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Why aren't your nails polished? The Paradoxes of Woman and Socialism in Cuba

The socialist experiments in the XXth century addressed the "woman question"[1] with varying degrees of success. Such is the case in Cuba, where there is no doubt that the position of women improved substantially after the revolution, particularly in relation to educational levels, access to health and day care, and job security. There are, however, three areas where Cuban women themselves acknowledge that the revolution has fallen short: their lack of participation in high level decision making positions, the permanence of gender roles within the family, and, until very recently, the lack of a theoretical framework to analyze the women's movement in Cuba. The question then is why the advancement towards gender equality seemed to stop? One possible explanation is that there are fundamental theoretical shortcomings in socialism regarding gender issues. If this is the case, Cuba would be another example to be added to those of the former Eastern Block countries.[2]

In this paper, it will be argued that the containment of gender equality in Cuba is not so much theoretical shortcomings as the result of deliberate state policy and performance regarding the issue. By means of an analysis of the women's role in the Cuban revolution - within the socialist conceptual framework first elaborated by Engels, and expanded on by Bebel, Lenin, Zetkin and Kollontai – it will be argued that the Cuban leadership failed its female constituency by not having a clear understanding of the multidimensionality of gender inequality and its meaning for socialism, and, as a result, did not assign a high priority to gender issues. On the contrary, the state's discourse has continued to emphasize the equation woman-mother-family in strictly bourgeois terms. One of the main reasons that it has been able to do so, it is suggested, is to be found in the *machista* character of the Cuban revolution which is inherently in contradiction to not only the movement of women towards equality but also to the fundamental tenets of socialism.

In the introduction to *Woman and Socialism*, August Bebel wrote "there can be no liberation of mankind without social independence and equality of the sexes."[3] Following Marx and Engels, he argued that this

[1] This phrase makes the "victims" of inequality into the subject, and ignores the fact that the "question" is about both genders and that, therefore, any proper discussion on the subject should be gender inclusive.

[2] For an analysis of the role of women in the former Eastern Block see H. Scott, *Does Socialism Liberate Women*? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

[3] A. Bebel, *Woman and Socialism* (New York: Socialist Literature Co., 1910), 7.

equality could be achieved only through socialism and, consequently, urged the inclusion and active participation of women in the project of building a new society. This new role for women would be supported by a total transformation of society, which would involve not only the socialization of the means of production, but also of certain functions traditionally relegated to the private sphere, such as domestic labour and child care. This process would facilitate women's rapid insertion into productive roles and with that, their independence and the possibility of living fuller lives in a position of equality with their male counterparts. The new found independence would also change the nature of male/female relationships as the economic basis that defines bourgeois marriage gave way to a union based on love and mutual respect.[4]

In her book *Women and the Cuban revolution*, Elizabeth Stone asserts, regarding the situation of women, that:

> *(…) in all essentials the Cubans have acted in accord with the analysis of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on this question. In his famous work, The Origin of the Family, private Property, and the State, Engels puts forward the same goals the Cubans have stressed as being necessary to freeing women: 1) ending the economic dependence of women on their husbands; 2) getting women out of the isolation of the home and incorporating them into the work force; 3) socializing household chores traditionally done by women through the use of public laundries, cafeterias, child care, and other public services; and 4) ending the economic chains that compel family members to remain together, so that relationships between people can be based on affection and not on economic necessity*.[5]

This conclusion reveals a somewhat superficial reading of Marx, Lenin, and Engels and also of the reality of gender in Cuba. The four points cited should be conceived within the broader framework of the fundamental inequality existing in the family, which led Engels to conclude that "It will then become evident that the first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry, and that this again demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished."[6] In other words, the four goals stated above are not independent of one another, they all have to be pursued

[4] A critique of marriage was elaborated by Kollentai and Zetkin, both followers of Bebel. See A. Kollontai, *Communism and The Family* (1920), (London 1984), and C. Zetkin, *Lenin on the Woman Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), *Selected Writings*, ed. by Philips S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1984).

[5] E. Stone, ed., *Women and the Cuban Revolution.* 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

[6] F. Engels, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State", in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1949, v. II), 212.

together because they form the necessary basis for the restructuring of the family. Only when the basis of gender inequality is removed in the work-place and family can equality be achieved.

This transformation, we suggest, has not happened in Cuba. A review of woman's role and participation in the public (specifically education and labour) and private or domestic spheres indicate that even though higher levels of education have allowed for the incorporation of women into the workforce, their participation there has fluctuated according to the economic imperatives defined by the state and, as a result, their economic independence has not always been guarantee, in spite of laws designed to protect them. Also confirmed will be the fact that the socialization of household tasks has been in sufficient and that, in practice, many woman have had not other choice but to reassume their domestic responsibilities. Lastly, a review of the role Federation of Cuban Woman (FMC) and of the realities of *machismo* will support the argument that not only economic imperatives but also patriarchal practices have continued to reinforce gender stereotypes that perpetuate inequality.

Labour and education

In the mid 1950's women accounted for only 13% of the economically active population. Of these, 5% were employed in agriculture, 19,7% in industry and 72,5% in commerce/services. Most of working women lived in Havana (78%) where they were usually employed as domestics. Regarding women's level of education, the rate of illiteracy among them was 21,1% (for population 10 years and older), while women comprised 3,6% of high school/vocational graduates and 0,7% of university graduates.[7]

These statistics changed dramatically shortly after the Revolution.[8] In the massive effort to improve the literacy of the population by means of the campaign of 1961, women as members with low literacy rates benefited disproportionately. More gender specific were the numerous effort to provide skills training for women, particularly in nutrition, sewing, nursing, daycare, etc.; in other words, skills related to the traditional division of labour.[9] Yet, these were significant strides for a large number of women who until then had had no access to education and health.

[7] M. Pérez Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*. 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

[8] L. Smith and A. Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) Chapters 7 and 8.

[9] Most famous of these were the Ana Betancourt Schools for Peasant Women. Thousands of women went through this training. They would leave their home area and go to Havana

The efforts to integrate women into the educational system have been continuous and noteworthy. Statistics show that in the 1990's women generally had higher levels of education than men. More than half of all doctors and lawyers were women, and the same applies to the student population at the university of Havana.[10] Two points, however, need to be made. First, despite the fact that women are more educated and in positions traditionally occupied by males, the majority of the jobs, performed by women are still "gendered", i.e. In areas considered the "natural" domain of women such as teaching, nursing, clerical, and services in general. In other words, jobs that draw on the definition of women as supportive, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. Second, higher levels of education have not translated into high-level managerial positions. At this level there still is a significant vacuum as far as women's participation is concerned.[11] One explanation could be the lack of commitment from the leadership to appoint women to such positions, but, most interestingly, according to the research conducted by Núñez Sarmiento,[12] many women who feel prepared and ready to take on positions of high responsibility, choose not to do so because they do not want to be in supervisory positions over males, and because the extra responsibilities involved take time from family obligations. The first reason clearly underlines deep-rooted sexism in society where both men and women still assume and adhere to traditional gender roles, and the second reveals a lack of societal support for socializing domestic duties.

Higher levels of education no doubt enabled women to join the work force in large numbers. It has been argued, however, (and quite convincingly) that the massive entry of Cuban women into the workforce was not just particular to Cuba case but comparable to that of other Latin American countries as the result of the modernization process that characterized de-

where they would receive training in sewing and clothes making, along with basic health issues and political indoctrination. Once their training was finished they would go back to their place of origin (with a sewing machine provided for them) with the mandate to teach ten other women what they had learned. According to Smith and Padula, in the beginning the selection of the Anitas (as they were called) was nothing short of political. Most were from Escambray were there was talk of counterrevolutionary movements. Fearing for their daughters safety in Havana peasants would be hesitant consider the possibility of an uprising. L. Smith and A. Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 37-39.

[10] M. Núñez Sermiento, *New Needs and Values in Gender Identity in Cuba: the 90's,* Paper presented at the CALACS meetings, Ottawa, October, 1999.

[11] L. Smith and A. Padula, pp. 114-116.

[12] M. Nez Sarmiento, *New Needs and Values in Gender Identity in Cuba: the 90s,* Paper presented at the CALACS meetings, Ottawa, October 1999.

velopment at the time. In Cuba, this process had already started in the 1950's and gained full force after the revolution.[13]

Women's participation in the economy was quite significant in the late 1960's, reaching a high point in 1970 when all of the country's efforts were concentrated in achieving a sugar crop of ten million tons. Women's employment in production continued to increase during the early 1970's but according to Stone, at this time:

> *There was also insufficient economic incentive to encourage women to work. More money was in circulation than there were goods that people could buy. Everything was rationed to assure a fair distribution, so a second household income often did not mean an equivalent ability to purchase things the family needed. Education, medical care, and many other social services were free and rents were no more than 10 percent of income. This also lessened the need for a second income*.[14]

Stone seems to suggest that women participated in the labor force mostly because of economic need rather than for economic independence, and that, having the choice, they would stay home. This reflects the failure of the leadership (particularly the FMC) to raise consciousness on the meaning of women's emancipation, as argued by Engels and Bebel who considered women's full integration into the productive sphere of society as fundamental for the promotion of gender equality. Equally problematic, as the state acknowledged, was the degree of women' s permanence in the labour force. As indicated in the thesis "On the Full Exercise of Women's Equality" presented in 1975 at the First Congress of the Communist Party, between 1969-1974 out of 713,924 women incorporated in the labour force only 196,903 remained there. These was explained as the consequence of "objective" and "subjective" causes -the former meaning lack of social support services (mostly day-cares), the latter referring to lack of familial support, problems with the couple, etc.[15] This curious division between "objective" and "subjective" causes only confuses the issue. The only underlying objective cause was the unwillingness (or shortsightedness) of the leadership to prioritize the socialization of housework in the same manner as health care, education and international solidarity were and still are, and not the lack of support services per se. The so-called "subjective" reasons not only underline the devaluation of housework which takes its most visible form in male resistance to cooperate in these tasks implicitly reinforcing the role of

[13] C. Bengelsdorf, "(Re)considering Cuban Women in a Time of Troubles", in Consuelo López Springfield, *Daughters of Caliban Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, 236.
[14] E. Stone, 15.
[15] Ibid., pp. 80-83.

women in the private sphere as "natural" but it also shifts the focus away from the responsibility of the leadership to address proactively these systemic practices.

Stone's analysis, furthermore, leaves out a crucial factor that helps explain what was at the core of the decline of female participation in the labour force in the seventies. Referring to the position of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba/Central Organization of Cuban Trade Unions (CTC) in regards to the labour market at the time, Smith and Padula point out that by "the mid-1970s the union, fearing a future labour glut, sought to scrap policies that gave women preferential treatment in employment in certain fields."[16] This clearly reflects a lack of consciousness of the meaning of full and equal participation of women in society among the leaders of the CTC. Furthermore, in 1976 a law was passed by the Labor Ministry barring women from working in almost three hundred jobs, the rationale being that these jobs were "hazardous" and incompatible with women's physical and biological make up. The real reason, however, was a surplus of male labour that had to be absorbed under the policy of full employment which applies only to males.[17] Women became, therefore, disposable labour.

Furthermore, in 1980, Fidel, in his closing remarks at the Third Congress of the FMC in 1980, stressed that the pace of employment growth for women would be most difficult to maintain. He argued that a whole new generation of young Cubans would be entering the labour force and that it would be impossible to accommodate them all, that important decisions would have to be made regarding job creation and that this should be ruled by the necessity to increase productivity.[18] In practice, this translated into fewer opportunities outside of the traditional "female" sectors such as services, health and education.

In the mid 1980's, women constituted 35% of the economically active population, but almost half were employed in the service sector and their earning power was "significantly less than men: 62.6 percent of men were employed in sectors where wages were above the national average of 2,250 pesos; only 38.6 percent of women were so employed."[19] Equally disturbing was the persistence of some forms of discrimination: managers would often be reluctant to employ women citing their unreliability as a result of their family obligations.[20]

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[16] L. Smith and A. Padula, 110.
[17] H. Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995, 168.
[18] E. Stone, 115.
[19] M. Pérez Stable, 141. 20 Ibid., 141.
[20] Ibid., 141.

By 1990, women represented 39.6% of the labour force. This figure could be explained by the economic growth of the 1980's, which allowed for expansion of employment, particularly in the service sector. The crisis that followed the fall of the Soviet block did not have an immediate impact on female employment given that the areas most affected were transport, construction and industry, sectors in which women accounted for only 10% of workers. Statistics for 1994 show that women's participation rate at the end of that year was 40.6% (the figure given by the IDB for the same period is 38%).[21]

Even though female unemployment apparently could be contained, in general, the adjustment policies adopted after the fall of the Soviet block had particularly negative effects on women[22] who, despite the provisions about gender equality within the household specified in the Family Code of 1975, still carried most of the responsibilities in the domestic sphere. The crisis increased the demands on women not only within the household but as Maxine Molyneux points out, in their extended role as caregivers as well:

> *The declining quality and accessibility of public services involves a shift to unpaid services in the household. Restructuring thus creates a redefinition of the boundaries between the public and private realms with greater responsibility being devolved from state to family. [...] It is evident that even the limited restructuring that has taken place had already involved a renegotiation of reproductive responsibilities, and an absorption into the private sphere of some which were previously administered by the state*.[23]

This was particularly the case in child-care services, education and health. Even though no school or hospital closed even during the worst times of the crisis (as Castro proudly proclaims), the shortages in supplies and resources meant that these services could not be rendered properly so women became responsible for the care of children, the elderly, and the sick.[24] In other words, a fundamental condition for gender equality i.e. the socialization of household duties, which was at the best of times insufficient, was

[21] Even though women do not appear to have been significantly affected by unemployment, many chose to start small private enterprises (which were legalized in September 1993) mostly in gastronomy and handicrafts for tourism consumption.

[22] For a detailed analysis of the effects of the crisis of the nineties on Cuban women see Isabel Holgado Fernández, *No es fácil: Mujeres Cubanas y la Crisis Revolucionaria*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2000.

[23] M. Molyneux, *State, Gender and Institutional Change in Cuba's 'Special Period': The Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1996, 37.

[24] In the case of day-cares, for example, as of 1999 the age to qualify for admission has been changed from 45 days to six months, meaning that the responsibility of the State has now been transfer to the mother or extended family in what basically has become "volunteer" or unpaid labour. Smith and Padula, 120.

further eroded as the state relied on women's unpaid labour as one of the main strategies to buffer the effects of the crisis. As it will be shown later, it was able to do so mainly because of the patriarchal nature of the system.

The 1990's also witnessed further drawbacks in the progress made by women in the previous three decades. In 1993 the dollar was legalized and tourism on the island was consciously and aggressively expanded as the quickest path to generate much needed foreign currency. This created a double economy (and an evident class division) where those who could gain access to dollars were now in a much better economic position than those who relied on a very devalued Cuban peso. The prospect of better economic conditions offered by jobs in the tourist industry or in foreign companies operating in Cuba, has led many Cubans to abandon professional careers to search for work in positions where they can be remunerated in dollars. One of the options available for women is prostitution, which has become a problem just too visible to ignore.[25] This is particularly problematic because the early eradication of prostitution and the provision of health benefits and education were obvious positive landmarks for the revolution.

Even more problematic are the arguments given to explain (or even justify) this unfortunate phenomenon. In 1997 the Latin American Social Sciences Faculty of Cuba (FLACSO Cuba), an established research team within the University of Havana, released a series of papers on the situation of women during the Special Period which reflect the official position on the issue.[26] They stressed that prostitution is not a desperate option for women (as in the West, one assumes) because jobs in other sectors are still available to them. So, it is suggested that these women prostitute themselves for the fulfillment of very short-term aspirations, such as clothes, cosmetics, recreation, and maybe marriage to a foreigner, as if this justified the act of prostitution. It is also argued that there are no specific red zones so prostitution is practiced mostly in heavy tourist zones which, mixed with "normal life" makes it more visible and thus gives the appearance of being a larger problem than it actually is. In addition, it is said, the majority of prostitutes are not part of organized sex trade so they would not be in a relation of domination by intermediaries. To add to the confusion, it is remarked on how sexually liberated Cuban women are and how this often leads them to identify sexual liberation with prostitution so women do not see themselves as prostitutes. Apparently, this self-perception makes them more attractive to fo-

[25] Soliciting is open and relentless in Havana, where police raids are not an uncommon sight.

[26] Elena Diaz, et al. *Cuba, impacto de la crisis en grupos vulnerables: mujer, familia, infancia*, La Habana: Universidad de La Habana FLACSO, 1997.

reigners.[27] This type of conceptualization of prostitution in Cuba, which has become the official rhetoric on the subject, in effect, sanctions one of the most degrading practices of society, and puts into question the clarity of the leadership, particularly of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), regarding gender policy.

In addition, a relatively high percentage of female employment, whether in the formal or informal sectors, does not necessarily translate into economic independence of women from their husbands. Women still get lesser-paid jobs and are more likely to quit in order to take care of childcare and household duties leaving them in a position of dependency on their partners. Equally important is the rising number of households headed by women, mostly as the result of the high rate of divorce in the island.[28] While the FMC argues that one of the reasons for the high incidence of divorces is women's new economic solvency, it is a fact that divorced women are at an economic disadvantage while men usually improve their economic welfare after a divorce.[29] Also, divorced women usually are and feel responsible for

[27] In her article on prostitution in Cuba, Elena Diaz cites the commentaries of one tourist regarding Cuban prostitutes that illustrates this point in detail: "y ahí se encuentra la verdadera diferencia entre la jinetera cubana y la prostituta tradicional: la jinetera tiene alma (que le ha dado la Revolución quiera ella o no). Es una persona, no una cosa. Es libre y ejerce el jineterismo por esa libertad. Está preparada, tiene educación, tiene cierta cultura, tiene conversación, sabe presentarse, es alegre y le gusta disfrutar... El no está en condiciones de discernir (...) no se da cuenta que lo están engañando, que lo quieren utilizar. Se encariña, y a veces hasta se enamora. Ademas lo vuelve loco con el sexo. Lo que él obtuvo de su jinetera era parte de sus más irrealizables fantasías. Una mujer así no la ha tenido nunca." "And that is where you find the true difference between the Cuban "jinetera" and the traditional prostitute: the jinetera has soul (given by the Revolution whether she likes it or not). She is a person, not a thing. She is free and exercises "jineterismo" just because of that freedom. She is prepared, she has an education, she has a certain degree of culture, she has conversation, knows how to present herself, and she is cheerful and likes to enjoy herself (...) He is in no condition to discern (...) he is not aware that he is being deceived that he is being used. He becomes endeared, and sometimes he even falls in love. Also, she drives him nuts with sex. What he got from his jinetera is part and parcel of one of his most idealized fantasies. He has never had a woman like this" quoted in E. Dfaz, "Genero y poder: el caso de Cuba" in Elena Diaz, et al. *Cuba, impacto de la crisis en grupos vulnerables: mujer, familia, infancia.* (La Habana: Universidad de La Habana FLACSO, 1997), 41. (Author's translation).

[28] According to Marta Núńez Sarmiento "approximately one third of Cuban women wage-earners head their households." However, she includes single earners and those households where women are the higher earners so it is not clear what is the exact number of women sole household earner. Furthermore, given the dramatic house shortage in Cuba, particularly in La Habana, a large number of divorced couples stay under the same roof, making the rubric "head of household" harder to assess.

[29] M. Molyneux, 38.

the maintenance of the children of the marriage,[30] despite the fact that by law fathers are obliged to contribute equally. This is very difficult to enforce, particularly in cases (not so rare) where the father has gone abroad and is no longer heard from.

The lack of economic equality between genders is further aggravated by the fact that the law does not protect women economically, despite its claims to do so. As a case in point, Section 2 of the 1975 Family Code[31] is worth examining. This section is entitled "the economic basis of matrimony" and consists of four articles. Article 29 defines the economic basis of matrimony as the joint property of goods as established in the remaining three articles that composes this section. Article 30.1 specifies that income from either one or the two partners is to be considered joint property. Article 30.2 states that joint property also includes: "The goods and the rights acquired by virtue of a purchase made during the marriage with common funds, regardless of whether the purchased item is for joint use or for one of the partners." Article 31, however, states that: "The goods in the possession of the partners will be presumed to be common property as long as it is not proven that they are the sole property of one or the other." Article 32 specifies the items that are individual property of the partners, among which are included: "Those they purchased during the marriage with money derived from inheritance, in replacement or substitution of another item which is their property, and for commercial purposes (32.2)", "those which were purchased with the money of one of the partners (32.3)" and, "those which are for the exclusive use of each of the partners (32.5)." In other words, if a woman does not work and is dependent on the husband's salary, despite of it being "joint property" under the law, in practice she is placed in a situation of economic subordination not much different to the arrangement found in liberal democracies. Furthermore, the establishment of what is individual property of each of the partners is ambiguous and very hard to determine, let alone enforce. Article 32.5, for example, clearly contradicts 30.2; if the latter declares as joint property that acquired for the use of "one of the partners", then the former clearly contradicts it by stating that individual property is the one for the exclusive use of one of the partners.

These legal definitions confirm the role of the family as an economic unit little different from that found in liberal democracies. It not only sanctifies private property and a property relation within the family, but it perpe-

[30] Often women who enter into a new marriage or union still are entirely responsible for the maintenance of their children from the previous marriage. This points to the prevalence of bourgeois relationships where children are considered individual private property and their care is based on consanguinity.

[31] All quotations from the Family Code are taken from E. Stone, pp. 140-151.

tuates practices that have more to do with accumulation rather than socialization, such as inheritance rights. Furthermore, these definitions have tremendous implications for economically dependent women by leaving them vulnerable to their partner's moral integrity, which is not always certain. Section 3 of the Code, entitled "Responsibilities and obligations involved in joint property of goods" is an effort to avoid the kind of abuses that may take place in the case of a one earner family, but this is very difficult to enforce in a culture defined by patriarchal patterns of domination. This becomes even more significant when we consider that in 1995 of the 3,600,000 women (82.4% of the female population) that were affiliated to the FMC 42.5% were housewives.[32] This means that, approximately 1,530,000 women (35% of the total female population) were at the time, in one way or another, economically dependent. If students are included then this number rises to almost half the female population, and this does not account for the 17.6% of those women who were not affiliated to the FMC. It can be concluded, then, that legislation for the protection of women's economic interests within the marriage institution is, in some instances, more discriminatory than in most capitalist countries. Women do not fare much better regarding the division of labour in he domestic sphere.

Division of labour in the domestic sphere

Advances have been made with respect to the socialization of household chores traditionally done by women by means of the creation of public laundries, cafeterias, childcare operations, and other public services. While this is laudable, particularly when compared to other Latin American countries, it is no different from what has been a reality for decades in Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and other non-socialist countries. In Cuba, in addition, these services are in a constant state of flux between the public and the domestic sphere depending on economic conditions. In times of scarcity, such as prevailed during the 1990s, the domestic sphere takes on the responsibility for the reproductive function of society. Women are given the extra burden of performing these unproductive tasks because the traditional division of labour within the household persists.

The official rhetoric is quite contradictory on these subjects. While gender inequality within the family is officially acknowledged and even legislated against, there is plenty of evidence to show that, in fact, the traditional role of the family is being reinforced, and that women continue to be defined primarily as mothers. This attitude can be found in the pronounce-

[32] Holgado Fernández, 270.

ments of Vilma Espin who, in her inaugural speech for the FMC in 1960 noted that:

> *La mujer cubana, siempre presente en las horas decisivas de la historia, es hoy consciente de la responsabilidad que le corresponde y ha decidido también estrechar filas por encima de banderias y diferencias e integrar un sólido bloque, en defensa de nuestra Revolución y del futuro de nuestros hijos."*[33]

In the speech she gave ten years later, in 1970, in commemoration of the creation of the FMC, she acknowledges the difficulties encountered by women in attempting to participate politically:

> *Pero aún así realizan tareas dentro de la organización, dentro de las posibilidades que tienen. Y unas hacen tareas como dirigentes, tareas que les toman todo el tiempo que les queda disponible después de la atención a su familia y a las obligaciones domésticas.*
>
> *Sabemos que necesitamos crear los bienes materiales. Nosotras mismas somos parte de la fuerza de trabajo necesaria para crear esos bienes materiales que nos darán las posibilidades de contar con las instituciones y los servicios que necesitamos para poder trabajar mas libremente. Nuestras compañeras así lo comprenden y por eso salvan esos obstáculos, se cuidan unas a otras los niños, se resuelven sus problemas y dan el paso al frente*.[34]

In this statement, it can be seen that there is no mention of the integration of men into the sphere of domestic work. It is implicitly understood that women must take care of the family and the home. In short, the official position on the role of the family in society in Cuba does not differ much from that of the so-called "liberal democracies". As the Family Code states:

> *The socialist concept of the family is based on the fundamental consideration that it constitutes an entity in which social and personal interests are present and closely linked in view of the fact that it is the elementary cell of society and, as such, contributes to its development and plays an important role in the upbringing of the new generations. Moreover, as the center for relations of common existence between men and women and between them and*

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[33] V. Espín, *La Mujer en Cuba,* La Habana: Editora Política, 1990. "The Cuban woman, always present at the decisive moments of our history, today is conscious of her responsibility and has decided above partisanships and differences, to align herself in a solid block for the defense of our Revolution and the future of our children." (Author's translation)

[34] Ibid, pp. 15-16. "But even then they perform duties in the organization within their possibilities. And some perform as leaders, a task that takes all their time available after taking care of the family and household duties. We know we have to create material goods. We ourselves are part of the labour force necessary to create those goods that will allow us to have the institutions and services we need to work more freely. Our female comrades understand this and that is why they sort out the obstacles, they take care of each other's children, solve their problems and move forward." (Author's translation)

> *their children and between all of them with their relatives, it meets deep-rooted human needs in the social field and in the field of affection for the individual*.[35]

Furthermore, the traditional role of the family is further reinforced by the objectives of the code, which are:

> *• the strengthening of the family and of the ties of affection and reciprocal respect between its members;*
> *• the strengthening of legally formalized or judicially recognized marriage, based on absolute equality of rights between men and women.*
> *• the most effective fulfillment by parents of their obligations regarding the protection, moral upbringing, and education of their children so they can develop fully in every field as worthy citizens of a socialist society;*
> *• the absolute fulfillment of the principle of equality of all children*.[36]

Again, as Engels commented on the systems of law regarding marriage existing during his time, if the rights and obligations of the couple "were consistently carried into effect, women would have all that they could ask for."[37] But there can be no strengthening of ties of affection and reciprocal respect when there is no real equality among genders and this imbalance not only reinforces gender stereotypes but it also has a profound effect on children' perceptions and internalization of gender roles.

It can be concluded, then, that despite the apparent revolutionary tone of the Family Code at the time of its inception, in reality it has contributed to the perpetuation of a system of inequality, not only because of its internal flaws and contradictions, but also because of the near impossibility of enforcing the regulations within the Code that address gender issues and advance the quest for equality, such as sharing household duties and child rearing, child support after divorce and spousal abuse. In light of this, it is almost impossible not to question the role of the FMC, one of whose mandates is to defend the rights and represent the interests of its constituency.

The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC)

Our analysis of the trajectory of women's participation in the revolutionary process suggests that it has been tied to the socioeconomic needs of the Revolution rather than being the result of a deliberate attempt to address the question of equality. Women, in fact, now constitute a highly educated and well qualified reserve labour force within a system that disregards their

[35] E. Stone, 140.
[36] E, Stone, pp. 140-141.
[37] F. Engels, 210.

rights and continues to stress the role of the family as the "pillar of society", a position that denies the basic inequalities inherent to such an institution. Furthermore, the emancipation of women was never considered as a priority of the revolution at its inception, but rather as a byproduct of the change in the mode of production. The role of women was seen as that of supporters of the Revolution and one of the strategies to involve them in the process was through the creation of the FMC. This, the largest mass organization of its kind in Latin America, was initially conceived as a transmission belt between the masses (women in this case) and the leadership, but in practice it has acted to contain rather than advance gender issues:

Vilma Espín, the leader of the FMC since it was founded in 1960, has confirmed this repeatedly by stressing the fact that at the beginning "no hablábamos ni de liberación de la mujer, ni de la emancipación de la mujer, ni de la lucha por la igualdad, nosotros ni usamos esos términos en aquel momento, de lo que sí hablábamos era de la participación,"[38] and added elsewhere "desde los primeros momentos las leyes dejaban muy claro para esa madre, para esa ama de casa, para la mujer que habìa perdido sus hijos en la lucha, que esa Revolución era para beneficio de ella, de sus hijos y de la familia."[39] These comments reveal the lack of clarity with respect to the meaning of gender equality and socialism, which has characterized the FMC since its beginnings. It has not understood that a socialist revolution is concerned with ending all forms of oppression nor has it recognized the nature of women's oppression within the system. The organization defined its role mainly as subordinate to the overall project of the (male dominated) revolutionary leadership explicitly accepting whatever demands would be imposed upon it: "De nuestras futuras federadas que van creciendo esperamos muchas cosas más. Sabemos que cumplirán cualquier tarea que ordene el Partido, que ordene el Comandante en Jefe."[40] As a result, one of the main tasks of the FMC has been to organize women for volunteer work - where, according to Isabel Holgado Fernández, they hold an impressive record.[41] It is important to underline that volunteer work has been widely sanctioned by the leadership as the most appropriate venue for women's participation in public

[38] V. Espin, 99. "We did not talk of women's liberation, nor women's emancipation, nor struggle for equality, (we did not use those terms at the time) but of participation." (Author's translation).

[39] Ibid, 99. "From the very beginning laws made it very clear for that mother, for that housewife, for that woman that had lost her children in the struggle, that the Revolution would be for her benefit, her children's and the family's." (Author's translation)

[40] Ibid, 27. "Form the growing number of our future federates we expect much more. We know that they will carry on any task ordered by the Party, order by the Commander in Chief." (Author's translation)

[41] I. Holgado Fernández, pp. 268-276.

life.[42] This is directly tied to the perception of women as natural caretakers first of their children, then of their families and as a logical consequence, of society at large. As Holgado Fernández points out: "El don de la gratuidad o servidumbre voluntaxia de estas mujeres, llamada amor por los otros, ha sido uno de los grandes aportes con los que el poder revolucionario ha contado para su perpetuación en estos 40 años."[43]

The wealth generated by women's unpaid labour in the public and domestic spheres is, therefore, "unseen" and basically unaccounted for.

The high profile that women have as volunteers points to a further contradiction in the system when juxtaposed with their reduced role in "formal" politics, particularly at the higher levels. Out of 589 members in the current National Assembly; 134 are women (22.7%) showing a slight increase from the 1st National Assembly (1976-1981) where out of 481 members 105 were women (21.8%). The Council of State is composed of 31 members out of which S are women (16%). The Council of Ministers is composed of a President, the First Vice-president, six vice presidents, the secretary, 27 ministries and six central administrators. Of these positions, only two are filled by women (Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, and Ministry of Domestic Commerce).[44] Even though this lack of visibility in higher positions has been recognized at the leadership level, little has been done by them or the FMC to deal with this issue proactively. Women have larger representation at the lower levels of the political structure (such as in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution [CDR], for instance) in positions that usually involve a significant amount of, again, unpaid work.

Highly popular in the beginning, the FMC lost much of its impetus in the 1980s and 1990's precisely because in its role of supporter of state policy it could not represent its members whose interests often did not coincide with those of the state. As a case in point, Maxine Molyneaux observes that "the precipitate decline in the economy exposed the population to extremes of deprivation they had never dreamt of, and, while women struggled to cope as best they could, the FMC uttered not a word of protest about the policies pursued nor tried to place them in a gender perspective."[45] This is hardly

[42] For the lack of women's political participation see I. Holgado Fernández, Chapter VII.

[43] Ibid, 323. "The gift of giving for free or voluntary servitude of these women, so-called love for the others, has been one of the major contributions that the revolutionary power has counted on for its continuity during the last 40 years." (author's translation)

[44] Source http://www.embacuba.ca/gov.htm as of June 14, 2001. There is some discrepancy between these numbers and those from *Tribuna de La Habana* (07/16/00) which puts the percentage of women in the National Assembly at 27.6% and the number of ministers at three.

[45] M. Molyneux, 18.

surprising given the highly hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the system which has prevented the FMC from developing a gender specific agenda, and one of the reasons for this curtailment can no doubt be attributed to the deeply rooted "machista" character of Cuban society.

Machismo/Marianismo

In Latin America "machismo" can be defined as the cult of the male. According to this, maleness is defined in terms of violence, aggression, physical power and sexual strength and lack of control over all of these. Among men, the macho engages in extreme behavior to prove his physical strength, for example, he may drink too much, opt for aggressive sports, and/or resort to violence at the slightest of offences. He also brags about his sexual prowess, particularly in terms of the number of women he has conquered. A macho's libido is supposed to be high and uncontrollable so he can never be without a woman, or women, because this would put into question his virility. His virility is also asserted by the number of children he has a fact with obvious repercussions for women and their reproductive choices. A man's honor is of the utmost importance and it depends mostly on the virtuousness of the women who surround him, particularly daughters, sisters and mothers (who are all saints), so he has to protect them from bad influences and watch their behavior to ensure that they do not bring the whole family into disgrace. If that were the case, he has to restore his honor by whatever means, in extreme cases this can result in the death of the woman who committed the misdeed, or in a variety of other forms (ostracism of the woman in question, unwanted marriage, etc.). So, among women the macho is authoritarian and sexually aggressive. Here lies the biggest contradiction, since on the one hand, he has to protect the women in his immediate circle of influence from falling prey to other aggressors, yet he has to be an aggressor as well to prove his own virility.

Machismo's female counterpart is Marianismo, a set of attitudes and expectations for women based largely in the model of womanhood exemplified by the Virgin Mary. First and foremost of these is motherhood as the highest and noblest purpose in life. This defines women as inherently nourishing, patient, self-sacrificing, pain-enduring, source of refuge for men, and possessor of unlimited amounts of self-control. It should be stressed, however, that these patterns of behaviour are not atypical in Cuba, as they are also prevalent in different degrees in all Latin American countries. The problem that concerns us here is that, after forty years of proclaimed socialism, not much has changed in this regard in Cuba. It is acknowledged that cultural attitudes and patterns change slowly despite a change in the mode of pro-

duction, however, in a society that declares itself socialist, higher levels of consciousness on the issue are expected, and a much concerted effort of society as a whole to overcome this, the most fundamental of all inequalities.

Machismo/marianismo, then, becomes the ideological rationalization for the unpaid and under-paid labour of women. In other words, unconscious cultural traits are used consciously ("because that is the way it is" in the vernacular) to perpetuate gender inequality. In the case of Cuba, because of their prescribed roles women have been prohibited from performing certain jobs, they still work more in poorly paid jobs, they have been called upon to contribute to production when needed and laid off when not. Considering this, the fact that they excel in certain areas such as law, medicine and technology becomes more of a propaganda item than an example of an all-inclusive process towards gender equality.

In this sense, Cuban women's perception of themselves as liberated and "equal" loses much of its meaning as well. In fact, it can be asserted that equality exists only on an abstract level. Reality, as we have seen, shows that their insertion into the public sphere has not been the result of addressing gender issues systematically, but of the political and economic needs of the system. Despite Cuban women's sexual freedom, they are still subservient, inferiors, objectified and confined to strictly define traditional roles (as mother and caregivers). This explains the emphasis on mother's day celebrations, the 15th birthday party for young girls (coming of age), a seeming obsession with their appearance (particularly the care of nails) their demeanor and body language, and a whole set of attitudes that are considered cultural signifiers of *cubanidad* and are, in many cases (the Tropicana dancers come to mind), a matter of pride for both men and women.[46] Such deeply ingrained cultural notion blinds their significance in terms of gender. The fact remains that the prevalence of female stereotypes and overt sexist double standards in Cuban society today is a fact that does not escape any gender-conscious foreigner visiting the island.[47]

[46] More problematic, as Sheryl L. Lutjens points out, is the participation of Cuban women as subjects in the March 1991 issue of Playboy. S. Lutjens, "Remaking the Public Sphere: Women and Revolution in Cuba", in Mary Ann Tetreault, *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994, 380.

[47] To illustrate this point two anecdotes of personal experience are included. I was advised not to run, even though I was in a hurry, if I did not want to be mistaken for a foreigner, because, I was told, Cuban women do not run. The subtext being that it is most "ungainly" and "unfeminine" to do so.

On another occasion, I was talking with the manager of the hotel I used to stay in when doing research. I was asking her about the increase in prostitution and how it had affected the hotel. She told me that her hotel was respectable, so she would not allow customers to bring in a different young woman every night, but if one of the regular customers

This is further reinforced by the spread of *la doble moral* o *discurso de la negación* (denial discourse) as it would be more accurately described. In Cuban politics, this means that, given the lack of institutional channels to express any form of disagreement with governmental policies, what is not said in public is said in the hallways. As Perez-Stable says "growing numbers of citizens were living in a second society: acquiescing in public and dissenting in private."[48] The *doble moral*, however, is not circumscribed to the sphere of politics and economics, but extends to almost all, if not all, aspects of Cuban life. In a country that defines itself as socialist, and where the official rhetoric continuously compares the system to imperialism to stress the evils of the latter (of which, undoubtedly there are many), there is really no room left for constructive self criticism. Indeed, by definition, the maladies that affect Cuban society which are normally identified as being characteristic of capitalist societies cannot, and are not, officially acknowledged. This also applies to certain practices, which not only unmask the economic failure of the system but also point to its failure in terms of creating a true socialist consciousness in the population. Only under these conditions of negation, for example, can the black market survive. In fact, people do not refer to items purchased on the black market as such but as obtained "on the street" (en la calle). Likewise, it is commonly acknowledged that private appropriation of state resources occurs more often than not. Both activities (black market and theft from the state) are referred to in private conversation but no in public because they are, of course, illegal and can carry strong consequences, but the government turns a blind eye to it. To acknowledge the existence of these two anomalies would be 1) to acknowledge the failure of its economic policies and 2) it would encourage popular dissent, for the majority, these two practices are simply strategies to supply what the state does not and cannot, given its political/ideological limitations.[49]

As Cuba's official discourse of its political and economic reality is constructed to accommodate to a particular ideological model, so is the offi-

(mostly business men) had a particular Cuban friend "to keep him company" every time he was in Havana, that was another story, she would make sure that the staff was aware of who she was and would make allowances to let her in, but a different woman every night would be totally out of the question.

She was in fact condoning "selective" prostitution and, furthermore, justifying it on the basis of so called men's innate, biologically determined sexual needs.

[48] M. Pérez-Stable, 209. This obviously has a stalling effect on needed change, but it also puts into question the so-called democratic process, which the government proclaims, exists in Cuba.

[49] See L. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 391-394.

cial discourse in other spheres of society.[50] The *doble moral* o *discurso de la negación* also applies to the situation of women, but with one fundamental difference. While *la doble moral* is recognizable and acknowledged in the sphere of politics and economics, in the case of women it is more pervasive and hard to detect (invisible) mostly because of women's quiet acquiescence and adherence to their primary role as "biological reproductors" within the constraints of the family.

So far it has been argued the necessary goals for freeing women have not been met in Cuba. Their achievement would have required a deeper understanding of the sources of gender inequality, not just amongst women, but primarily amongst the leadership of the revolution who have been no more successful than women in escaping from the machismo/marianismo cultural construct. Nothing can be more pointing than the example set by the *líder máximo* whose wife and family have never been acknowledged publicly (for all intents and purposes she is "invisible") and apart from three legitimate children the exact number of his progeny is unknown.[51] Furthermore, Fidel's owns words attest to this stereotypical view of women that predominates among the leaders of the Revolution:

> *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. [...] And if women are physically weaker, if women must be mothers, if on top of their social obligations, if on top of their work, they carry the weight of reproduction and child-bearing, of giving birth to every human being who enters the world, and if they bear the physical and biological sacrifices that those functions bring with them, it is just that women should be given all the respect and all the consideration they deserve in 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.*[52]

Such views not only result in a paternalistic treatment of women but also endorse the role of the family as the main unit in society and deny the existence of the "gender question". As Ian Lumsden points out, these attitudes derive from the "belief that all social problems have been solved (or

[50] This is the case for the black population. Despite the fact that they have gained much with the Revolution in terms of health and education, they are largely absent in high managerial and political positions. Also, contrary to the official rhetoric, racial discrimination is widespread, particularly at the level of interpersonal relations.

[51] I. Holgado Fernández, 326.

[52] E. Stone, 68.

soon will be) by the Communist Party, which has the insight to define these problems even better that the people experiencing them can do."[53]

Already in 1973, Susan Kaufman Purcell accurately commented on the meaning of the top down approach of the regime regarding women and concluded that while on the one hand it had a positive impact when the political elite saw the advantages of the inclusion of women in society, on the other it left women vulnerable to the priorities set by the regime which, as it has been demonstrated, have not included gender issues in a proactive manner.[54] This is why, even though the obvious gains made by Cuban women since 1959 cannot be contested, they have not resulted in real gender equality in Cuba today. Equality will not be achieved as long as the institution of the family remains intact. And it has remained so to this day because, backed by the powerful ideological tool provided by the cultural construct of machismo/marianismo, the state has taken the role of the defender of the model of the family found in liberal democracies, and has not prioritized the socialization of domestic labour.

Signs of change

Until recently most literature by and about Cuban women since 1959 concentrated on the achievements of the revolution in changing the status of women from second or third class citizens into one of equality with their male counterparts. This is the case in virtually all of the publications produced by the FMC and by Cuban academics.[55] These accounts are valuable sources, but can be misleading. Despite an apparent "objectivity" they tend to be biased and selective in their data.[56] This can also be explained by the *doble moral* mentioned above, whereby only the positive is acknowledged and the less than positive either ignored or denied.

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[53] L. Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); 186.

[54] S. Kaufman Purcell, "Modernizing Women for a Modern Society: The Cuban case", in Ann Pescatello, ed. *Female and Male in Latin America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973, p. 259.

[55] Works of non-Cuban such as Margaret Randall and Elizabeth Stone should also be included.

[56] The case of academic publications is quite remarkable. They all rely heavily on quantative research designed to demonstrate positive results while less palatable data is obviated. Also, all documents follow the same methodology, which consists of a comparison of the state of women before, and after the Revolution, a comparison with Third World countries followed by one with First World countries. While they may contribute to the advancement of knowledge about gender issues, their main purpose is clearly to demonstrate the accomplishments of the Revolution. To this effect, quite often statistics are selective and, therefore, misleading.

Attempts to make a more critical analysis appeared in the mid-1980s, and particularly after 1988, when Cuban delegations began to participate in the Latin American Feminist Encounters. Here, they were exposed to different realities and research methodologies that forced them to look at their own experience much more critically.[57] Also, some new spaces have been opening in the 1990's, which hold the possibilities for women to develop their own agendas without being restrained by the narrow focus and mandate of the FMC.[58]

Equally refreshing has been the development abroad of a vast literature on the subject which offers a critical assessment and analysis of gender in Cuba forty years after the revolution. While most of these works are sympathetic to the goals and aims of the Revolution they also point out to its failures, and while most agree to the latter, there is no consensus about what went wrong.[59] The important point, however, is that there is an open debate on the subject, particularly inside the island. If we accept Holgado Fernández statement that "la actual situación de crisis ha puesto de manifiesto, con demasiada crudeza, el verdadero cariz ideológico del Estado cubano respecto a las mujeres'[60] then there is hope that Cuban women will be empowered by this new self-awareness and will be able to work proactively for their equal place in society.

As a final note, it is important to recuperate the notion of socialism as the eradication of all forms of oppression. Considering that the most significant of these forms occurs in the family, priority should be given to address the contradictions inherent to this institution. This has not been the case in Cuba, nor in any of the other socialist experiments to date. The next task, then, is to assess the extent to which this lack has prevented the formation of a genuinely socialist society in Cuba, and contributed to the demise of other socialist projects as in the eastern block. One cannot speak of socialism while one half, or more of the members of society are not able to truly take control over their own lives.

[57] M. Molyneux, 11.
[58] Ibid., pp 46-49.
[59] Mention Smith and Padula, Maxine etc. and their analysis. Lumsden
[60] "The current crisis has openly exposed, in all its crudeness, the true ideological bent of the Cuban State regarding women." (Authors' translation) I. Holgado Fernández, 334.