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Women in the Cuban Revolution: Where's the Change?

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Introduction

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was a notable turning point in the country's history, with significant ramifications for politics, culture, and society. One crucial aspect of the Revolution was its impact on the role of women in society. The Revolution sought to end capitalism and establish a socialist government as communism emerged, but alongside this was a push to challenge the entrenched gender norms of Cuba's patriarchal society. Before the Revolution, Cuban women faced significant inequality and discrimination. They were often relegated to traditional roles such as homemaking and childcare and excluded from participation in formal politics and activism. However, the revolutionary movement sought to change this. Fidel Castro and other revolutionary leaders recognized the importance of women's participation in the struggle and actively invited women to participate in political activities. Other women, however, became inclined to join based on their desire for equality.

As a result, women played a significant role in the Cuban Revolution, both in the armed struggle and, during state building, in areas such as healthcare, education, and community organizing. Women fought alongside men in the rebel army, and some rose to positions of leadership and authority. Women's participation in the revolutionary

war significantly departed from traditional gender roles and challenged patriarchal structures. However, the strategies aimed at gaining state approval for women's participation in the revolution were used to achieve outcomes that reflected Cuba's socialist values and goals for enhancing social and economic systems.

Post-war changes for women explicitly aligned with the state's goals for producing a "new Cuba." These specific goals included reform efforts such as implementing new policies focused on social welfare issues for all Cubans. Other policies reflected the development of industrialization in Cuba and promoted development within industrial settings as well as an adequate labor force to support such goals. Such policies include reform programs within education, healthcare, and agricultural industries. Many of these reform efforts not only supported Cuba's rural areas but also helped promote equality between men and women. The ambitions of leaders such as Fidel Castro provided women with a platform for consistent change after the conflict resided. Though various changes were made, their overall purpose was to promote best the ideals of "new Cuba's" development and did not always result in a positive result for all Cubans, including women.

In the state-building period following the revolutionary war, women witnessed the results of their efforts on behalf of the Revolution. By the 1970s, new policies slowly began to alter gender norms between men and women regarding education, parenting, and household responsibilities. Though these limited developments did not create significant change, women embraced work outside of the home and in advanced educational programs. The profound changes produced by Cuban women during the revolutionary era were tremendous; however, changes such as social reform were supported through policies set in place by male leaders. Approved policies that resulted in opportunities for equality reflected the ability and the limited willingness of male leaders to make changes surrounding gender norms. In many instances, such as healthcare and employment, the state's redeveloping economy played a more significant role than social equity. The government recognized the importance of women's contributions to the economy and society and sought to enable them to work outside more easily of the home. However, despite these advances, there were also some contradictions and limitations to the Cuban government's approach to women's rights. For example, there was tension between the government's promotion of gender equality in the workplace and its emphasis on traditional gender roles and family values in the home. The government implemented policies to promote women's rights but failed to address deep-rooted cultural attitudes toward women. As a result, women continued to face discrimination and harassment at work and home. The strategic limitations of the male-dominated political leadership created a double-edged sword for reform efforts—the publicly recognized inequalities between men and women and the limited

interest in making women truly equal to men. Despite a significant change in the revolutionary state, the growth of women's responsibilities and rights remained limited. Women who entered the workforce often remained in domestic work or careers considered "feminine" or maintained maternal values. Though Cuba was changing, the government's views on gender were a mixture of old and new attitudes.

In analyzing significant historical events such as the Cuban Revolution, it is crucial to consider how gender dynamics shape events and perspectives. Diverse groups of women from various racial and social backgrounds implemented unique change. Understanding the significance of women's roles in the Cuban Revolution provides a thorough analysis of their impact on the Revolution's outcomes and success. In addition, identifying and comprehending social and cultural norms provide insight into the power dynamics during the Cuban Revolution. Finally, the assessment of overall change can be studied by comparing Cubans' masculine and feminine values during the Revolution.

Overview of the Cuban Revolution

Before the Revolution began in the 1950s, men were the primary participants in political conflicts. When the war for Cuban independence broke out in the 1890s, José Martí, a Cuban Independence hero and writer, promoted freedom among Cuban men and highlighted women's importance to the cause when he wrote, "The people's campaigns are weak only when women offer them merely fearful and restrained assistance; when the cultured and virtuous woman anoints the work with the sweet honey of affection – the work is invincible."¹ The initial recognition of women's significance in achieving

independence motivated the development of efforts focused on women's reforms. This led to women becoming a model for effective participation, not just among other women, but also among men. The idealization of Cuban women's eagerness to support an independent Cuba depicted them as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. This strategy-maintained women's association with nurturing and domestic roles and highlighted their assumed need for protection. The overall goal was not just to end colonial rule but to address problems of poverty and inequality that strained ordinary people and created tension among Cubans. Though equality was a focus of Marti's independence campaign, equality among Cuban men became more central than equality between men and women.

Independence did not solve Cuban's political, social, or economic problems. As a result, the 1930s in Cuba were a time of political and social upheaval. The country was experiencing economic difficulties, and the government was unstable. The Great Depression hit Cuba hard, and unemployment was high. The Depression led to widespread poverty and social unrest. The economic decline in the 1930s helped to initiate women's transition into activists. In part, this was driven by feminist movements and by the passage of female suffrage in 1934. By recognizing a common interest in reform, women began organizing small groups to support the protests. Throughout the 1940s, with the development of a new constitution. The 1940s constitution brought hope for political and social change, but problems persisted. New struggles due to changing economic and social developments deepened inequalities that continued into the 1950s into the peak of the conflict.

Fulgencio Batista took advantage of this

turbulence and staged a bloodless coup in 1952; almost immediately, anti-Batista groups formed to combat corrupt leadership and reorganize the state.² Women took on essential roles within these resistance movements based on prior experience. Historian Aviva Chomsky noted, "The 1950s insurrection and women's place in it was not created from scratch but rather drew from experiences of Cuba's previous wars and rebellions."³ Upset with the dictatorship and ignited by the desire for equality within Cuba, women began to harness their abilities to create change.

In 1953, Fidel Castro and a group of rebels tried and failed to take over the Moncada army barracks, which although unsuccessful gained national attention for their cause. Fidel Castro's publicized opposition to Batista appealed to struggling Cuban communities, such as those unemployed or impoverished in rural and urban areas. Fidel Castro addressed the difficulties Urban Cubans faced under Batista's regime stating in his speech "History Will Absolve Me":

The people we counted on in our struggle were these: Seven hundred thousand Cubans without work, who desire to earn their daily bread honestly without having to emigrate in search of livelihood. Five hundred thousand farm laborers inhabiting miserable shacks, who work four months of the year and starve for the rest of the year, sharing their misery with their children, who have not an inch of land to cultivate, and whose existence inspires compassion in any heart not made of stone. Four hundred thousand industrial laborers and stevedores whose retirement funds have been embezzled, whose benefits are being taken away, whose homes are wretched quarters,

whose salaries pass from the hands of the boss to those of the usurer, whose future is a pay reduction and dismissal, whose life is eternal work and whose only rest is in the tomb.⁴

The struggle of urban Cubans is highlighted by Castro as he detailed the brutal conditions of workers and children, displaying limited support from the government and promoting the desire to revolt. After serving a jail term followed by a period in Mexico, Castro returned to Cuba in July 1956 with a small rebel army and began to wage guerrilla warfare against the Batista regime in the Sierra Maestra. The urban conflict and guerrilla forces fought for two years, but due to losses in urban leadership, the guerrilla force took the lead over the Revolution in 1958. The shifting focus from urban to guerrilla forces within the Cuban Revolution changed the dynamics of warfare.

The guerrilla struggle was now dominant, but the urban conflict continued. Historian Michelle Chase noted, "If existing historiography acknowledges the starring role awarded to guerrilla warfare by mid-1958, we may also surmise that some segments of the urban anti-Batista resistance embraced diverse strategies, continuing to raise the banner of mass civic struggle even while supporting the growing rebel army."⁵ The diversity of combatant techniques exemplified both in the urban sectors and the Sierra provided a more profound understanding of the involvement of Cubans in the Revolution. The Cuban Revolution was comprised of diverse groups that used both peaceful and violent means to achieve political and social change. The development of guerrilla warfare in the Sierra helped to push forward revolutionary efforts with force, while at the same time, urban protests led by women promoted gender inclusivity.

In many cases, however, women did not hold leadership positions in urban areas. Instead, Cuban women of the urban arena used their flexibility to strategize and contribute to various areas of conflict. The eventual turn to armed force united both parties, unifying men, and women under one set of leaders. The forced transition and desire for increased support from Cuban women required men to look past traditional gender norms and accept the assistance of women within warfare.

Following the revolutionary victory, the revolutionary government went through different phases over time. Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes note that beginning in 1959, "the revolution consolidated its domestic political position, began the socialization of the economy, and established a new pattern of foreign relations."⁶ Reform efforts gradually focused on developing a socialist government, including income distribution. Other reform efforts such as Land reform developed slowly as their ideals at first did not inherently reflect Cuba's socialist beliefs. Before the Revolution, small groups of wealthy individuals owned Cuba's arable land for their benefit. The Agrarian Reform Law changed this by breaking up large estates and distributing them among peasants who had previously been landless. To improve the conditions of the sugar workers in Cuba, the government took actions such as expropriating large estates, redistributing land to farmers, and nationalizing foreign-owned properties. The focus was on improving work and wage conditions rather than increasing the amount of land. During the post-war era, these farmers made up most of the workforce. The redistribution of wealth to rural communities also saw success in the first three years following the Revolution.⁷ Reform efforts allowed for more outstanding food production

and improved living conditions for rural communities. The reform also led to the establishment of agricultural cooperatives, which allowed farmers to pool resources and share knowledge. These cooperatives were instrumental in increasing productivity and improving crop quality. Despite some challenges, such as resistance from former landowners and limited resources, the Cuban Revolution's Agricultural Reform has impacted the country's economy and society. It remains an important example of how agrarian reform can bring about positive change for marginalized communities.

One of the Revolution's most significant accomplishments was education reform. The Cuban government launched a nationwide literacy campaign that mobilized 250,000 volunteers to teach literacy skills to over 700,000 people. Education reform during the Cuban Revolution was a significant step towards improving the lives of poor Cubans. The revolutionaries recognized that education was a powerful tool to empower the masses and create a more just society. Thus, they implemented various reforms to improve education access and enhance quality. The literacy campaign accompanied educational reform, including advocating for increased Cuban literacy. Educational reform efforts and policy implementation impacted Cuba politically and benefited social development. Aviva Chomsky notes that for undereducated Cubans, "Illiteracy and lack of education meant to silence, marginalization and oppression."⁸ Education reform in Cuba impacted women by not only providing education opportunities but also advancements in new areas of employment. Though educational avenues were limited for women in Cuba, and many remained in positions that featured feminine nurturing roles, further integration of women

into careers outside of the home began to over time become a reality.

One of the most significant reforms was the literacy campaign launched in 1961. The campaign mobilized thousands of volunteers who went door-to-door teaching people how to read and write. This effort resulted in an impressive achievement as Cuba became one of the most literate countries in Latin America. Additionally, the revolutionaries nationalized all schools, ensuring that educational training was free and accessible to all. For women, training for new work opportunities such as nursing, teaching, and childcare were offered. They also introduced a new curriculum emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, and social responsibility, as well as pushed ideologies that proved loyalty to the state and the emerging Communist Party. As a result, vocational education became popular in rural areas of Cuba, providing greater accessibility to specifically agricultural work skills to combat poverty.⁹ The government invested heavily in education, creating a comprehensive public school system providing free primary school education through university.

Following the Revolution, women's reform groups emerged to promote social change and further developments in support of equal rights among Cubans. The establishment of such groups including the FMC displayed independent group development and prompted government officials to take accountability and action on behalf of Cuban citizens. The Cuban government established various social welfare programs in the 1960s. As a result, access to healthcare and education became universal, child mortality rates declined dramatically, and life expectancy increased.¹⁰ In 1961, the Medical Services Auxiliary Corps were established to support

the armed forces of the Revolution, allowing women to enter healthcare positions and provide support in a new way.¹¹ One of the most notable social welfare programs implemented after the Revolution was establishing a universal healthcare system. This system provided free medical care to all citizens, regardless of their ability to pay.¹²

The Cuban government's turn to communism in the early 1960s prompted economic reorganization through Soviet influence. During this period, Cuba became reliant on the Soviet Union for economic support. Castro's government focused on the sugar industry and adopted a centrally planned economic system. However, this economic restructuring was challenging. The U.S. imposed an embargo on Cuba in response to these changes, which severely impacted the country's ability to trade with other nations. In addition, inefficiencies in state-run industries led to shortages of essential goods and services.¹³ Despite these challenges, Cuba has maintained its socialist economic model for over six decades. While some recent reforms have opened the economy to private enterprise and foreign investment, the government remains committed to maintaining control over key sectors of the economy.

In addition, changes in Cuban leadership influenced economic change by the 1970s. During this period, authoritarianism began to develop as Cuba separated from its formerly democratic government. Rachel Hynson identifies this shift as, "the revolutionary movement's transition from a relatively democratic one with legions of mass supporters and outwardly accountable leadership into a more solidified authoritarian government, whose authority was contingent on citizens' willingness to surrender their economic autonomy to the

state."¹⁴ The shift in government prompted reform efforts to improve the state's productivity and development between 1971 and 1975. Keen and Haynes note that "Political institutionalism accompanied efforts to reorganize and rationalize the economy... At the root of the problem was the lack of professional management, quality control, and labor discipline, all of which contributed to poorly manufactured goods...."¹⁵ The economic crisis continued into the 1980s, ultimately leading to dissatisfied Cubans migrating out of the country.

Women Within the Revolutionary Conflict

Women from various backgrounds and social classes began to form activist groups against the Batista regime as soon as he took power in 1952. Over time, women in urban areas began to take the initiative within the revolutionary cause. Cuban women played a significant role in the urban setting of the Revolution by participating in protests and demonstrations. Independently, women formed groups in protest of the repression and violence of the Batista regime by means other than direct conflict. Urban protests during the Cuban Revolution were influenced by women's desire to engage in Revolutionary efforts on their terms. They also played a crucial role in guerrilla warfare against the regime. Women were involved in various acts of sabotage, including the burning of sugar cane fields and the bombing of military installations.¹⁶ However, they also gained some support for their participation through Fidel Castro.¹⁷

Women were essential to the guerrilla conflict, as they played a critical role in the covert operations that were carried out. Under the guise of being ordinary citizens and assumed less suspect than men, Cuban women smuggled

weapons, food, and even people through the mountains. Although these acts of resistance came with significant risks, including persecution and detention, Cuban women actively supported the Revolution. The role of women in the mountains was not limited to covert operations. Some were also actively involved in the fight as soldiers. Women who sought to fight alongside men had to prove themselves capable in training, undergo military training, and carry arms. Celia Sanchez led women to form their battalion and played a vital role in the revolutionary army. They were an inspirational force for the male rebels and helped to motivate them to fight hard, knowing there were women present fighting by their side.

Moreover, women in the mountains also served as medics, doctors, and nurses. Despite having limited access to medical equipment and being in a war zone, women played an essential role in treating wounded rebels. In medical roles, women worked tirelessly, using their skills to save countless lives. They were respected and valued for their contributions beyond gender roles and traditional expectations. The mountain conflict of the Cuban Revolution was a crucial turning point for the country, and women played a massive role in the victory of the Revolution. Female rebels demonstrated great bravery and resilience in the face of blatant discrimination, proving that they were equally valuable in society and that discrimination could not stand in the face of determination.

Demands for societal changes created varied expectations for men and women, which were clearly outlined during the era of conflict. Smith and Padula noted that “women were expected to be loyal implementers or grateful recipients of the male-determined revolutionary program. Women's concerns were viewed as peripheral.

Those women who could not accept this status were rejected by the Revolution.”¹⁸ The restrictions within the Revolution for women equally represented previously dictated beliefs regarding women's role in society as well as their ability to claim roles of leadership and power. The freedom Cuban women wished to earn through wartime victory became the same restriction that prevented them from participating in the liberation of Cuban women. The insurrection's masculine agenda focused on freedom from alienation within a socialist community as an end goal for Cuban men, completely disregarding the demands and rights of Cuban women.¹⁹ Many of Cuba's best combatants maintained an anti-women prejudice, further restricting participation. A focus on maintaining traditional masculine and feminine values appeared in the mobility of status among ranks.

The Marianas Platoon

Cuban conflict in the Sierra resulted in high demand for power in numbers—this need for increased support. With Fidel Castro's approval, the Mariana Grajales platoon was formed in 1958. In their 2003 study, Tete Puebla and Mary-Alice Waters note that “The founding of the Mariana Grajales Women's Platoon marked a milestone in the Cuban Revolution. It demonstrated in practice the social course of a victorious Rebel Army would fight for.”²⁰ The formation of the first and only women's platoon during the Cuban Revolution is documented in numerous interviews provided by Tete Puebla based on interviews by Mary-Alice Waters. Puebla described the formation of the Mariana's Platoon after the army's defensive line had been defeated in conflict.²¹ Armed for the first time during the Revolution, Cuban women became a leading force in the physical fight for

equality. The acceptance of the Marianas Platoon though a symbol of Cuba's initiative to support equality created conflict among men who supported traditional gender norms. description of the resistance focuses on the tension and limitations within the conflict created, "There were still not enough weapons for everyone, and the men were saying, 'How can we give rifles to women when there are so many men unarmed?'"²² The support from Fidel Castro to support the Marianas helped to reduce tension between male and female revolutionaries. Fidel Castro ensured that the Marianas Platoon received proper training, amplifying their succession and prominence. Providing the female platoon with arms helped to create a break from traditional gender norms.

Providing women with necessary weaponry and training helped to diffuse the nurturing and maternal imagery that created restrictions for women in the past. The Marianas quickly became Castro's first and last opportunity for defense as his forces and armed guerrillas depleted. The organization of the Marianas though late in the Revolution would initiate the promotion of gender equality within the Revolution's conflict phase. Mixed support of the Marianas followed the platoon as numerous Cuban men judged their abilities to participate in active warfare. The Marianas Platoon would prove themselves in September of 1958 by engaging in their first battle. Puebla's account of this conflict describes the perseverance and strength of the Marianas, "'The first combat we saw was the battle of Cerro Pelado on September 27, 1958. This was the Marians' baptism by fire. The entire squad participated. This was a tough battle. Remember that the enemy had artillery the area had become the last redoubt of the dictator's troops... Five companeros were killed in the fighting; there were

no casualties among the Marianas. Fidel has talked about this battle.'"²³ The success of the Marianas Platoon was seen not only during times of conflict but also by providing a legacy that would come after the warfare. This memory from Puebla highlights the succession of the Marianas Platoon limiting the full perspective of their struggle and the truth behind the platoon's formation. Manipulated by the state, many accounts from the women of the Mariana's romanticize Fidel Castro's efforts within the war and his support for women combatants. This account fails to recognize the political strategies of Cuban government officials and how the Marianas were organized as a last result of effort and for further political gain for women's support of the Revolution and future reform.

Both Waters and Smith and Puebla describe the Marianas Platoon as a way of opening doors for women's equality. "Around the world, many are interested in your story because it helps capture what the Cuban Revolution meant for women."²⁴ Isabela Rielo, head of the Turiboca Vegetable Ian and captain in the Revolutionary Armed Forces, described the unity that the Marianas Platoon created among women during times of conflict;

Our relationships were the most fraternal, the most sincere and at the same time the most complete; it was the best kind of atmosphere for a woman, with all the problems and all of the difficulties that existed; privation, far from family, lack of affection... I don't know, though we always resisted that, because we knew damn well what we were there for and why we were there. Those of us who had formed the women's battalion never felt we should have any different treatment from the men; we wanted them to look on us as one more soldier.²⁵

As one of eleven members of the Marianas Platoon, Rielo provides a valuable account of women's limited experiences facing combat during the Revolution. The confidence and strength that the Marianas provided the guerrillas helped to promote their succession within the Cuban Revolution as well as provided them with opportunities to promote social change during the state-building era. Proving effective in combat, the Marianas' force was limited due to the size of the platoon and their formation late in the Revolution. In many ways, the Mariana's was formed by Fidel Castro as a gender tactic with benefits and repercussions during the war and following the Revolution.²⁶ These opportunities however were not easily available for women who participated in the Cuban Revolution, as gender norms continued to shape both the urban and rural environments, altering women's abilities to participate. The Marianas Platoon proved to Cuban leaders that they could withstand the brutalities of armed conflict in eth guerrilla and work among men.²⁷ Though proven true, the women of the Marianas Platoon, along with other women engaged in the Revolution, continued to face restrictions based on competing ideals of masculine and feminine norms.

Masculinity and Femininity in the Cuban Revolution

Historian Michelle Chase notes in her 2015 study of the Cuban Revolution that during the revolutionary war, masculinity and femininity constructs played a large role in the fight for freedom and liberation. She stated "The conflict sparked by the revolutionary victory of 1959 was not only a struggle over property rights, national politics, or international relations. It also unleashed a struggle over constructions of femininity and masculinity, of

marriage and the family."²⁸ Gender norms shaped Cuba's economy, politics, and social sectors both before and after the Revolution. In many ways change was produced, however, traditional gender norms were strongly tied to Cuba's history as a state and were a difficult obstacle to overcome. Gender norms within the urban underground during the Revolution created difficulties for women's participation. Women's strength was often questioned by men during the revolution. Chase also identifies the internal conflicts caused by masculine and feminine norms during the Revolution. "The issue here is not simply about the literal predominance of men over women in the urban underground and in the rebel army. 'Real' revolutionary participation was also understood as being linked to traditional notions about physical strength."²⁹ Urban Cuba's warfare focused on different strategies to succeed, many of which surrounded the diverse roles of women. Noncombatant efforts of urban Cuban women included moving materials, protesting, and other undercover elements where women remained in their everyday routines to support the Revolution. By women maintaining stereotyped roles, they were able to seamlessly blend into Revolution efforts without being detected while maintaining their home life. Chase goes on to argue that competing expectations of men and women during the Cuban Revolution are responsible for the lack of representation and documentation of women's support in urban environments.

A persistent problem in recovering women in the historical record has to do with existing frameworks for studying the Cuban Revolution. Women's mass participation primarily took place in urban settings, often in public protests, and in roles now understood to be auxiliary or

somehow secondary to the military struggle... State-sanctioned histories thus routinely include hagiographic treatment of the so-called heroines of the Sierra, praising the small group of female strategists close to Fidel Castro in the Sierra as important but exceptional actors. Yet they leave out the many more women who participated in or supported the urban anti-Batista resistance.³⁰

Important women such as Aleida March demonstrate the difficulty of balancing women's roles within the Revolution as well as traditional maternal and household duties. Aleida March married Revolutionary leader Che Guevara displaying the balance between Revolution participation and the duties of being a wife and mother. In her autobiography, March wrote, "My future role has been decided in the first days of January when, on a trip around Havana Raul Castro asked Che what rank I would be honored with. Che bluntly replied, none, because I would be his wife. I accepted this, although some may not understand my position."³¹ Aside from men deciding the roles of women within the revolution came the observation of women's limits. During the first year of the Revolution, Aleida March identified the limits of women's education. March saw uneducated women as an obstacle to reaching equality in urban Cuba and looked to Che as a teacher; "Che helped me a great deal. He was a brilliant teacher, leading me by his daily example. But some things I had to figure out for myself, like how to juggle my roles as a wife, mother, and worker."³² The duality women faced in urban areas of Cuba, often going unrecognized, forced women to participate in the Revolution in their way. Independently organized groups of protesters helped women take on roles within their communities and spread

the demand for equality, uncovering the Revolution within the Revolution. The contribution of Cuban women in the war, however, did not guarantee a reward once victory occurred.

Gender and Revolutionary State Building

In 1966, Fidel Castro gave a speech commending women's participation in the Revolution, identifying the need for gender-based reform as the "Revolution within the Revolution."³³ Though Castro stated that women's rights were important and contributed to the Revolution, Castro mainly discussed how women could best serve the Revolution rather than how the revolutionary state could serve women. Within his speech, Castro identified the efforts of Cuban women within the Revolution and the changes in which they promoted. Castro identified improvement in social and economic reform efforts, "For events are demonstrating, even now, the possibilities of women and the role that women can play in a revolutionary process in which society is liberating itself, above all, from exploitation, and from prejudices and a whole series of circumstances in which women were doubly exploited, doubly humiliated."³⁴ Here Castro publicly identified the struggles of women throughout the Revolutionary period, alongside the hardships gender norms created in moving towards equality. Fidel Castro's perspective on Cuban women's participation in the Revolution differed from other men's. Due to Castro's support, women were able to participate in indirect conflict and as noncombatants, however traditional views of a woman's responsibility remained. Addressing the controversy, Castro stated,

I described before the opinion held by many men concerning the functions of women, and I said that among the functions considered to belong

to women was -almost exclusively- that of having children. Naturally, reproduction is one of the most important of women's functions within society. But it is precisely this function, relegated by nature to women, which has enslaved them to a series of chores within the home.³⁵

Castro's claims highlight the restrictions that numerous women faced before, during, and after the Revolution. Though social changes improved opportunities for women many remained in roles that used domestic skills such as education, healthcare, and caretaking roles. Though Fidel Castro tried to use these opportunities to uplift women in the workplace, it remains a constant reminder of the limited change in the lives of Cuban women after the Revolution. In 1974, Castro presented a second speech reflecting on the struggle for women to integrate equally. Almost ten years following his speech regarding women's change for equality in Cuba, progression towards women's equality and autonomy had not gained significant traction. Castro identified the continued need for women to further integrate into employment outside of the home to further stimulate Cuba's industrialization, "Naturally, in the socialist countries women have advanced a long distance along the road to their liberation. But if we ask ourselves about our own situation: we who are a socialist country with almost sixteen years of revolution, can we really say that Cuban women have acquired full equality of rights in practice and that they are absolutely integrated into Cuban Society?"³⁶ Understanding the limited social and economic growth under "new Cuba's" development, displays the motive of government officials to present solutions for women which overall stimulated economic growth. Security within Cuba's new and developing

economy became a priority above all others. The Cuban government incorporated opportunities for women into its social platform when it was advantageous for the state. However, there was also resistance towards granting Cuban women full and equal integration into society, which sparked a debate on the roles that women should play. Castro argued the importance of women in roles reflecting traditional gender norms and the consequences of removing them;

Of course, in this lack of equality, in this lack of full integration, as I said, there are objective factors and there are subjective factors. Naturally, everything that prevents the incorporation of women into the workforce makes this process of integration difficult, makes this process of achieving full equality difficult. And you have seen precisely when women are incorporated into the work force, when women stop performing the traditional and historical activities, is when these problems begin to show up.³⁷

The continued desire for women to maintain maternal positions as well as maintain Cuban family life became another construct plagued by traditional gender norms.

Reform efforts produced policies to develop the Cuban "nuclear family." In 1975, Cuba's executive government passed the Family Code to unify Cuban families and modernize gender roles within the home. The Family Code included policy on aspects such as marriage and relationships between husbands and wives.³⁸ The expectations of married Cuban couples highlighted equal care for the family and must "cooperate with the other in the education, upbringing, and guidance of the children according to the principles of socialist morality."³⁹ These

policies helped to initiate the division of household roles among Cuban families. Though the government initiated household regulation to promote equality among Cuban men and women, the attempt to regulate the private lives of Cuban families was near impossible. The private lives of many Cuban families remained inside of the home and changes from traditional gender norms had already seen resistance. Primary source accounts collected by Margaret Randal provide a different perspective on women's participation in the Revolution. In an interview of fourteen women who actively participated in the Revolution, Randal identifies the various roles Cuban women took on. One woman, Josefina, is "a forty-one-year-old peasant woman, married and with eight children. Of worker-peasant stock, she has a fourth-grade education and belongs to the FMC and the militia. She lives in a small village in the province of Havana, and both she and her husband work in the nearby sugar refinery."⁴⁰ Interviews with Josefina describe her agricultural labor as well as her perspective on gender roles in Cuban households. When asked about her perspective on men's strength versus women's, Josephina responds, "Oh Yeah, stronger sometimes. That's the truth...when the Federation got us to go to the mill there were fifteen of us women and the only one who stayed was me. They give me the hardest job, that the men don't even want."⁴¹ Josephina's claims prove that the incorporation of women into the labor force did not always prove to become appositive or equal opportunity among Cuban men and women. Once again, an attempt made by Cuba's new socialist government had only limited success. Even as government programs tried to implement change, economic development remained more important than social advances. The policy implemented by government officials continued to

bring only limited change to the lives of women on their own, initiating Cuban women to organize and take reform efforts into their own hands.

The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC)

Various causes before the revolution had allowed women's groups to mobilize when upcoming rulers desired to strengthen their support, allowing women to participate and organize.⁴² These events would allow generations of women to participate in the Cuban Revolution conflict creating designated groups referred to as the "Old Left" and the "New Left." According to Chase, Women of the Marxist "Old Left" belief system were primarily older women who did not mainly participate in the insurrection efforts. This group of women and their advocacy included progressive ideologies not found in the youthful "New Left" groups who engaged in conflict during the insurrection.⁴³ Within conflicting ideologies, both groups supported women's roles throughout the Revolution. Though Cuban women began to organize themselves during this period and increase their involvement in the era of conflict, leaders often dismissed the demands of women and were selective with their wording while addressing concerns. Rather than using "the term 'liberation' or even 'equality' to discuss women's issues... terms usually used by the leadership were 'integration,' 'incorporation,' or even 'redemption.'"⁴⁴ These remarks placed Cuban women as parts of a working system rather than humanizing them within the context of the Revolution; such comments would continue to promote masculine ideologies and priorities throughout the insurrection while making participation by women increasingly tricky. By 1959, struggling women's groups collaborated to become the Federation of Cuban Women

(FMC).⁴⁵ As Chase notes the development of such groups occurred as the state weakened independent women's groups in favor of the FMC to maintain control.

The Federation of Cuban Women's establishment helped women gain a more secure foothold in the Revolution and brought attention to women's reform and revolutionary demands. The FMC would eventually become "the largest women's organization in the history of Latin America."⁴⁶ Influential female leaders of the FMC included Vilma Espin, who worked closely with Fidel Castro, initiating some improvements for Cuban women. The group sought to combat gender-based discrimination and provide a strong all-female force for the Revolution.⁴⁷ Though acknowledged for their efforts, women often faded into the background of their male counterparts who represented the masculinity of liberating Cuba. Men remained primary leaders of combat efforts and even oversaw women-based groups. The strict control of the FMC by the Cuban government limited the group's overall ability to promote change. Outcomes of the FMC's reform efforts would only be produced if they aligned with the views of government officials. The group also focused on the support of women within society, such as through education, healthcare, and family-based support. These changes helped to initiate the development of new gender expectations among Cuban women. These changes would catalyze the "New Cuban Woman," providing its need for advocacy.

The FMC, or the "Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas," was formed during the Cuban Revolution on August 23, 1960. The organization was established by Vilma Espin, who was the wife of Raul Castro, the brother of Fidel Castro. Espin's primary source account of the FMC and interactions with Fidel Castro provides a

contradicting perspective of women's roles in the Cuban Revolution. The FMC was formed to achieve gender equality and improve the status of women in Cuba. The Cuban Revolution brought about significant changes in the country, and the FMC played a crucial role in ensuring that these changes extended to women. The formation of the FMC was a significant milestone in the Cuban Revolution. Women in Cuba had been marginalized and oppressed for generations. The FMC provided Cuban women a platform to voice their concerns and further promote gender equality. The organization aimed to break down patriarchal structures in society and promote equal treatment for women in all areas of life, including education, healthcare, and employment. The FMC also played a vital role in promoting family planning and reproductive rights, which had previously been neglected in Cuba.⁴⁸

The FMC often helped to organize social welfare initiatives. This organization of Cuban women fought for just and equal social welfare opportunities for poor Cubans, especially women. The FMC supported women's education and health and provided subsidies for single mothers, older women, and disabled women. As a result, the FMC helped thousands of women explore their full potential, with many rising to leadership positions in government, science, and other fields. Castro's support for women's rights was a cornerstone of the Cuban Revolution. Castro's policies empowered women to take control of their lives and participate actively in building a socialist society. By creating opportunities for women to participate in all areas of society, he broke down the barriers that had oppressed women for generations. With the creation of The Federation of Cuban Women, women gained a platform to raise their voices and influence

policy decisions. These points contradict the findings of historians such as Smith and Padula who note the limited ability of Cuban women to gain independence. Additionally, the Cuban government implemented policies promoting gender equality, including free healthcare and education for all citizens. These policies helped break down traditional barriers and stereotypes about women's societal roles, enabling them to participate more fully in the country's civic life.

As a result of these policies, Cuban women gained greater access to education and professional opportunities, leading to increased participation in the labor force. This increased participation helped bolster the country's economy and gave Cuban women in some cases a sense of purpose and fulfillment. The changes brought about by the Cuban Revolution were not only limited to economic and political fronts but also significantly impacted women's personal lives. Various legislative acts promoted gender equality and accorded women unprecedented rights to equal inheritance and divorce.⁴⁹

By 1975, the FMC secured the Family Code, which helped to "recognize the equal right of both spouses to education and career, required them to share in household duties and childcare, and established divorce as a legal remedy for any spouse whose mate refused to comply."⁵⁰ The Family Code's objectives stated the institution of the Cuban family including "marriage, divorce, parent-child relations, the obligation to provide alimony, adoption, and tutelage with the main objections contributing to: the strengthening of the family... the strengthening of formalized... marriage based on absolute equality of rights between men and women..."⁵¹ This code, though presenting initial support for family

development withing "new Cuba," displayed limitations based on the government's ability and willingness to regulate the code. Though many changes from the Family Code embraced equality among men and women's roles within the home, there is limited proof that families upheld such policies within their homes. The desire for further support for women and the hope for equality prompted further organization of reform groups. The FMC provides insight into the lasting impact of women's reform efforts following the Cuban Revolution and the state's transition to socialism. Changes by the Cuban government influenced the development of a "new Cuba" while simultaneously maintaining some of Cuba's traditional values. This focus on gender equality and women's rights was also reflected in the revolutionary protests, where women played a prominent role. The revolutionary movement in Cuba represents a significant turning point in the history of gender relations. Through its policies and initiatives, the Revolution addressed long-standing gender disparities in Cuba and created a more equal society. The Revolution in Cuba was a significant turning point in the history of gender relations, as it enabled women to participate more fully in the country's civic life and create a more equitable society.

The Revolution's emphasis on gender equality and women's rights allowed Cuban women to break free from traditional gender roles, access education, and professional opportunities, and participate more fully in the country's civic life. The creation of "The Federation of Cuban Women" offered a platform for women to raise their voices and influence policy decisions, enabling them to play an active part in shaping the country's future.

Women, Family, and Work

The years of reconstruction following the Cuban Revolution presented new opportunities for Cuban families to shift away from traditional patriarchal beliefs. Operation Family, a program established by the Ministry of Justice, was enacted within the first year of Cuba's state-building phase. Historian Rachel Hynson notes that this movement promoted greater autonomy for "the female heads of household who participated in the paid-labor force."⁵² The initial phase of Operation Family allowed working women to maintain part-time employment even after marriage if the state approved the line of work. Operation Matrimony and Operation Registration, initially implemented from 1959 to 1962 and again in 1965, helped to expand the state's outreach to rural areas of Cuba where formal documentation of marriage was limited. Over time with increasing state control, Operation Family provided new opportunities for married Cubans. Women who had children before marriage became less scrutinized, and divorce became an option for women, giving them more control over their home life situations. However, the limits to Operation Family required strict state control and supervision, creating limitations. Interracial marriages and relationships also became a source of conflict and tension between Cubans and the State. These limitations over time became less regulated but still provide an example of how new policy created new opportunities and maintained restrictions for Cubans, especially women.

The Revolution prompted more women to enter the workforce, and the Campaign for Women's Employment helped support better women entering the workforce while initiating economic and social development within Cuba.⁵³ The integration of women

into Cuba's workforce was initiated in the 1940s when the state no longer tolerated sex-based discrimination. These policies ultimately became regulated as the state of Cuba relied on an extra labor force to stimulate the economy, providing women with new work opportunities that provided new skills and experiences. In rural Cuba, women's work often needed to be recognized as the sugar industry hired few women. Cultural biases also limited rural women's integration into other areas, such as harvesting and processing crops and tending to small plots.⁵⁴ Following the Cuban Revolution, employment for women changed as domestic service positions and prostitution were eliminated. As a replacement, "Government programs to expand and democratize healthcare and education provided many new jobs for women. New positions created for women by government programs were crucial to the integration of rural women into the workforce. Following these social reforms can the agricultural reform movement, providing further outlets for employment for the rural women of Cuba."⁵⁵

Conclusion

Overall, the Cuban Revolution was a period in which women played a crucial role in gender-based reform efforts. In studying the Cuban Revolution, understanding the shift of dynamics within societal perspectives is crucial to fully analyze change. The changes for equality and autonomy for women produced by revolutionary participation widely differed for women based on their age, race, home life, and geography. The Cuban Revolution in fact produced change for all Cubans as the state adopted socialism and began to industrialize. However, many of these changes still maintained limitations for groups who were traditionally seen as a minority in the

past, including women. A combination of traditional and progressive beliefs that were prevalent in Cuban society helped to facilitate social change and stimulate the economy. While certain improvements were made for women, such as new opportunities, there was also a continued emphasis on maintaining traditional maternal and feminine roles. During the Revolution, some women were able to secure positions in politics. However, despite these gains, male leadership continued to maintain its dominance. Male leaders of the Cuban Revolution such as Fidel Castro, allowed promoted social equality among Cuban men and women, only when it was able to benefit “new Cuba’s” economic development.

Within Cuba’s era of conflict, women participated willingly to fight for equality in the hope to improve their own lives. By participating many women including Aleida March, Vilma Espin, and the women of the Marianas Platoon developed as historic figures for women’s rights during the Revolution. Participation by female revolutionaries took place in both urban and rural Cuba using different strategies against Batista’s regime. Though the armed conflict was mainly used in the Sierra by guerrillas, smaller-scale resistance efforts and protests supported women’s success in rural Cuban areas, stimulating social and economic changes directly.

Post-Revolution changes and continuous reform efforts by women helped to expand education, healthcare, employment, and home-life balance among all Cubans. Social development in Cuba provided women with opportunities to gain some independence by becoming educated and entering new types of work. In contrast, many of these opportunities kept women in caregiver positions that they had tried to escape before the Revolution. The ultimate change of the Cuban Revolution

came with economic development and industrialization, promoting the integration of women’s demands outside of the household. The organization of women’s groups such as the FMC, helped to initiate reform campaigns that would create lasting change. Achieving such change, however, proved to become a difficult task, limiting the potential for positive outcomes. As Cuba’s new government recovered and gained stability and became increasingly authoritarian. The Cuban government found it challenging to keep up with the constant demand for change from the general population. To prevent further economic crisis and conflict, the government initially supported and publicized social and gender-based reforms. This initial support allowed organized women’s groups to make more significant changes within their communities.

Overall, the Cuban Revolution resulted in lasting change for generations, but not without struggle or consequence. Though change can be witnessed by social reform and economic development, the impact on women resulted in stagnant mobility for autonomy and liberation. The Cuban Revolution’s main goal was to gain freedom and liberation from corrupt government and dictatorship. Various efforts through conflict and noncombatant efforts proved successful. By adopting a socialist government with an emphasis on equality, many minority groups within Cuba awaited change. However, by the end of the 1970s, equality, especially for women had only witnessed limited progression. It is not to say that change did not occur during the Cuban Revolution. But these changes can be seen in the economic success of industrialization rather than the adoption of gender equality.

¹ As quoted in Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Women and the Cuban Insurrection: How Gender Shaped Castro's Victory* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 25.

² Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 5.

³ Bayard deVolo, *Women and the Cuban Insurrection*, 23.

⁴ Fidel Castro: "History Will Absolve Me," Castro: History Will Absolve Me, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/slatta/hi216/documents/dabsolve.htm>.

⁵ Michelle Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 49.

⁶ Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes, *A History of Latin America*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Cengage Group, 2013), 403.

⁷ Keen and Haynes, *A History of Latin America*, Vol. 2, 403.

⁸ Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 42.

⁹ Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 43.

¹⁰ Vilma Espín, Asela de los Santos, and Yolanda Ferrer. *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution*. (New York: Pathfinder, 2012), 210.

¹¹ Espin, Asela de los Santos and Ferrer, *Women in Cuba*, 211.

¹² Espin, Asela de los Santos and Ferrer, *Women in Cuba*, 237.

¹³ Rachel Hynson, *Laboring for the State Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 14-15.

¹⁴ Hynson, *Laboring for the State Women, Family and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971*, 16.

¹⁵ Keen and Haynes, "Cuba: The Revolutionary Socialist Alternative to Populism," 408.

¹⁶ Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (Kitchener, ON: Women's Press Dumont Press Graphix, 1974), 296.

¹⁷ Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 22.

¹⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 23.

¹⁹ Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro. *Socialism and Man in Cuba*. (New York: Pathfinder, 2002), 33.

²⁰ Teté Puebla, and Mary-Alice Waters. *Marianas in Combat: Teté Puebla & the Mariana Grajales Women's Platoon in Cuba's Revolutionary War, 1956-58*. (New York: Pathfinder, 2003), 45.

²¹ Puebla and Waters, *Marianas in Combat*, 46.

²² Puebla and Waters, *Marianas in Combat*, 47.

²³ Puebla and Waters, *Marianas in Combat*, 48-49.

²⁴ Puebla and Waters, *Marianas in Combat*, 63.

²⁵ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 139.

²⁶ Bayard deVolo, *Women and the Cuban Insurrection*, 210-211.

²⁷ Bayard deVolo, *Women and the Cuban Insurrection*, 219.

²⁸ Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 207.

²⁹ Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 59.

³⁰ Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 95.

³¹ Aleida A. March, *Remembering Che: My Life with Che Guevara*. (London, UK: Ocean Press, 2012), 79.

³² March, *Remembering Che*, 89.

³³ Fidel Castro, "The Revolution within the Revolution," in *Women and the Cuban Revolution: Speeches & Documents by Fidel Castro, Vilma Espin & Others*, ed. Elizabeth Stone (New York: Pathfinder, 1981), 64.

³⁴ Stone and Castro, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 65.

³⁵ Stone and Castro, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 70.

³⁶ Stone and Castro, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 75.

³⁷ Stone and Castro, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 79.

³⁸ Stone, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 192-193.

³⁹ Stone, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 192.

⁴⁰ "Fourteen Cuban Women Speak," in *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women*, ed. Margaret Randall, (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1974), 35.

⁴¹ "Fourteen Cuban Women Speak," ed. Randall, 46.

⁴² Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 106.

⁴³ Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 106.

⁴⁴ Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 115.

⁴⁵ Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*, 105.

⁴⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 33.

⁴⁷ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 36.

⁴⁸ Espin, Asela de los Santos and Ferrer, *Women in Cuba*, 191-193.

⁴⁹ Hynson, *Laboring for the State Women, Family and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971*, 144-145.

⁵⁰ Keen and Haynes, "Cuba: The Revolutionary Socialist Alternative to Populism," 409.

⁵¹ "Cuban Family Code," in *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, ed. Elizabeth Stone (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), 184.

⁵² Hynson, Laboring for the State Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971, 91.

⁵³ Smith and Padula, Sex and Revolution, 95.

⁵⁴ Smith and Padula, Sex and Revolution, 96.

⁵⁵ Smith and Padula, Sex and Revolution, 96.

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