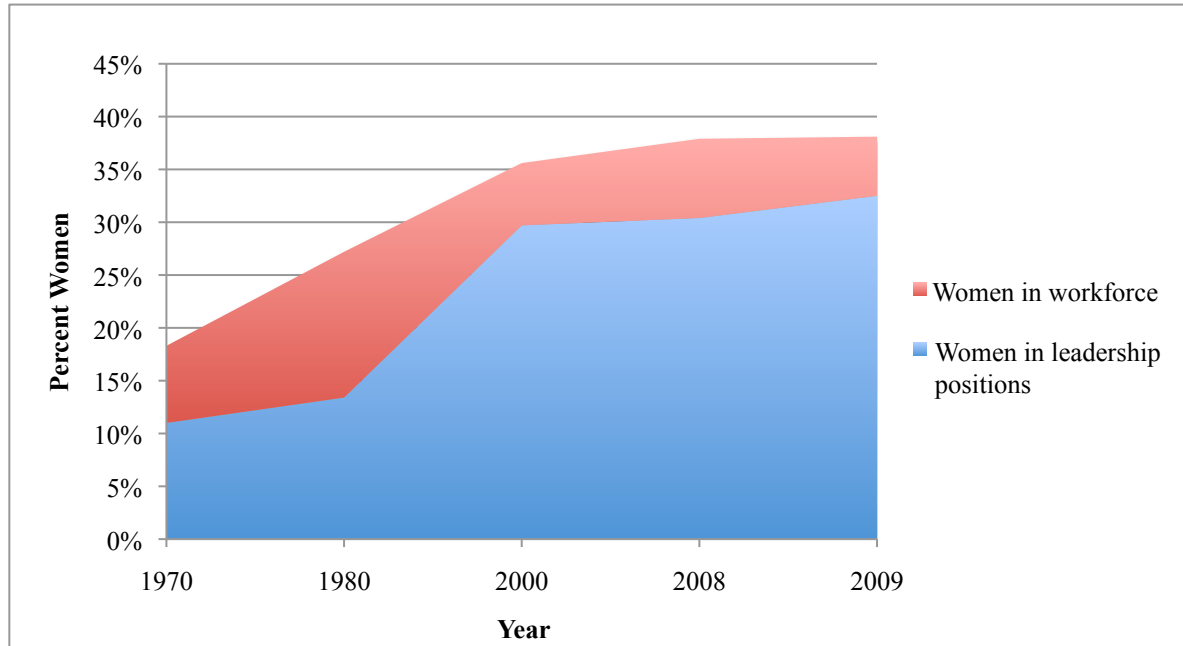
	1970	1980	2000	2008	2009
Percent of leaders who are women	11.0%	13.4%	29.7%	30.4%	32.5%

¹⁶¹ ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 23.

Percent of total workforce that is female	18.3%	27.2%	35.6%	37.9%	38.1%
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Sources: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 29 and ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 73.

Graph 6.12 – Women in leadership positions and total workforce, 1970-2009



Sources: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 29 and ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 73.

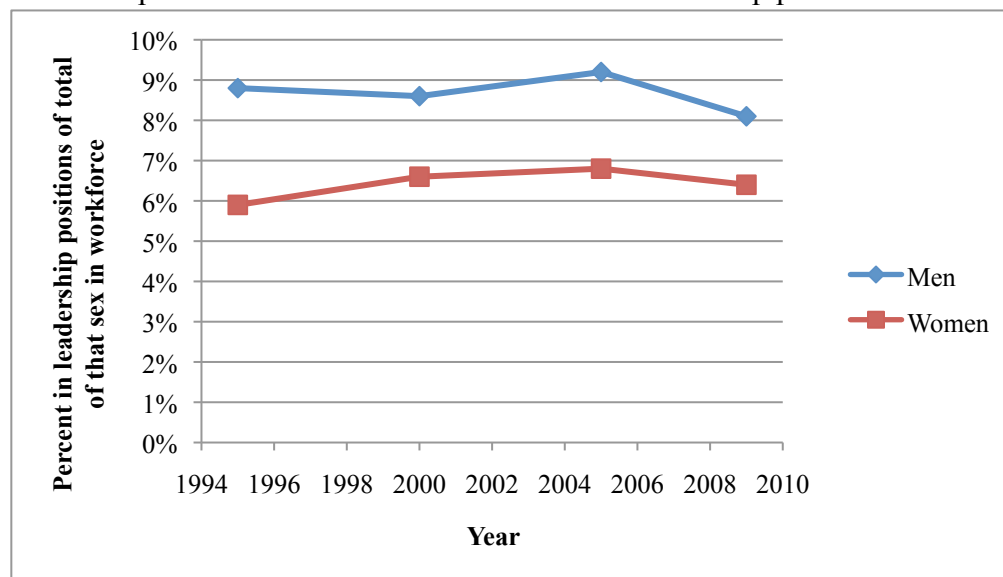
Table 6.13 and Graph 6.13 show the lack of women currently holding management positions is not just a function of the fact that there are and always have been more men than women in the workforce: a larger percentage of men than women achieve management positions. Men are more likely to get promoted than women are. Over the last two decades, the percentage of men and women who have leadership positions in the workplace has held relatively constant: about 8.5 percent of men and 6.5 percent of women. Two percent more men than women reach management roles. Thus, the reason behind the remaining gender gap in management is simple: there are more men in the workforce, and a larger percentage of those men are getting promoted to management.

6.13 – Proportion of men and women workers in management positions

	1995	2000	2005	2009
Men in leadership positions	8.8%	8.6%	9.2%	8.1%
Women in leadership positions	5.9%	6.6%	6.8%	6.4%

Source: Compiled from ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 72.

6.13 – Proportion of men and women workers in leadership positions



Source: Compiled from ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 72.

Significantly, various studies have traced this disparity in men's and women's management to women's double burdens. In simple terms, because women are expected to take care of the home and family, they do not have the time or energy to "go the extra mile" at work and prove themselves for management roles. Because their husbands are not sharing equally in household responsibilities, many women cannot stay late, work on weekends, or travel. In a study performed by the Cuban labor union in the mid-1970s, 85.7 percent of 5168 workers (male and female) believed that domestic obligations were a significant obstacle to women's participation in management roles.¹⁶² A 2008 Oxfam study confirmed these findings, noting that flexibility for long days and travel were "among the factor that create significant obstacle for

¹⁶² Bengelsdorf and Hageman, "Emerging from underdevelopment," 371.

women who aspire to management positions.”¹⁶³ Moreover, many women “self-limit,” or do not *seek* leadership roles, because they are resistant to adding to their double responsibilities.¹⁶⁴

However, rather than viewing this as a simple “preference” or “choice” that women make, we need to see this as a response to patriarchal values that put a variety of direct and indirect pressures on women that exclude them from management positions. Limited access to leadership positions clearly demonstrates the negative effects of the double burden on women’s integration into the workforce.

Analysis of Workforce Segregation by Sex

As the data presented above clearly show, the Cuban workforce is segregated by sex. To a large extent, women are held in traditionally “feminine” and non-leadership positions. Even as the revolution progressed and more women entered the workforce, satisfying the Marxist preconditions for their equality, women are concentrated in certain jobs that resemble domestic chores and promoted to management positions at lower rates than men. This indicates that something else systematically holding women back. I have suggested that this “something else” is patriarchal values. These norms about women’s nature and abilities permeate Cuban society, regulating what positions women can and cannot – or at least, should and should not – occupy.

Moreover, for the first half of the revolution at least, the state played an active role in perpetuating these values — in apparent direct contradiction to Engels’s argument that Marxism would directly lead to the liberation of women. Even as the leadership made rhetorical “commitments” to women’s equality, the government passed laws that seemed to support the

¹⁶³ Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 37.

¹⁶⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 115.

idea that men and women should be treated differently because of their sex. In other words, the lists of jobs for men and women not only lent official credence to the idea that women are “innately” better at certain tasks.

All in all, the revolution’s integration of women into the workforce has been disappointing. In Marxist feminist theory, women are supposed to be liberated simply by means of entering the workforce. But in Cuba, the government has not even prioritized women’s participation in the workforce. Indeed, revolutionary leadership has made it difficult for women by failing to provide effective collectivization of domestic chores. Following patriarchal patterns, women continue to bear the majority of domestic tasks, which keeps them out of the workforce and out of management positions. Moreover, when women manage to enter the workforce – despite the government’s lack of support – they are concentrated in feminized industries, further reflecting the strength of the patriarchal norms that restrict their advancement.

Section 7 - Political Participation

In Cuba and around the world, women's political participation is a key indicator of women's equality. Women's access to political institutions determines how much women can shape the country they live in; without power in government, women necessarily live in a society whose present and future are defined only by men. Political participation is especially important in Marxism, which purports that women's liberation can only come about through integration into the larger revolutionary processes. If women are absent from revolutionary leadership, then they are not defining the very structures that are supposed to liberate them. Moreover, they are unable to assure that their unique concerns will be addressed in the context of the broader transition to communism.

At first glance, the situation of women in Cuban government seems very promising. In 2008, Cuba's National Assembly (parliament) had 43.2 percent women, which was the third highest percentage in the world.¹⁶⁵ However, a closer look at the political situation within the country reveals that this statistic is misleading; the National Assembly holds almost no power. This parliament is mainly a figurehead group, and for the majority of the year, it allows a small, elite group to act on its behalf. In the true loci of political power in Cuba – local level government, the party, and elite decision-making groups – women are underrepresented. This indicates that those who select political leaders in Cuba, namely the voting citizens and political elites, still hold patriarchal views that associate leadership with “masculine” qualities. But it is more than just evidence that there are still sexist values in Cuba after fifty-four years of revolution. The fact that women do not hold substantial political power in Cuba means that Cuba

¹⁶⁵ Goetz, Anne Marie, “Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009 – Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability,” (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2009): 24.

is still patriarchal in the most basic sense of the word: Cuban men dominate the nation's power hierarchies.

Before the People's Power

In order to evaluate how women fare in Cuba's current governmental system, it is necessary to first review women's power in the nation's earlier political systems. Before the revolution, women had very limited access to political process. Although they gained the vote in 1934, women were unable to translate this electoral power into leadership positions – women never constituted more than 5 percent of representatives in either house of congress.¹⁶⁶ The small contingency of women in congress was obviously restricted by its size, but female representatives were able to help pass several progressive laws, including a maternity law that mandated 12 weeks maternity (1934) and a new constitution with equal rights provisions (1940).

Cuba's prerevolutionary government structure and laws were pushed aside when Fidel Castro ousted Fulgencio Batista in 1959. For the first decade and a half of the revolution, leaders "moved into an institutional vacuum"¹⁶⁷ and operated in an extra-legal space. Fidel Castro explained, "There wasn't any classical legislative power, no judicial power or anything else left, because all that disappeared on January 1 [1959], with the collapse of the Batista regime. A de facto revolution government was established, and the laws were enacted by decree."¹⁶⁸ It is not clear exactly who was in charge, and as a result, it is impossible to discern what the gender composition of the decision-making groups was. Though we can assume, from the data presented on work, that women were not heavily involved. It is clear, however, that the masses had no

¹⁶⁶ Casal, "Revolution and Conciencia"

¹⁶⁷ Peter Roman, *People's Power: Cuba's Experiment with Representative Government*. Latin American Perspectives Series (Boulder, Westview Press, 1999): 63.

¹⁶⁸ Roman, *People's Power*, 64.

official mechanism for influencing policy decisions; there was no democratic system, and leaders made decisions based on what they deemed best.

This centralized extra-legal system produced mixed results for women. On the one hand, Castro and his comrades appeared to have progressive views on women's issues, and "the concentration of power at the top made possible the rapid implementation of a comprehensive program of sexual equality regardless of public opinion."¹⁶⁹ The state could impose women's rights from above, even if the people were resistant. On the other hand, this political system posed several critical problems. Because there was no women's input, the leaders – however progressive they appeared to be on the issue of women's rights – could push aside women's concerns at their discretion. As discussed in the work section, they did this when there were "bigger problems" like male unemployment at hand. In addition, the establishment of gender policies from above "impeded women's awareness of their own oppression."¹⁷⁰ Ironically, women had no political agency in the struggle for their own equality. And perhaps most saliently, this system meant that women's lives were controlled by a few men.

Women in the People's Power Assemblies and the Cuban Communist Party

In 1974, the Cuban revolutionary leaders initiated a new political structure. In this new system, two separate bodies hold political power: the state and the Cuban Communist Party (PCC by its Spanish acronym). The structures of these two institutions have allowed for more democracy, but the new system has not solved the problem of patriarchal values and male dominance in the political system.

¹⁶⁹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 182.

¹⁷⁰ Murray, "Socialism and Feminism, Part 2," 104.

Background – State and Party Structures, 1974-Present

As I will explain below, in the new political system, women have achieved significantly different levels of representation at the different levels of government. At first glance, there seems to be no obvious pattern to women's varying success. Why would women be highly represented in the parliament but underrepresented in local assemblies? How could women have party membership that is lower than their participation in provincial assemblies? The answers to these questions lie in the organization of the government, which concentrates power in unexpected places, and the procedures of the different bodies of the government, which either assist or disadvantage women's participation. Because the nuances of the structure of the government is so critical to interpreting the distribution of women in Cuban politics,

In revolutionary Cuba, the state and the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) share political leadership. Rather than being one in the same, as is common in communist countries, the PCC and the state have a symbiotic relationship; they work together and many important individuals hold leadership positions in both party and state, but they are distinct and play different roles in the political system. While the state administers the nation and focuses on short-term goals, the party more broadly guides the nation toward Marxist Leninism in the long-term.

On the state side, power is organized into three levels of "People's Power" assemblies: municipal, provincial, and national. Each of these representative assemblies has different duties and electoral procedures, which has a significant impact on their gender compositions. Interestingly, the delegates at all three levels are not paid for their service to the country; the delegate responsibilities are supposed to be part-time volunteer work to be assumed on top of normal salaried work.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ As these institutions have evolved, it has been necessary to convert a few individuals into full-time staff. However, this is neither the norm nor the ideal.

At the municipal level, the People's Power assembly is very community-oriented. These institutions do not hold any legislative power, but rather execute national policies and address any issues that arise in the town, from the local economic budget to potholes. This work is understood to be "time-consuming and demanding,"¹⁷² especially in light of the fact that it is unpaid. Reflecting the community-oriented character of the municipal assemblies, delegates represent a small geographic area, usually "a few city blocks,"¹⁷³ and are elected through direct democracy without the influence of the party. Neighbors come together in small groups and nominate candidates, and then the larger community then votes in secret, competitive elections to select one of the nominees to fill the delegate seat. Because of this system, the masses are intimately involved in choosing their representative and "candidates are primarily chosen based on the reputation and public profile they enjoy in the neighborhood"¹⁷⁴

The provincial assemblies are charged with "direct[ing] the state economic enterprises and social and service entities,"¹⁷⁵ monitoring the work of the local assemblies, and providing a link between the local and national levels of government. They do not have legislative power. In contrast to the direct democracy of the local elections, the government essentially chooses the delegates for the provincial and national assemblies. For the first 15 or so years of this political system, the provincial and national delegates were selected through indirect democracy: the municipal delegates elected the higher delegates from their ranks. In 1992, a major constitutional reform changed this process; since then, the people have directly voted on the candidates for the provincial and national assemblies, but the elections are non-competitive mediated through the government. In this process, the National Candidate Commission (or CNC) selects one candidate

¹⁷² Ilja Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba: Gender Equality in Political Decision-Making," *Politics and Gender* 1, no. 2 (2005): 245.

¹⁷³ Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba," 245.

¹⁷⁴ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 42.

¹⁷⁵ Roman, *People's Power*, 82.

for each possible seat in parliament. The voters only have one choice – vote or abstain.¹⁷⁶ In other words, there is no competition for those seats: “voters are not choosing between competing candidates; instead, they vote for one or more candidates on the slate selected by the candidate commissions.”¹⁷⁷

Finally, the delegates of the National Assembly, who are elected by the same non-competitive system as the provincial delegates, are responsible for passing laws, reviewing the national budget, and monitoring the activities of the ministries. Although the National Assembly is the parliament highest organ of power in the Cuban system and has supreme legislative authority, it is largely a rubberstamp institution. The representatives only convene twice a year for days, and when the National Assembly is not in session, a different body, the Council of State, assumes all its responsibilities including making laws. When the parliament does meet, it can repeal the decrees made in the interim by the Council of State, however, the brevity of the sessions means there is “insufficient time for thorough debate and critical contribution on the part of the deputies.”¹⁷⁸ In short, the National Assembly has de jure power to create legislation, but the Council of State has de facto control of all policies created by the Cuban government.

The Council of State, the true seat of political power within the Cuban state structure, is composed of thirty-one members. These individuals are delegates of the National Assembly, “ministers and the heads of the mass organizations, as well as representatives from other important state institutions.”¹⁷⁹ To get a spot in this elite group, candidates must be selected by the National Candidate Commission (CNC) and then confirmed by the parliament.

¹⁷⁶ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 38.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷⁸ Roman, *People's Power*, 83.

¹⁷⁹ Luciak, “Party and State in Cuba,” 258.

However, even though the Council of State exercises de facto legislative authority, it still does not hold all the political power in revolutionary Cuba. As indicated above, the state must share the leadership with the PCC.

The PCC has a very hierarchal structure. The lowest level of the party, the base, is the composed of PCC members. Not all Cuban citizens are members of the party; instead, membership is an honor reserved for the vanguard of society. Individuals must be nominated by their peers to become members, and because the PCC is supposed to represent the working class, this nomination usually takes place in work centers. At the top of the PCC pyramid, there are two decision-making bodies: the Central Committee and the Politburo (Political Bureau). This is where critical decisions about the long-term direction of the revolution are made; in these structures, political elites determine the goals of Cuban communism.

Women's Political Participation in the State and Party

Women in Cuba have achieved varying levels of participation in the political structures described above. At first glance, one statistic stands out – Cuba has one of the highest proportions of women in its national parliament in the world. This makes the situation seem promising, as if the problem of women in government were solved in Cuba. However, a more thorough analysis of the levels of participation in each structure reveals a completely different reality. Women are notably absent from grassroots groups and elite decision-making bodies, which, as explained above, are the true seats of power in revolutionary Cuba. In other words, women are still left out of the political system.

For a casual observer, Cuba's high proportion of women in parliament leads to the belief that Cuba has resolved the gender disparity in high-level politics. Indeed, the data seem

compelling: as of 2012, Cuba had 45 percent women in the National Assembly, earning it a third place ranking for proportion of women in parliament around the world. As Table 7.1 indicates, it was surpassed by only Rwanda and Andorra, and it's greatest adversary and critic, the United States, was far behind in 95th position. Moreover, the data shows that Cuba is trending towards greater and greater equality in the parliament. As Table 7.3 shows, the percent of women in the National Assembly has been rapidly growing since 1993. In the early 1990s, only 22.8 percent of delegates were female, but just ten years later, this number had risen to 36.0 percent. Growth continued over the last decade, and women are now 45 percent of the parliament. As Table 7.2 indicates, this progress has been reflected in Cuba's worldwide ranking for women in parliament, which has been increasing monotonically since 1985.

Table 7.1 – Proportion of seats held by women in the national parliaments (%), 2012¹⁸⁰

Rank	Country name	2012
1	Rwanda	56
2	Andorra	50
3	Cuba	45
4	Sweden	45
5	Seychelles	44
6	Senegal	43
7	Finland	43
8	South Africa	42
9	Nicaragua	40
10	Iceland	40
95	United States	17

Source: Data from The World Bank, "Proportion of seats held by women in the national parliaments (%). Last modified 2012.

http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?order=wbapi_data_value_2012+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc

Table 7.2 – Cuba's world ranking for women in parliament

Year	Rank
1945	12
1985	13
1995	12
2000	12
2005	7
2009	4

Source: ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas: Estadísticas y Realidades*, 82.

¹⁸⁰ Unicameral or lower house

Table 7.3 – Women’s Participation in People’s Power National Assembly, 1976-2008

Elections	1976	1981	1986	1992-1993	1997-1998	2002-2003	2007-2008
Percent women	21.8%	22.7%	34.3%	22.8%	27.6%	36.0%	43.3%
Number women	105	113	175	134	166	219	266

Source: Data compiled from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 81; ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 115; Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 65.¹⁸¹

However, women’s representation in the National Assembly is not an accurate indicator of women’s success in Cuba’s politics. As explained above, the parliament is basically a figurehead institution – its only role is to convene several times a year to review and approve the policies promulgated by the Council of State. As Lois Smith and Alfred Padula succinctly explain, “women of the National Assembly could do little to influence policy, because the assembly was merely a rubber stamp for elite initiatives.”¹⁸² In short, the fact that women are well represented in Cuba’s parliament does not mean that women are integrated into the revolutionary government. Rather than the National Assembly, the authentic seat of power in Cuba are the local-level political structures and the highest decision-making bodies, and the data reveals that women’s participation in these organization leaves much to be desired.

In Cuba, the local-level state and party structures hold a significant amount of authority. Due to its Marxist ideology, the government stresses the importance of connecting with the masses, and this connection must happen through the grassroots political bodies of the party and the state. On the state side, this local power resides in the municipal People’s Power Assemblies.

¹⁸¹ These figures come from three different sources. The numbers of women are always the same, but the percentage calculations differ slightly. They are never more than .5% different.

¹⁸² Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 56.

As explained above, they are very community-oriented and manage all aspects of the day-to-day proceedings in their locality.

Data shows that women's representation in the municipal power assemblies lags significantly behind women's representation in the parliament. As Graph 7.4 shows, the proportion of women in the national and local bodies have trended together, moving parallel to one another, but the municipal proportion has always been significantly lower than the national proportion. Based on the data presented in Table 7.4, from 1976 until 1986 elections, the proportion of women in parliament was double the proportion on women involved in the local governments. The disparity between these two levels of government has shrunk slightly since the 1990s, but women are still only one third of municipal delegates (by 2010 counting) compared to nearly one half of national delegates. In other words, women are faring much worse in than important municipal assemblies than they are in the symbolic parliament.

Table 7.4 – Women's Participation in People's Power Municipal and National Assemblies, 1976-2010

	1976	1981	1986	1995	1997	2000	2005	2007	2010
Number women (Municipal)	856	837	2264	2211	2595	3081	4000	4159	5046
Percent women (Municipal)	8.0%	7.8%	17.1%	15.5%	17.9%	21.0%	26.5%	27.3%	33.4%
Percent women (National)	21.8%	22.7%	34.3%	-	27.6%*	-		43.3%*	*

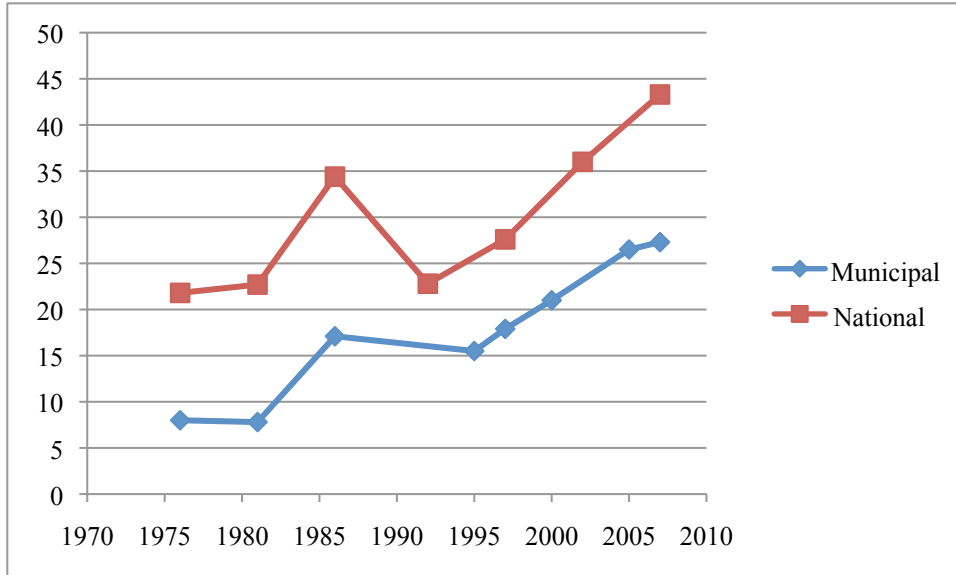
Source: Compiled from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 79; ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 113; Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 65.¹⁸³

* Corresponds to 1997-1998

** Corresponds to 2007-2008

Table 7.4 – Women's Participation in People's Power Municipal and National Assemblies, 1976-2010

¹⁸³ These figures come from three different sources. The numbers of women are always the same, but the percentage calculations differ slightly. They are never more than .5% different.



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 79; ONE, *Mujeres y Hombres*, 113; Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 65.¹⁸⁴

What could explain this disparity between the national and municipal assemblies? There are two main factors impeding women's participation in the municipal assemblies. First is the time commitment required by the municipal assemblies coupled with women's double burden. As explained above, "serving on a municipal assembly is considerably more demanding than being a member of parliament."¹⁸⁵ municipal delegates are expected to be on-call for their constituents at all times, but the parliament is only in session several days per year. This hinders women's participation in local level government because, as discussed in the work section, domestic tasks still absorb more of women's time than men's time. Between working and taking care of the home, women do not have time to take on a third, labor-intensive, unpaid role: municipal government.

¹⁸⁴ These figures come from three different sources. The numbers of women are always the same, but the percentage calculations differ slightly. They are never more than .5% different.

¹⁸⁵ Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba," 252.

The second reason, perhaps ironically, is that members of the municipal assemblies are popularly elected, whereas the government chooses a non-competitive field of candidates for the national delegates. But why does this lead to a gender disparity? A Marxist revolution should have eliminated gender discrimination in public attitudes. Certainly, that might seem to be one goal of the National Candidate Council (CNC) which creates the high proportion of women in the parliament in order to project an image of women's equality. By controlling the non-competitive candidates, the government can show its citizens and the international community that the revolution has resulted in gender equality, and perhaps, even, encourage Cubans to view women as equally capable of ruling. Though Cuba denies that there is an official quota system in place, there is an affirmative action plan that requires the CNC "final selection and approval processes for leadership positions... to include a man and a woman under equal conditions, so that decisions could be made upon equal requirements."¹⁸⁶

But while the parliament may intend to change public attitudes, and may reflect the ideal image the government would like to project to the world, the municipal assemblies reflect the actual opinions of the Cuban masses. Local elections are controlled 100 percent by the people – without any party or state interference. In other words, the municipal delegations accurately mirror the Cuban reality – the conceptions the masses have about women and leadership are the determinants of the election. Thus, the fact that women's representation is much lower in the local government, where decisions have actual impact than in the National Assembly, which is not much more than a rubberstamp power, can be explained in part by the two bodies' distinct electoral systems, which allow the government to handpick the figurehead delegates in the parliament but rely completely on people's opinions of leadership for the municipal delegates.

¹⁸⁶ Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 10.

This concern deepens when we look at other political structures in which gender parity should exist but does not. Just as women’s representation is low in the important local state structures, women’s representation at the grassroots level of the PCC – party membership – falls below women’s representation in the National Assembly. Although party members do not have political authority per say, they serve the important role of representing the masses to the party. They are, in a sense, the agents of the people within the PCC and the agents of the party in the masses.

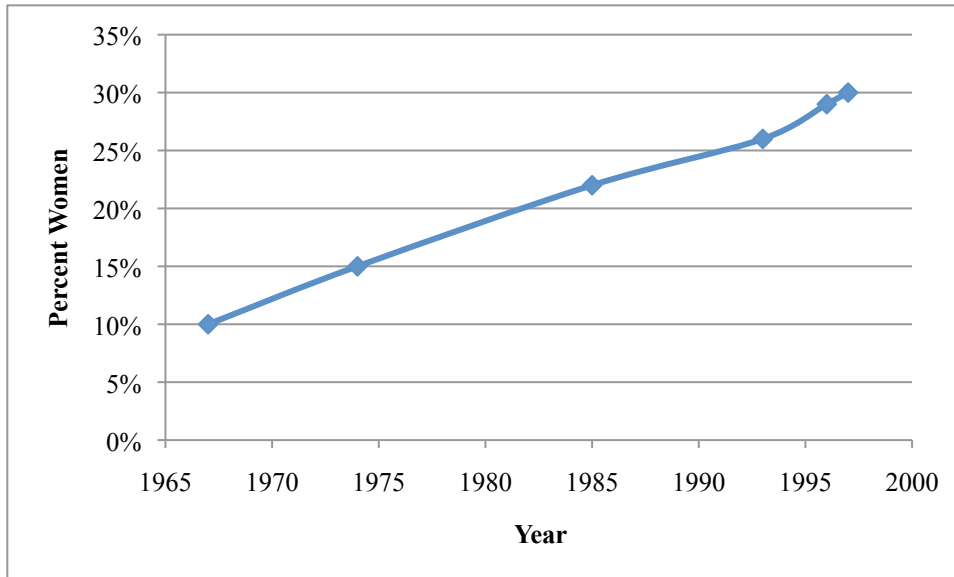
But very few of them are women. The data in Table 7.5 shows that women’s representation in among party member is not proportional to their size in the population. During the first decade of the revolution, women constituted only 10% of party members. As Graph 7.5 indicates, women’s representation in the party has been steadily increasing, but women are still only one in three party members.

Table 7.5 – Women as a percent of total membership of Cuban Communist Party

Year	1967	1974	1985	1993	1996	1997	2000
Percent	10%	15%	22%	26%	29%	30%	30.1%

Source: Data compiled from Luciak, “Party and State in Cuba,” 258 and Oxfam, *50 Years Later*, 14.

Graph 7.5 – Women as a percent of total membership of Cuban Communist Party



Source: Data from Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba," 258.

Women are notably absent from the important grassroots level of the PCC due to the party's policies regarding nominations and membership and women's domestic burden. As explained above, being in the party is an honor and requires a nomination, and this nomination usually occurs in the workplace.¹⁸⁷ Because women are still working more in the home and less in public production than men, this has greatly restricted women's participation in the party.

Indeed, women who do not work outside the home have great difficulty accessing party structures at all. In fact, the PCC did not allow housewives to be members until 1986.¹⁸⁸ Even the 2008 figures put women at 38.1% of the workforce, which "this puts immediate limitations on the possibility of female Party membership reflecting the total female population."¹⁸⁹ Moreover, working women are faced with a double burden and may not have the time to be exemplary works and win a nomination. Carollee Bengelsdorf explains:

¹⁸⁷ Individuals can now be nominated for work outside of paid production. For example, women can be nominated for their voluntary work with the FMC. This was not the case earlier in the revolution.

¹⁸⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 198.

¹⁸⁹ Bengelsdorf and Hageman, "Emerging From Underdevelopment," 369.

Access [to the PCC] requires not simply their presence in the workforce, but the kind of active participation in the workplace which might distinguish individual women as potential candidates. For women who are chiefly responsible for both home and children, such active and time-consuming participation is often simply impossible.¹⁹⁰

In other words, women's domestic workload – whether it causes them to stay home or not devote their full energy to production – severely limits women's party membership. As a result, women are notably absent from the important grassroots structures of the PCC.

Just women's high representation in the insignificant National Assembly is not congruent with women's representation in the important grassroots institutions of the state and party, women are sorely underrepresented in the high-powered decision-making institutions in Cuba. The proportion of women in the elite decision-making group of the state, the Council of State, falls far below the proportion of women in the parliament. As explained above, the Council of State is the small group that replaces the parliament when the National Assembly is not in session. Because the National Assembly meets so rarely, the policy-making power in Cuba resides in the Council of State. Of the thirty-one members of the Council of State, the number of women has ranged from two to eight, or 6.5 percent to 25.8 percent. In contrast, women's representation in the National Assembly ranged 21.8 percent to 43.3 percent in the same time period. As shown in Table 7.6, women's representation in the Council of the State has been slowly trending upwards since the late 1980s, but still only a quarter of the members are female. This percentage is comparable to the National Assembly's female contingency during the first two elections, and it lags behind the current National Assembly by nearly 20 percent. Contrary to the picture of women in government painted by superficial information about the National

¹⁹⁰ Bengelsdorf, "On the problem of studying women in Cuba," 44.

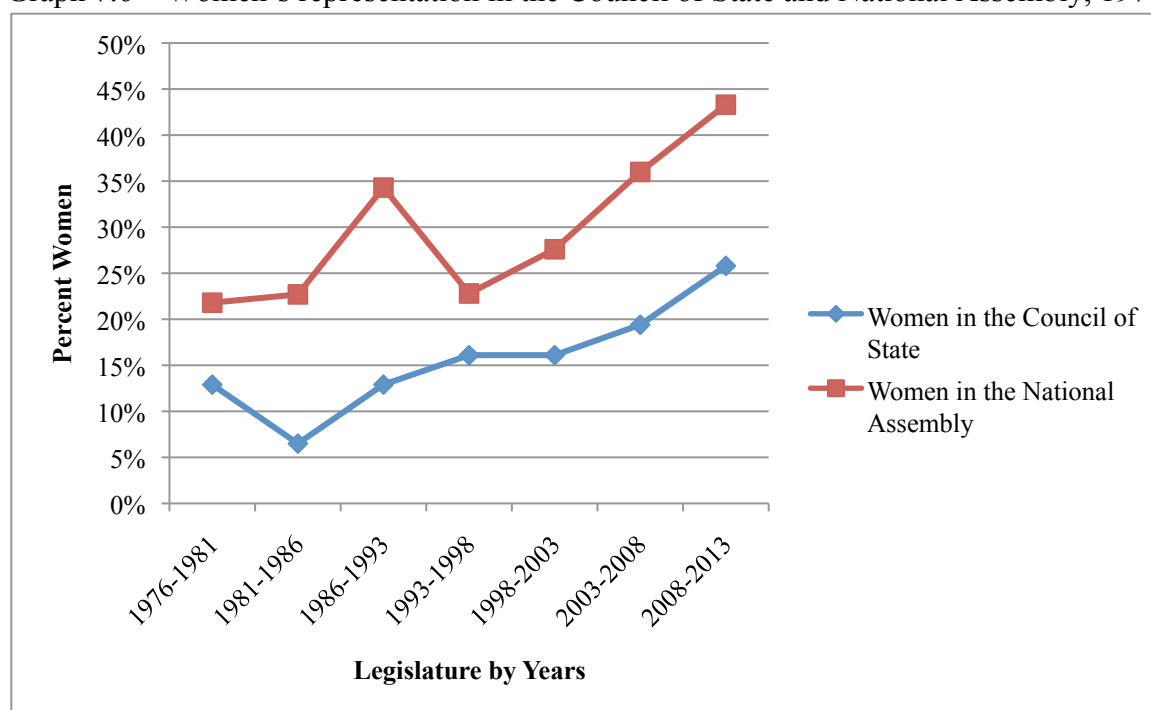
Assembly, this data shows that women are still struggling to enter the state decision-making body in Cuba.

Table 7.6 – Women’s representation in the Council of State, 1976-2013

Legislature	Total Number of Members	Number of Women	% Women Council of State	% Women National Assembly
I (1976-1981)	31	4	12.9%	21.8%
II (1981-1986)	31	2	6.5%	22.7%
III (1986-1993)	31	4	12.9%	34.7%
IV (1993-1998)	31	5	16.1%	22.8%
V (1998-2003)	31	5	16.1%	27.6%
VI (2003-2008)	31	6	19.4%	36.0%
VII (2008-2013)	31	8	25.8%	43.4%

Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 83.

Graph 7.6 – Women’s representation in the Council of State and National Assembly, 1976-2013



Source: Data from ONE, *Mujeres Cubanas*, 83.

Women are also very underrepresented in the top decision-making groups in the PCC – the Politburo and the Central Committee. As presented in Table 7.7, over the course of the revolution, women have never constituted even one-fifth of the representatives in these structures. The most recent data available is from 1997, and the results were dismal: there were

only two women on the 24 person Politburo (about eight percent) and 20 women on the 150-person Central Committee (about thirteen percent). For the sake of comparison, the National Assembly elected in 1997 was 27.6 percent female. Moreover, Graph 7.7 illustrates that women's representation in the Politburo and Central Committee have never been proportional to women's representation in the party as a whole (membership). Given that women are less than a third of party members — in other words, out of proportion to the general population — this means that their representation in party leadership in relation to the general population of women in Cuba is even worse. Ilja Luciak contends, “there is no single explanation for the scarcity of women in higher party ranks. Cultural factors, combined with practical and institutional impediments, have led to this outcome.”¹⁹¹ I have suggested that women's relationship to work and their double burden in the home is a significant contribution, but general sexist attitudes in a “machismo” culture like Cuba's is also a source of this disparity. Regardless of the causes, this situation is clear: women are denied access to the key ruling bodies of the Cuban Communist Party.

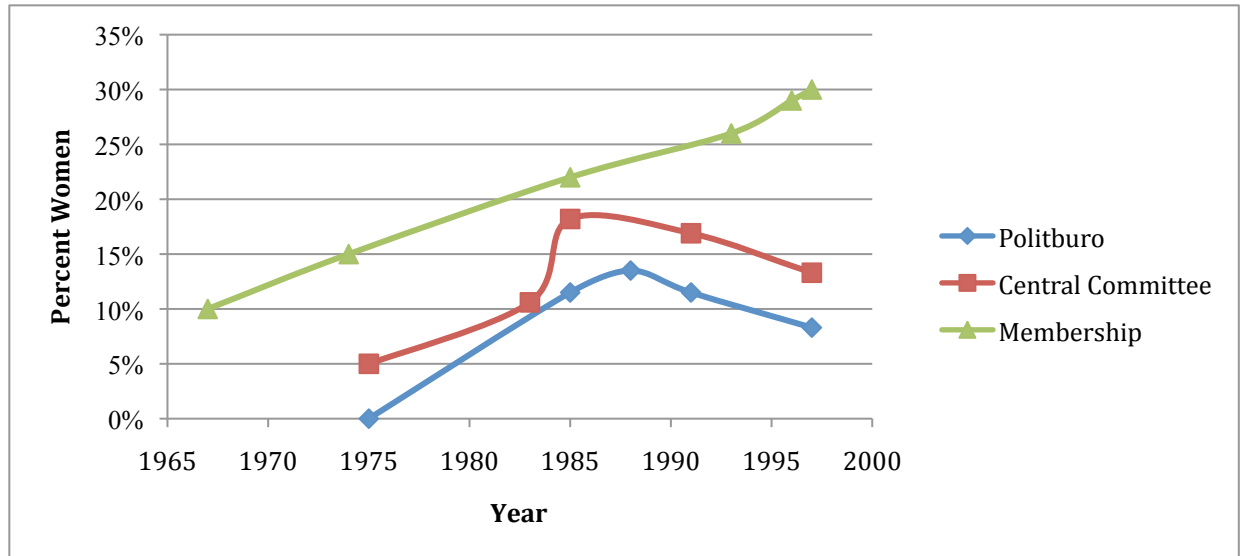
Table 7.7 – Women in the Central Committee and the Politburo

	1975	1983	1985	1988	1991	1997
Politburo	0%	-	11.5%	13.5%	11.5%	8.3%
Central Committee	5%	10.6%	18.2%	-	16.9%	13.3%

Sources: Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 46-47 and Luciak, “Party and State in Cuba,” 259-260; Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 81.

Graph 7.7 – Women in the Party – Central Committee, Politburo, and Membership

¹⁹¹ Ilja Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 81.



Source: Data from Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 46-47; Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba," 259-260; Luciak, *Gender and Democracy in Cuba*, 81.

In sum, despite the fact that Cuba's parliament has a nearly equitable gender distribution, women's representation in Cuban government is actually very low. While the numbers from Cuba's National Assembly are very impressive, they have less significance because the parliament has very little power. Authority and leadership in Cuba are concentrated on the two ends of the political pyramid – the mass-level institutions of the base and the key decision-making bodies at the pinnacle – and women are very underrepresented in both.

Analysis of Political Participation

In Marxist theory, women's liberation is supposed to advance as a result of women's integration into the larger revolutionary transformation. It is implied that women must become involved in the political structures of the revolution – how else could they be fully integrated? Unless they are leading the revolution, how could they be part of all the revolutionary processes? How else could the broad revolution become their revolution? In the case of the Marxist revolution in Cuba, the government has made some strides towards the incorporation of women,

but the progress is far from complete. A detailed analysis of Cuba's revolutionary political systems does not demonstrate the Marxist ideal of women's liberation via integration, but rather it reveals a patriarchal system that impedes women's progress toward equality.

To be fair, women's current participation in Cuba's political systems is a marked improvement over the prerevolutionary period and the early years of the revolution. Women are now between one quarter and one third of party members, municipal assembly delegates, and leaders on the Council of State, the highest decision-making body in the state. Moreover, all indicators (with exception of women's leadership at the top level of the party) are trending towards greater participation of women.

But the progress is not enough. As I argued above, women are still underrepresented in the power political institutions in Cuba. Female leaders are concentrated in the National Assembly, where the power is symbolic rather than substantive, and notably lacking from the local organizations and elite decision-making groups. This suggests that women are not fully integrated into the revolutionary processes that are supposed to liberate them.

More importantly, the fact that women are underrepresented in the loci of political authority in Cuba means that Cuba is still patriarchal in the most basic sense of the word. That is, whether or not sexist attitudes prevail, the power hierarchy in the country is controlled by men. Men are still making the decisions that impact women's lives.

On a slightly more subtle level, the gender composition of Cuba's political institutions indicates that patriarchal norms still condition choices among the masses and the elites. For the masses, this is exhibited in the results of the municipal elections. As explained above, women are sorely underrepresented in these popularly nominated and elected bodies. The data show that women are just as likely as men to get elected once they are nominated, but they do not get

nominated at the same rate as men. Thus, the question is: why are women not nominated by their peers for local council as much as men? There are two possible explanations for this situation, and both have sexism at the root.

First, it is possible that women are not getting nominated because they are women and the people still associate leadership with masculine qualities. This is a simple, straightforward sexism – people are not nominating women because they do not believe that women can and should be in positions of political power. This theory has been put forth by a number of scholars, including Mayda Alvarez, an FMC researcher. She writes,

When positions are determined by direct vote there are... beliefs, prejudices, and cultural patterns inherited from a class and sexist society are expressed which assign to the man the world of work and public power and to the woman the realm of the home, that is to say, the social perception still assigns a preferential masculine face to leadership.¹⁹²

In other words, the unsatisfactory representation of women at the local level could show that many Cuban citizens still hold outdated values about a women's proper place in society.

The second possible explanation for the low nomination rate of Cuban women for seats of local power could be that women and their peers are aware of the double burden of women and thus do not want to subject women to any more responsibilities by putting them in local office. In other words, it could be that because the municipal assemblies are so time-consuming that "local voters... did not want to impose additional burdens on a woman."¹⁹³ Eduardo Freire, the CNC's president describes how neighbors sometimes do not nominate women because of their double day. He describes a nomination scene as follows:

¹⁹² Alvarez, Mayda et al., *Situación de la niñez, la adolescencia, la mujer, y la familia en Cuba* quoted in Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba," 252.

¹⁹³ Luciak, "Party and State in Cuba, 251.

“Among each other they say: ‘Poor Aidita, who has two little kids, for what reason are we going to involve her in this responsibility.’ It also has to do a little with how we Cubans are, with this sense of protection toward a woman so she can fulfill her duty in the family. We men also have it but, well, the sentiments from the past remain. However, this is changing and when these things happen it is between ourselves. At times we see ourselves saying: ‘We will not include Aidita who has three small children.’ And perhaps we have not consulted her. Maybe you ask her [and she responds]: ‘It doesn’t matter to me. I have three kids but I am [willing to be a candidate for] delegate or deputy.’”¹⁹⁴

However, even if the community is excluding women from nominations out of concern for women’s already overwhelming responsibilities, sexism is a root. How so? This entire problem is based off the acceptance of the patriarchal norm that women will bear the primary responsibility for the home; in other words, if the sexist attitude that women had to take care of the home were not so prevalent, then women’s limited time would not even be a factor in deciding a nomination. Thus, regardless of whether women are not nominated for local positions because their peers do not believe women can be in power or because their peers do not want to subject them to an additional burden, the acceptance of patriarchal norms about women’s responsibilities are at the core of the problem.

¹⁹⁴ Luciak, “Party and State in Cuba, 253.

The gender composition of the high-powered decision-making bodies in the party and state reveal that Cuban political elites – despite their state “commitment” to women’s rights – also have patriarchal values. In other words, the absence of women from the highest levels of the state and party suggests that Cuban elites are only in favor of gender equality on a superficial level and are resistant to share power with women. How do we know this? Revolutionary leaders are able to select individuals for political power through non-competitive elections and nominations, and yet, they only select women for the symbolic, powerless parliament. In doing so, Cuban leaders are able to achieve high rankings on indicators of gender parity in politics without giving up any of their own power. Although they could easily appoint women to join their ranks among the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Council, they choose not to pick women to share in that authentic power. These elite groups are all less than one quarter women. In sum, it appears that they choose women for the symbolic National Assembly as “window dressing” – just something to prove that they care about women in politics – and hidden behind the curtains, they deny women access to the true seats of power. This is patriarchal and deceptive, and it sheds doubt of the revolution’s “devotion” to gender equality.

Section 8 – Why Marxism Is Not Enough

I began this project with a simple inquiry – has Marxism helped women in Cuba? From my personal experience in Havana, I thought the evidence was ambiguous. There seemed to be progress on some fronts and stagnation on others. After months of study, I have reached a similar but new conclusion about gender equality in Cuba: there has been progress on some fronts and stagnation on others, but the situation is not ambiguous. There is a clear reason why women's progress towards equality in Cuba is partial or incomplete: women are still oppressed in Cuba because the revolutionary leadership's hard-line Marxist approach to women's equality views women's issues as secondary and insufficiently attacks patriarchy.

Since the 1959 revolution, there has been substantial advancement towards women's equality in Cuba, but the progress is far from finished. Though Marxists, Marxist feminists and Cuban leaders argue that this partial advancement indicates that the revolution's work is not yet complete, I take a different stance. I argue that the Marxist approach adopted by the Cuban leadership has led to some positive changes for women, but the limitations of the theory – specifically, the belief that women's liberation can only occur as a component of a larger Marxist transformation and the idea that patriarchy is a historically specific problem that would crumble with a change to a communist mode of production – result in inadequate policies for women's issues and impede progress to women's equality. By prioritizing the so-called broader revolution over women's issues and refusing to directly attack patriarchy, the revolution's strict espousal of the Marxist feminist theory allows women's oppression as women to live on in Cuba. And because women in Cuba are still disadvantaged because they are women – even after fifty-four

years of revolution – I agree with the Socialist feminist opinion and argue that women's full equality can only be achieved after a direct, feminist attack on patriarchy is launched.

Success and Failure

After reviewing changes in health care, work, and political participation in revolutionary Cuba, it is impossible to deny that women's lives have improved in some ways as a result of the revolution. There are numerous examples. To mention a few, women in revolutionary Cuba have access to free, comprehensive health care, including reproductive care. Birth control and abortion are free, as are ultrasounds, homes for pregnant women, and doctor-attended childbirth. Women in Cuba are also much more economically independent than they were before the revolution: only 13% of women worked before the revolution, but now almost 60% of women work. In addition, women are gaining ground in popularly elected local assemblies; in the most recent elections, women won about one third of the seats. In short, there has been progress.

But, as I have pointed out in my chapters on health, work, and politics, the progress is not yet complete. For example, women still bear the majority of the domestic workload, which keeps them out of the workforce, management positions, and politics. The revolution tried halfheartedly to collectivize domestic tasks, but the programs are ineffective and too small. The acclaimed Family Code was supposed to help with this problem by dividing the housework between men and women, but data indicates that the distribution of work in the home has yet to change radically. Another example of women's lack of advancement is the political arena, where women are sorely underrepresented in the highest decision-making bodies in the party and state. This indicates that women cannot provide input on the direction of the revolution. In other words, there is still a lot of work to be done before Cuban women are fully equal.

Thus, women's progress towards equality in revolutionary Cuba is partial. While it is incorrect to assert that women's lives have not changed as a result of the revolution, it is also misinformed to suggest that women's equality have been unconditionally achieved. There are two possible explanations for this partial progress: first, the one that Marxist feminist theorists would offer, which the Cuban leadership has adopted, and second, the explanation offered by Socialist feminist theory, which I believe is more plausible.

Marxist Theory and Cuba's Apologist Explanation

In Marxist theory, the fact that women's equality is incomplete is understood as the result of the incomplete Marxist transformation. Because women's liberation is a direct effect of the broader social transformation entailed by the destruction of capitalism, women's equality cannot be fully established until the new society is fully established. Implicit in this understanding is the idea that nothing beyond a Marxist revolution is necessary to free women; this is because it does not view patriarchy as a separate system of oppression. Based on the Marxist idea of historical materialism, patriarchy is instead understood as part of the societal superstructure that rests on a capitalist material base; as the remnants of this capitalist material base disappear in the socialist revolution, so too will the remnants of the patriarchal superstructure. Thus, the Marxist solution to the unfinished nature of women's progress in Cuba is clear: more Marxist revolution – and nothing else – is necessary for more women's liberation.

Since 1959, the Cuban government has adopted this Marxist view on women's equality. This has been widely acknowledged by Western academics studying gender in Cuba. For example, Colette Harris writes, “[the revolutionaries] also held the traditional Marxist assumption that the transformation to a socialist mode of production would basically solve the

problem of women's emancipation.”¹⁹⁵ Jean Stubbs confirms, “The revolutionary government adopted mainstream socialist thinking on the ‘woman question.’”¹⁹⁶

But more convincing than these outside Western observations are declarations of the Cuban revolutionary leadership. Speeches by Fidel Castro, the political and ideological leader of the revolution, and Vilma Espín, longtime leader of the FMC, illustrate that the Cuban revolution has always conceptualized women’s equality as part of the Marxist ideal – something that would naturally come about as the revolution moved forward. Even when they face setbacks for women’s equality, more revolution is always the answer, it is never seen as part of the problem. For example, in 1966, Fidel Castro said,

In a class society, which is to say, a society of exploiters and exploited, there was no way of eliminating discrimination for reasons of race or sex...Discrimination with respect to race and sex can only be wiped out through a socialist revolution, which eradicates the exploitation of man by man.¹⁹⁷

That is to say, women’s liberation can only come about via socialism. He continues, acknowledging that women have not yet been completely liberated by socialism:

Now, does the disappearance of the exploitation of man by man mean that all the conditions are immediately created whereby women may elevate her position in society? No.¹⁹⁸

This suggests a potential recognition of patriarchy as a separate system of oppression; but nonetheless, he concludes,

¹⁹⁵ Harris, “Socialist Societies and the Emancipation of Women,” 94.

¹⁹⁶ Stubbs, “Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power,” 192.

¹⁹⁷ Castro, “The Revolution Within The Revolution,” 52

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

The conditions for the liberation of women, for the full development of women in society, for an authentic equality of rights, or for authentic equality of women with men in society, require a material base; they require the material foundations of economic and social development.¹⁹⁹

In other words, women's liberation will come about when the transformation to socialism is complete – when the new material base, the socialist mode of production, is in place. How this could explain or predict, for instance, the failure of the government and the party to appoint women to positions of leadership seems an obvious question that the research I have presented suggests.

Along similar lines, this strictly Marxist approach to gender equality is evident in the speeches of Vilma Espín and the actions of her organization, the Federation of Cuban Women. As explained in Chapter 3, the Federation of Cuban Women, the only women's group in Cuba, views supporting the revolution as its mechanism for achieving women's equality. Vilma Espín has asserted:

We never fought for partial demands, we were always conscious that the problem of women is part of the whole society and integrally related to the struggle of all the people for their liberation, to men and women together sweeping aside the very foundations of capitalist society to build a new life.²⁰⁰

The only “partial demand” that could suggest that the FMC has addressed patriarchy as a separate system and could therefore pose a possible challenge my conclusion is the Family Code (1975); where else in the world is there a law that requires men to do household tasks? However,

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Stubbs, “Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power,” 196.

as I explained, the law is impossible to enforce, and as a result, it is fairly meaningless in women's lives. The Cuban model is not to push this "partial demand," but rather to destroy any remnants of capitalism and construct socialism in order to eliminate gender inequality. Women will be liberated when the Marxist revolution is completed.

Limitations of Marxist Theory

However, as the research I have presented here suggests, Marxist theory is an inadequate model for and guide to women's equality in Cuba. Strict adherence to Marxist theory is not the solution to the incomplete progress, but rather the problem. Two limitations in the Marxist theory that the Cubans have adopted are at the root of the continuing gender inequality in Cuba.

The first of these limitations, as already stated, is the Marxist belief that women's liberation can only come about as a result of the larger Marxist transformation. This aspect of theory allows the women's struggle to become subsumed by and subordinated to the Marxist struggle. Because Cubans and Marxist feminists believe that the Marxist revolution will produce women's liberation, they logically prioritize the revolution and treat women's issues as secondary and unimportant. The revolution must advance – for the sake of women and all of society – so women's specific issues do not get attention, time, or money. Thus, part of the reason women's equality has not yet been attained in Cuba is that it has been viewed as merely resultant.

As discussed in the chapter on the Federation of Cuban Women and women in production, there are numerous examples of Cuba pushing aside women's issues to focus on a project that is more "central" to the survival of Marxism. When the government chooses not to invest in a women's issues, Cuban leadership usually gives the excuse that economic

underdevelopment and the U.S. Embargo mean that they cannot afford a certain program, service, or initiative. The economy certainly has struggled, but what this really means is that they have chosen to invest their limited funds elsewhere; they deemed another project more important and understood women's issues as something that could wait. Perhaps the best example of this is the revolution's half-hearted attempt to collectivize domestic tasks. Although these domestic tasks are still shouldered by women, which keeps them out of the workforce, management positions, and politics, the government has not invested enough in either day care centers to make them scalable to all women with young children who work nor laundry services to provide trucks to make using the service feasible. Instead, the Cuban government chose to send thousands of troops to Angola and support to revolutionaries in Nicaragua. They chose to motivate the entire population to try to produce ten million tons of sugar in one year rather than to try to build enough day care centers, boarding schools, and collectivized domestic services to allow all Cuban women to work. In sum, they have chosen to put women's issues on the back burner.

Cuba has failed to achieve full equality for women in part because the revolution has failed to focus on women's issues. Though it is impossible to guarantee that "the woman question" in Cuba would be resolved today if the revolution had prioritized it, the success of other massive campaigns suggests that Cuba could have built sufficient day care centers, absorbed women's domestic chores, and leveled out the gender distribution in politics if leaders had deemed these goals important. This is the same nation that eradicated illiteracy in one year by encouraging 100,000 volunteers to teach over 700,000 individuals to read and write.²⁰¹ Cuba managed to put in place a rationing program that increased the average Cuban diet by nearly 500

²⁰¹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 83-84.

calories per day in 30 years.²⁰² That is not to say that these campaigns are unworthy of the government's investment, but rather to show that Cuba probably could have made much greater strides towards women's equality if they have made it a priority. Unfortunately, the Marxist theory adopted by the revolutionaries suggested that it was acceptable to disregard women's issues because they would naturally "wither away" as Marxism developed, and women's equality has suffered as a result.

The second limitation in the Marxist theory that the Cubans have adopted is the conceptualization of patriarchy as a function of the capitalist superstructure, which implies that patriarchy need not be attacked directly. Based on the principle of historical materialism, Marxist theorists and Marxist feminists contend that women's oppression as women is a component of the social relations that rest on the economic base of capitalism and other previous modes of production. Because of this, they contend that a change in the material base will necessarily cause patriarchy to crumble. As such, no frontal attack on patriarchy is necessary. Cuban leaders have embraced this view, and as a result, they have not confronted women's oppression as women. In turn, this has allowed women's unique oppression to live on in Cuban communism.

The FMC's firm stance against feminism is the best example of Cuba's absolute refusal to attack patriarchy or even analyze women's oppression through a gender lens. As indicated in Chapter 3, the Federation of Cuban Women, Cuba's only women's organization, firmly identifies as "feminine, not feminist." To the Federation and Cuban leadership, feminism is unacceptable precisely because it analyzes only the oppression of women, which divides society and disrupts progress towards true socialist change. Max Azicri explains,

It is their conviction that a Western feminist vision of women's liberation is not orientated towards real social structural changes, but only to the

²⁰² Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 60.

periphery of the underlying causes of the woman problem...this type of social change could only create new social cleavages that in practice are inimical to an egalitarian socialist state.²⁰³

In other words, the FMC rejects feminism on the grounds that it focuses on women's oppression by men, which, in their opinion, is a counterproductive pursuit – attacking patriarchy only divides society, and society must be united in a broad battle that will destroy all inequalities. In short, only mechanism for women's progress in the whole country spurns a gender-based analysis.

The result of Cuba's anti-feminist, non-gender-based analysis is that patriarchy has been permitted to exist and evolve in revolutionary Cuba. Indeed, Cuba is patriarchal in the most basic sense of the word – the power hierarchies are dominated by men and exclude women. In the final chapter on political participation, I presented strong evidence that men still control Cuba's key decision-making bodies in party and state as well as the majority of the impactful local offices. In simple terms, this means that men are still making choices about women's lives.

There is also extensive evidence that patriarchal norms about women are still prevalent in revolutionary Cuba. This is true for all areas of society – private and public. In the home, women are still performing the vast majority of domestic work. Ideas about women's and men's responsibilities in terms of housework and childrearing have yet to change – even after fifty-four years of revolution and the passage of the Family Code. The home is still primarily the woman's domain. In the workplace, women are still very much limited to the positions that they have always had – positions that reflect an expansion of women's traditional caretaking and nurturing duties into the public sphere. Once again, arguments about women's "feminine proclivities" and capabilities go unchallenged; patriarchal values dictate that women can better handle work like

²⁰³ Azicri, "Women's Development Through Revolutionary Mobilization," 31.

teaching and nursing. And in politics, women are nominated by their communities for local office at much lower rates than men. Though there could a number of explanations for this nomination situation, one likely cause is the masses nominating their delegates still associate leadership with “masculine” qualities. In other words, because of their patriarchal norms, they do not see women as fit to lead.

Perhaps the best evidence of how patriarchy lives on in Cuban communism is a 1974 speech by Fidel Castro at the FMC Congress. In this speech, Fidel begins by speaking about the importance of women’s rights, but ends up discussing “socialist chivalry” – a patriarchal view that women must be especially honored and protected in society because they are somehow inherently different than men. He begins by affirming his dedication to women’s revolution, stating, “Socialist society must eradicate every form of discrimination against women and every form of injustice and discrimination.” But he goes on at considerable length to stress the idea that women deserve special treatment in society:

Women also have other functions in society. Women are nature’s workshop where life is formed. They are the creators par excellence of the human being. And I say this because, instead of being the object of discrimination and inequality, *women deserve special consideration from society... if there is to be any privilege in human society, there must be certain small privileges and certain small inequalities in favor of women...* It is a question of the basic obligation we have toward others: on the bus, in productive work, on the truck, others always have to given special consideration, for one reason or another. *It is true with women and must be so with women because they are physically weaker and because*

*they have tasks and function and humans responsibilities that man does
not have [emphasis mine].*²⁰⁴

In other words, Fidel makes a patriarchal point that women are somehow inherently different than men and therefore deserve a different type of treatment. He concludes his discussion about the special treatment of women by arguing that this type of value should be reproduced for generations to come: “instead of bourgeois and feudal chivalry, there must exist proletarian manner and proletarian consideration of women!” This so-called “proletarian consideration of women” is grounded in the patriarchal and oppressive idea that women are different and need to be protected in a male-defined society.²⁰⁵ The fact that Castro makes this point within a speech about women’s equality is contradictory – indeed, he calls for the abolition of all inequality and then advocates for socialist chivalry within a matter of minutes –illustrating how deeply patriarchy permeates the thoughts of even the most revolutionary Cubans. Patriarchy is so normalized, so deeply rooted in Cuban culture that Castro cannot even get through a speech on the advancement of women without highlighting the innately different qualities of women.

This evidence of patriarchy goes to show that Cuban-Marxist strategy is too weak, too incomplete to address the complexities and scope of women’s oppression in Cuba. These two shortcomings of the Marxist doctrine – first, the view that the revolution is always primary and second, the view that women’s oppression as women does not need to be addressed – produce the partial success of women’s equality in communist Cuba. Based on these failures, I reject the Marxist claim that the incomplete nature of women’s equality in Cuba is caused by the transitional nature of the revolution and can be solved by more revolutionary movement towards socialism. The evidence shows that this strategy has been too weak in the past – so weak that it

²⁰⁴ Fidel Castro, “The Struggle for Women’s Equality” in *Women and the Cuban Revolution* ed. Elizabeth Stone (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), 68.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

causes the very problem it claims to solve – and there is no reason to believe it will do better in the future.

The Case for Socialist Feminism

The evidence I have presented to support this claim is what leads me believe that socialist feminism offers a superior framework for understanding the remaining inequalities for women in Cuba. Socialist feminist theory – specifically, dual systems theory – offers valuable insights into the persistence of gender inequality and can help us develop strategies for achieving full equality for women. Contrary to the Marxist theorists, Marxist feminists, and their Cuban followers, many Socialist feminist proponents like Heidi Hartmann argue that capitalism and patriarchy are “dual systems:” two unique oppressive structures that both need to be destroyed in order to liberate women. In other words, contrary to the Marxist view that patriarchy rests on a capitalist material base, “patriarchal relations are phenomena distinct from the economic relations of production analyzed by traditional Marxism.”²⁰⁶ Patriarchy does not fall as a result of Marxism, but rather needs to be attacked in its own right. Thus, through the lens of dual systems theory, the partial progress in Cuba can be explained as Cuba having passed through one of two necessary transitions – capitalism has been mostly abolished, but the patriarchal system remains in tact.

The evidence of patriarchy presented above as well as the information presented in the empirical sections on work and political participation suggest that Socialist feminist dual systems theory has merit – at least in the case of Cuba. Patriarchy is a unique oppressive structure: even after over a half-century of transition to a communist mode of production, men dominate Cuban’s power hierarchies in the home, workplace, and political structures, and machismo

²⁰⁶ Iris Young, “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory” in *Women and Revolution* ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981): 45.

culture runs deep and strong through Cuban culture. Thus, Cuba's inability to rid itself of patriarchy suggests that Heidi Hartmann was correct in her assertion that "capital and private property do not cause the oppression of women as *women*, [so] their end alone will not result in the end of women's oppression."²⁰⁷ In other words, women's full equality cannot be achieved by way of more Marxism alone. What Cuba needs is a prioritized, frontal attack on patriarchy. In a word, Cuba needs feminism.

A Future for Cuban Feminism?

Unfortunately, as discussed above, the Cuban-Marxist stance precludes the development of feminism. In the Cuban mentality, women's equality will come along naturally, and feminism only serves to divide society. The FMC and the government refuse feminist analysis, and as discussed in Chapter 3, they work to crush all other groups that could potentially have a feminist agenda.

Even so, there are several promising signs for Cuban feminism in the future. They are small, perhaps subtle, but they suggest that some Cuban women believe that Marxism is leaving them behind. Some Cuban women – independent of the FMC – have chosen to bring attention to and criticize machismo through popular culture; for instance, women use one of Cuba's popular music genres, rap, to criticize the male dominance around them through their lyrics. Talia Wooldridge writes, "female rappers are creatively pointing out the prevalence of unjust and sexist macho attitudes in current Cuban society...by utilizing rap music as a form of socio-political commentary on women's issues, Cuban *raperas* are demanding women's full equality

²⁰⁷ Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," 5.

in the Cuban rap industry and society.”²⁰⁸ This is promising because these popular music artists have the potential to spread their feminist message to masses of Cuban through popular music – or at least bring some attention to the issue of machismo.

A second though subtle hopeful sign is that the Cuban government seems to have slightly loosened its control over civil society, which could allow for the development of independent women’s (and feminist) organizations.²⁰⁹ Historically, Cuba has repressed civil society and NGOs “with suspicion for their potential to act as Trojan horses for US interests.”²¹⁰ However, over the last two decades, Cuba has somewhat changed direction and hesitantly encouraged NGOs because they “are useful financial intermediaries and because citizens desired self-help organizations capable of resolving local problems the state was unwilling or unable to address.”²¹¹ According to Ilja Luciak, there were over 2000 NGOs in Cuba in 2002. Although the government has traditionally folded all women’s groups into the FMC, this opening of civil society suggests that women may have the chance to start their own feminist, autonomous women’s groups.

A Revolution Beyond the Revolution

In 1966, Fidel Castro called the participation of Cuban women in the revolution “a revolution within the revolution.”²¹² Since then, this phrase has become the mantra for women’s equality in Cuba; it is often used by both the FMC and Western academics to describe the process of change for women in Cuba. Even though it is a simple statement, this quote perfectly

²⁰⁸ Talia Wooldridge, “Cuban Raperas: A Feminist Revolution within the Revolution,” York University (2008): 1-2.

²⁰⁹ Luciak, *Gender and Democracy*, 51.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Gillian Gunn, “Cuba’s NGOs: Government puppets or seeds of civil society.” *Cuba Briefing Paper Series 7* (1995): 1.

²¹² Castro, “The Revolution Within the Revolution,” 48.

encapsulates the Cuban-Marxist ideology about women's equality – it will come about as part of the revolution, as a result of the revolution, inside the revolution.

But this Marxist-informed strategy has not completely worked for Cuban women. After fifty-four years of Marxist “revolution within a revolution”, patriarchy still stands as a unique, oppressive structure. Thus, Cuban women do not need a “revolution within the revolution,” but rather a revolution *beyond* the revolution – a revolution *apart from* the socialist revolution. In order to achieve full equality, women need to aggressively and directly challenge patriarchy as an independent system. Though Cuba has consistently repressed feminism in the past, the new critique of machismo within music and the opening of civil society might be positive signs for the future. If the feminist movement is allowed to develop, Cuba may finally be able to achieve full equality for women.

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