

FIDEL CASTRO and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in CUBA

Julie Marie Bunck

The Pennsylvania State University Press University Park, Pennsylvania

3

Castro and the Goal of Sexual Equality

[T]he Cuban Revolution is the business of machos. . . . Machos drive jeeps, have big pistols, and make revolutions. . . . The Revolution, like certain brandies, is only for men. All that rhetoric of "assault brigades against the tomato" . . . and other belligerent formulas to get people to work, reflect the epic machismo background of the revolution. . . .

[E]ach leader, each time he zips up his olive green fly and checks the lock in his pistol, reinforces his male ego and congratulates himself for being such a macho. -- Carlos Alberto Montaner

To create an egalitarian society for women and men has long stood as a widely acclaimed goal of the Cuban Revolution. Upon seizing power Fidel Castro and his colleagues in the Cuban government emphasized equality between the sexes and women's rights: the liberation of women from the "chains" of prerevolutionary capitalist society. Castro continually encouraged women to leave the home, join the labor force, liberate themselves from their traditional roles, and view themselves differently in Cuba's revolutionary society. He also insisted that men, too, transform their prerevolutionary views toward women and women's role in Cuban society. In 1966 Castro declared that the women's movement represented a "revolution within the Revolution." He stated forcefully: "The most revolutionary thing that the Revolution is doing . . . is the revolution that is occurring among the women."¹

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Cuban women, like women from the United States and Latin America, fought for political rights, particularly the right to vote.² During the 1960s, after the triumph of the Revolution, women's issues took on new prominence in Cuban society. At a time when women's movements throughout the rest of Latin America remained weak and insignificant, women in Cuba made some dramatic strides. They did so contemporaneously with the United States civil rights movement and before many of the advances of the more recent American women's rights movement.

Women's liberation in Cuba, however, took on quite different meanings and assumed quite different objectives from the campaign in its northern neighbor. Unlike the movement in the United States, which finally became a strong political force nearly a decade after the Cuban Revolution, women's liberation in Cuba originated from official objectives rather than from the aspirations of women outside of government. As Susan Kaufman Purcell has written, "the impetus for the modernization of Cuban women comes from above. . . . Cuban women are to be made equal by governmental direction and means."³

In the United States, Mexico, Argentina, and other countries, by contrast, women's liberation movements are not government-based. In the United States, for example, private groups and individuals provide the impetus, funding and support, ideas and direction. Although federal and state government bodies in the United States have implemented equal opportunity laws, the movement to bring equality to women is organized and led by the citizens themselves. Indeed, on regular occasions women's rights in the United States have collided with the objectives and ideals of the administration in office.

In Cuba, however, the women's movement operated at the direction of, and hence with the full support of, the revolutionary leadership. Since the Cuban

movement functioned completely under government auspices, the women's organization took an approach that appears more traditionally "feminine" than "feminist."⁴ Women's liberation in Cuba never denoted individual achievement, personal development, and independence, as it has in the United States and other countries. The Cuban movement subordinated the independence of women to service and loyalty to state and society. Although the leadership referred to liberation as women's freedom from responsibility in the home and for the children, the objective was not simply, or even primarily, personal fulfillment for Cuban women. Instead, the goal was to free women to serve the Revolution more completely. "An individual alone can do nothing," Castro stated, "an individual alone is very little, but an individual integrated into the strength of society is everything."⁵ The Cuban leader continued: "The liberation of women is dependent upon the Revolution's success in attaining its primary objectives: to establish a wholly socialist economy and society. Women can be free only to the extent that they commit themselves first and foremost to the Revolution."⁶

WOMEN IN PREREVOLUTIONARY CUBA

Women in prerevolutionary Cuba had achieved a more respectable status visavis men than women in any other Latin American country, with the possible exceptions of Argentina and Uruguay.⁷ With regard to political rights, Cuban women received the vote in 1934. Among the Latin American states only women in Uruguay, Brazil, and Ecuador obtained voting rights earlier.⁸ Rates of abortion and divorce in prerevolutionary Cuba were among the highest in Latin America. In education the percentage of female students from ages five to fifteen approximately equaled that of male students.⁹ According to Cuba's 1953 census, the percentage of illiterate males (26 percent) exceeded that of illiterate females (21 percent).¹⁰ Within Latin America only Argentina and Chile had higher female literacy rates (85 percent and 79 percent respectively).¹¹ With regard to work positions and social status, the percentages of Cuban women working outside the home, att

ending school, and practicing birth control surpassed the corresponding percentages in nearly every other Latin American country.

Before the Revolution women had been elected to Cuba's House of Representatives and Senate. They had served as mayors, judges, cabinet members, municipal counselors, and members of the Cuban foreign service.¹² The Constitution of 1940, one of the most progressive in the Western Hemisphere with regard to women's status, prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex and called for equal pay for equal work.

Susan Kaufman Purcell has attributed the relatively higher status of prerevolutionary Cuban women, when compared to women in most other Latin American countries, to three factors. First, the Catholic Church played a lesser role in the colonization of Cuba and remained less powerful and influential on the island than throughout the rest of Spanish America. The patriarchal traditions of the Church, particularly in the nineteenth century and before, tended to subordinate women and confine them to childbearing and child rearing in the home. Such an influence proved to be somewhat less important in Cuba than in neighboring Latin American countries.

Second, unlike most other Latin American countries, Cuba never developed a dominant *hacienda* system emphasizing traditional patriarchal authority. Rather, Cuban plantations employed a wage-earning labor force. This agricultural structure engendered a stronger, more independent role for women in society. Finally, the island's proximity and economic ties to the United States substantially influenced Cuban culture. North American social mores, which have been considerably more sexually egalitarian than those of much of Latin America, affected significantly Cuban social mores, especially in the urban areas.¹³

To be sure, prerevolutionary society retained certain extreme inequalities between the sexes. Despite the early date in obtaining relatively advanced legal rights, prerevolutionary women were far from equal partners in govern

ing the state. Women "seldom [ran] for office nor [did] they appear often as members of boards, commissions, or other appointive positions at the policymaking level." Nearly all women in politics or public office found themselves relegated chiefly to subordinate roles.¹⁴

Moreover, although Cuba was less influenced by the Catholic Church and somewhat more socially egalitarian than other Latin American states, an authoritarian and patriarchal family structure, part of the island's Hispanic legacy, did indeed influence society to a considerable degree. This was particularly the case in the isolated, rural areas, which encompassed more than 43 percent of the population.¹⁵ Within the Cuban family a double standard prevailed that required "good" women to demonstrate unquestioned fidelity, while allowing, indeed encouraging, infidelity among men. Cuban society taught young boys to demonstrate their machismo: a Latin notion of male superiority and aggressiveness demonstrated by virility, strength, confidence, courage, and power. Young girls, however, were expected to be gracious, attractive, retiring, virtuous, and virgin.¹⁶

Prior to the Revolution most Cubans believed that the woman's place should center on the home. Although in practice only upperclass women had the security necessary to focus all their attention on the family, middleclass women tended to emulate this ideal whenever possible. By the late 1940s, however, Cuban society had accepted the idea that upperclass and uppermiddleclass women might choose to work in the absence of financial need, provided the labor occurred in a "respectable" professional or bureaucratic setting. At the same time lowerclass women, who often had to perform low status menial labor outside the home, could rarely afford what was seen as the luxury of unemployment.¹⁷ Organized child care in prerevolutionary Cuba remained extremely limited. Often, lowerclass working women took their older daughters out of school to supervise younger children and, in essence, to serve as surrogate mothers. This contributed to a high dropout rate among girls.¹⁸

Unquestionably, women in prerevolutionary Cuba held an inferior position in the labor force. In 1943, for example, women comprised only 10 percent of this force. Ten years later the figure had increased to 13.7 percent. Thereafter it grew steadily, though slowly: by 1956 to 14 percent and by 1959 to 17 percent.¹⁹ Although dramatically underrepresented in white-collar and blue-collar jobs, women did account for approximately 46 percent of Cuba's professionals and semiprofessionals. Of course, 60 percent of these women worked in the traditional occupations of nurse and teacher. In 1957 women filled more than 48 percent of jobs in the service sector. About one quarter of working women were employed as domestic servants. Indeed, more than 90 percent of all domestic workers were female. Fewer than 3 percent of Cuban women, however, worked in agricultural, fishing, construction, and transport industries.

As was true throughout the region, most Cubans tended to view higher paying positions as male jobs. Nevertheless, in 1956/ 1957 Cuban women did enjoy more job security and stability than men and were less affected by unemployment.²⁰ On the eve of the Revolution the number of women in the work force was increasing steadily. And the legal status of women had improved substantially beyond that of women in many other Latin American countries.

PHASE ONE

In August 1960 the Cuban leadership founded the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) to organize and develop the movement. Fidel Castro selected his brother Raúl's wife, Vilma Espín Guilloys, to lead the organization. In the three decades under Espín's leadership the Federation regularly and faithfully turned to the government for guidance and instruction. Its ultimate responsibility to the Cuban Communist Party was never seriously challenged. Indeed, Castro and his colleagues determined the direction of the movement. They dictated the women's goals and the extent of change in women's social roles. Although Raúl Castro assured observers that Fidel "clearly understands . . . the problems of women in society and their decisive

role in the Revolution," the FMCs' unflinching commitment to promoting the Castro government's objectives raises serious questions concerning the extent to which women's voices were heard within their own women's rights movement.²¹

Certainly, the Cuban movement enjoyed significant benefits. Aside from minimal membership dues, the state provided funding. Since the government always covered its expenses, the Federation operated without serious concerns about financial security. Nor did the movement have to fight antiquated laws or constitutional provisions. In creating laws compatible with its ideological rhetoric and objectives, the Cuban Revolution eliminated legal obstacles to equality. The government also undeniably served as a public relations instrument to promote and endorse its women's movement. This governmental support provided the FMC with a degree of legitimacy, and authority, over Cuban women.

These advantages must, of course, be balanced against substantial drawbacks. Most important, the government determined the rate and scope of initiatives to bring about social change. The Castro leadership, not Cuba's women, decided what was and was not necessary and appropriate concerning women's rights and needs. Throughout the first thirty years of the Revolution, women exercised little control over which aspects of the movement the government chose to emphasize. Women traditionally carried out FMC activities under government direction, supervision, and leadership.²² Perhaps as a consequence of the movement's domination by revolutionary leaders, the vast majority of whom were men, the Federation consistently emphasized economic goals. Other conceivable objectives for a liberation movement, such as women's independence and personal development, were all too often ignored.²³

Participation in the Revolution

With the establishment of the FMC, Cuban leaders made a concerted effort to involve women in the Revolution. According to the Federation's President, Vilma Espín, the organization's purpose was to prepare women "education ally, politically and socially to participate in the Revolution." The FMC mainly sought "the incorporation of women in work."²⁴ As one article in *Mujeres*, the FMC's official magazine, read, "We cannot cease being underdeveloped while all women able to work are not doing so."²⁵ The Federation sought not only to bring women into the labor force by teaching basic skills and disseminating employment information but also to politicize and desocialize them. The 1965 FMC Constituent Congress stated: "Women can enjoy all their rights, so that they can participate in all forms of work, free themselves from domestic slavery and the heavy burden of prejudice."²⁶

Cuban women, however, proved to be noticeably reluctant to join an organization created by the government, somewhat artificially perhaps, to look after their needs. Initially, relatively few women became members: by the end of 1960 the FMC numbered fewer than 100,000 women.²⁷ Over time, however, increasing efforts by the Federation and the government, particularly during the Revolutionary Offensive, succeeded in markedly raising membership figures. By the end of 1968, 981,105 Cuban women had joined the Federation. By 1977 FMC membership peaked at 2,182,953. At that time more than 80 percent of Cuban women over thirteen years of age belonged to the organization.²⁸

What were the Federation women doing during these years of increasing membership? In 1961 the FMC sponsored campaigns to encourage women to enter the labor force and to combat male prejudice against females by taking jobs traditionally set aside for men. The Federation hung posters throughout the cities calling for women to liberate themselves from oppression.²⁹ In assisting the Ministry of Education in assembling school textbooks, the FMC kept a close watch to avoid using stereotypic photos of women. The FMC sought to depict a different view of Cuban women in

school texts by portraying women as factory workers and agricultural laborers on statefarms. Moreover, the textbooks showed children as independent and revolutionary. In one text a young girl encourages her mother not to hurry home at dusk but to remain at the factory to work a few hours more.³⁰

Women and Education The FMC also played an important role in organizing and directing the literacy campaign of 1961 in which more than fifty thousand women ultimately participated.³¹ For the first time the Cuban government sent adolescent girls out on their own, far from home and the protection of their parents. Such a policy would have been astonishing, unthinkable perhaps, only a few years before.

This wholly new experience for Cuban girls caused a great deal of anxiety for parents.³² To assuage their fears, Fidel Castro insisted that the girls working in the countryside with the literacy campaign would remain "virtuous." They would not be living with the peasants. The girls would be more closely supervised than their male counterparts and would be housed in huts with females only. The sexual revolution had not reached Cuba, and the leadership tacitly assured parents that the familiar sexual double standard still prevailed. Nevertheless, such female participation in the literacy campaign was quite extraordinary for Latin America in the 1960s. The literacy campaign workers canvassed from house to house persuading illiterate people of both sexes to sign up for instruction.³³ During these visits the FMC also encouraged women to send their children to school.

After the literacy campaign the FMC organized schools to educate domestic servants. Young teachers, who had been trained for the literacy campaign, taught sewing, reading, writing, and other basic skills. Academic subjects included history, geography, current events, physical education, and the laws of revolutionary Cuba. By the end of 1961 the government had established sixty schools for domestic servants with a total of twenty thousand pupils.³⁴

The Cuban leadership also charged the FMC with the responsibility of raising the educational level and the standard of living of peasant women. In 1961 about fourteen thousand rural women came to Havana for six months to study dressmaking, cooking, and hygiene, and "to develop their cultural knowledge and study at first hand the achievements of the Revolution."³⁵ The government rewarded the graduates of these courses with equipment and material, such as sewing machines and fabrics. Upon returning to the countryside, the graduates could teach other women the same skills. By 1968 more than fifty-five thousand peasant women had graduated from these courses. For illiterate women not yet incorporated into the labor force, the FMC sponsored courses on subjects ranging from health care and personal hygiene to typing and handicrafts, from gardening and physical education to traffic directing. Equally significant, perhaps, the courses were designed to teach a rather traditional set of social mores: instructing women on how to be "ladies" and to carry out "*women's responsibilities*."³⁶

Curbing Prostitution

In 1961, with the assistance of the FMC, the Cuban government vigorously set out to curb prostitution, which it labelled a repugnant "social illness." The leaders considered prostitution not a crime but a product of prerevolutionary society's selfish capitalist culture. Government troops raided the prostitution sections of Havana, rounded up hundreds of women, photographed and fingerprinted them, and required each woman to have a complete physical examination.

Curiously, while the government outlawed pimping in December 1961, it never actually prohibited prostitution. Wary of taking such a radical step, **Castro** even announced publicly that the traditional *posadas*, government run hotels, would remain open to allow men and women to rent a room by the hour. *Posadas*, he insisted, "satisfy a social need."³⁷ While *posadas* did afford married and unmarried couples privacy that might be lacking at

home, their managers could not be expected to screen out prostitutes and their customers. Thus, in reality, the government sought only to control prostitution, not to prohibit it.³⁸

Cuban leaders did, however, make an effort to educate women who wished to quit prostitution by sending them to schools to learn hairdressing, typing, and sewing. The women were taught to "dress and fix their hair in ways that were not ornate. They were briefed on table manners and helped to break other bad habits."³⁹ The government then issued the reformed prostitutes uniforms and assigned them to factories and other places to work. Although the government scorned prostitutes who refused these new jobs and barred them from working for specified periods, it rewarded cooperative women with diplomas at special graduation ceremonies.

Despite some successful results, the government's attempt in the early 1960s to diminish prostitution and restore the dignity and self-esteem of prostitutes revealed that the leaders themselves harbored certain discriminatory attitudes. Taking women from the countryside and the slums and sending them to schools to learn hairdressing, typing, sewing, and cooking, how to dress and how to fix their hair, hardly amounts to a revolutionary break from traditional *machismo* attitudes. Moreover, rewarding women with sewing machines reveals something of the leadership's inability to eradicate its own prerevolutionary gender attitudes.

Day-Care Centers

Aside from promoting literacy and curbing prostitution, the Cuban government, assisted by the FMC, also created daycare centers. Many women, regardless of educational and occupational opportunities, simply could not join the labor force because they had children that required care. Thus, in 1961 the FMC opened the first *círculos infantiles*, state-operated daycare centers that took over certain traditionally female duties and responsibilities. The

FMC also established schools at which teachers and directors of the *círculos* were taught psychology and human relations, hygiene and first aid, history, politics, and ideology, teaching techniques, and childcare.

The purpose of the daycare centers, FMC leader Clementina Serra declared, was to allow women to enter the work force liberated from their traditional roles. The *círculos*, Serra maintained, sought "to take care of the children of working mothers, free them from responsibility while working, and offer them the guarantee that their children will be well cared for and provided with all that is necessary for improved development."⁴⁰ To bring the daycare message to most Cuban families, the government sponsored radio and television programs and personal interviews with mothers. It published a monthly magazine *Simientes*, which explained and discussed the daycare program.⁴¹ The *círculos* thus became a costly centerpiece of the Castro government's social initiatives.⁴²

That the day-care centers could serve ideological purposes other than liberating women most likely helped to justify to the Cuban leaders their high costs. Consequently, the daycare program was never designed solely to liberate women. In the *círculos* children could be separated from values at home that were incompatible with those of the leadership.⁴³ In addition, the government opened boarding schools for older children. The daycare centers and boarding schools thus augmented the revolutionary government's direct influence over the education of Cuban children. Since the *círculos* employed only women, they became female bastions that provided numerous job opportunities for women in search of employment. Cuban tradition dictated that no men would seriously be considered for any daycare position. As one young revolutionary explained, "Men can't behave like women, since men can't be mothers like women can."⁴⁴ Leaders and citizens alike, wrote an observing scholar, believed that women were "better prepared by nature to care for young children."⁴⁵ Another wrote, "No one seemed ready to imagine men staffing the daycare centers."⁴⁶ Often the leadership staffed the daycare centers with women who had been prerevolutionary

domestic servants because they had experience in caring for children. And, not surprisingly, daycare workers were the lowest paid of all occupational sectors in Cuba; their wages equalled a mere 77 percent of the average national wage.⁴⁷

Once again the Castro government's rhetorical zeal for equality between the sexes masked sharp limits in practice. Not only did the daycare centers employ only women but they taught certain subjects, such as embroidery and sewing, only to girls. In the mid 1970s the Cuban Minister of Education affirmed, "We just can't have little boys sewing and crocheting. . . . [T]he parents would never accept it."⁴⁸ The leaders, then, accommodated and protected many attitudes that contrasted markedly with the official goal of the women's movement: complete equality between the sexes.

As part of the campaign to increase the size and productivity of the Cuban labor force, in the early 1960s the government initiated a program to provide three meals a day in the workplace. This measure lightened the burden of housework for women and allowed the state to control food rationing more effectively. On May 1, 1966, Fidel Castro revealed an underlying economic motive behind FMC programs like the *círculos*, boarding schools, and meal plans in commenting: "[T]he entire nation profits from the incorporation of thousands . . . say of a million women into production; if each one of those million women produces the value of a thousand pesos per year, a million women means a thousand million pesos in created wealth."⁴⁹

During the early 1960s the FMC carried out other duties as well. It sponsored political education and emulation programs; it organized vaccination efforts, voluntary work programs, and Women's and Red Cross Brigades.⁵⁰ In addition, the FMC began distributing a magazine, *Mujeres*, which discussed women's contributions to education, production, and culture. A traditional, even paternalistic, view of women marked much of the writing in *Mujeres*; indeed, it nearly always contained a statement by

Castro praising "exemplary women." *Mujeres* published articles discussing how to make toys, knit and sew, care for sick children, use and care for a pressure cooker, and make the home more attractive. These articles in the official publication of Cuba's women's movement tended to reinforce prerevolutionary attitudes toward women in society.⁵¹

Thus, the Castro government, while formally espousing equality between the sexes, did not vigorously refute many prevailing notions regarding the suitability of particular roles for females. Women were still expected to be chiefly responsible for home and child care. The leadership made little effort to change the traditional belief that women are more suited for certain occupations, such as teachers and daycare workers.⁵² Even Che Guevara, the Revolution's most outspoken advocate of sexual equality, viewed the daily business of Revolution as largely a man's project. As Che explained:

Our vanguard revolutionaries must idealize their love for the people. . . . They cannot descend with doses of daily affection to the terrain where ordinary men put their love into practice. The leaders of the revolution have children who do not learn to call their father with their first faltering words; they have wives who must be part of the general sacrifice of their lives to carry the revolution to its destination.

⁵³

Gains Made by Women

Despite the fact that revolutionary rhetoric far outdistanced the government's actual practices, Cuban women during the 1960s did make remarkable social gains in many areas. For instance, the government increased the number of women in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. By 1963 women comprised nearly 44 percent of CDR members.⁵⁴ CDR membership provided women an opportunity to participate actively in the Revolution. The government also began to distribute free contraceptives, thus giving some women an opportunity to avert pregnancy.

Moreover, FMC members, perceiving divorce as a woman's way out of an excessively authoritarian marriage, successfully urged the government to facilitate divorce proceedings. The organization also effectively pressured courts to enforce alimony payments more thoroughly.⁵⁵ During these years

the government also legalized abortion. Castro, who personally considered abortions "repugnant," had ensured that the state outlaw them in the early years. However, after numerous clandestine abortions continued to occur, the government opted to make abortion services legal, available, and free for all women. Each of these measures could be viewed as a considerable concession to Cuban women.⁵⁶ Certainly, each significantly weakened the traditional bonds between women and family life and provided women with greater freedom in making decisions regarding pregnancy.

In 1968, however, almost a decade after the triumph of the Revolution, women still comprised only 15.6 percent of the Cuban work force.⁵⁷ This figure was not substantially higher than the 1958 figure of 14.8 percent.⁵⁸ In this respect the vast amount of energy and money expended on *círculos*, publications, boarding schools, television and radio programs, and women's educational programs failed to bring about a substantial increase in the number of women in the Cuban workforce.

Moreover, surprisingly few parents chose to send their children to daycare centers. In 1968 fewer than one out of ten children attended *círculos* while their mothers worked. Several reasons may help to explain why parents refused to commit their children to government daycare. First, at this early date in the Revolution, many families still had live-in relatives or domestic hired help with whom to leave their children. In addition, in the early stages of the daycare programs, many parents perceived facilities as insufficient and daycare staff as inexperienced and unskilled. Lacking confidence in the programs, parents avoided enrolling their children. Perhaps even more important, women continued to cling to traditional values and standards. As Ruth and Oscar Lewis observed, many lower-class women saw "liberation" not as

being incorporated into the labor force but as "release from outside work, taking care of their own homes, and having time to spend with their children." Prior to the Revolution, economic necessity had forced these women to work as servants, cooks, and janitors. Joining the revolutionary labor force did not answer their dreams of liberation and freedom.⁵⁹

At the same time middleclass and upperclass women whether to pacify their husbands or to suit their own values often resisted taking outside jobs. In truth, these women simply did not march forward, demanding the opportunity to leave the home and enter the work force. Instead, many Cuban women seemed consumed with the burdens of household management, a task decidedly more difficult than before the Revolution. In the 1960s the **Castro** government began to ration significantly food and consumer goods. The leadership also required husbands to spend extended periods away from the home on voluntary labor assignments. It nationalized, and made more cumbersome, basic services, such as laundries, repair shops, and dry cleaners.

Middle-class Cuban women thus certainly found housework more time consuming. Some may even have found it more challenging as well. Perhaps even more important, since the government legally guaranteed their husbands a steady wage, many women for the first time in their lives felt economically secure without having to work. Indeed, as consumer goods became scarce, their prices inflated, and the supply of money abundant, many Cuban women saw a secondary income as less desirable.⁶⁰

Cuban men also resisted the leadership's drive to bring women into the workplace. Husbands rejected the idea of "their women" working outside the home and interacting with other men in the workplace.⁶¹ The government leaders, still overwhelmingly male, expected women to volunteer their time to participate in the CDRs, parent-teacher committees, voluntary labor projects, and FMC activities. Thus, neither men nor women in

Cuba wholeheartedly supported official initiatives to bring women into the work force.

For each of these reasons the turnover rate for women in the Cuban work force remained quite high. In 1969, for example, 106,258 women joined the work force. That same year, 80,781 women quit and returned to their home.⁶² Women who joined the work force may have become disillusioned to find that few working women held high level jobs. Moreover, the vast majority of the female labor force was still clearly doing what had always been considered "women's work."⁶³ Thus, despite much revolutionary rhetoric, and despite new job opportunities, Cuban women on the whole remained extremely reluctant to take on more outside work and responsibilities.

PHASE TWO

In 1968, as attention turned to the future sugar harvests, the Cuban leaders greatly stepped up their efforts to recruit women into the work force, especially the agricultural and industrial sectors. During this period of the Revolutionary Offensive, the FMC assisted this intensive campaign to encourage women to labor for the Revolution. After a year's efforts, including 396,491 recorded home visits to women, the project actually succeeded in meeting, and even surpassing, its overall goal of hiring 100,000 additional women. This figure raised the percentage of women in the labor force from 15.6 percent in 1968 to 17.7 percent in 1969. Although still within sight of the 1959 figures, the numbers of Cuban working women had clearly risen in impressive fashion. In fact, the 2.1 percent jump surpassed the combined gains of the nine previous years of the Revolution.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the Revolutionary Offensive concerned itself more with numbers than with equality. Although more Cuban women went to work, their occupations remained much the same. During this period the Cuban government decided that society needed more women to sew, to teach, to nurse, and to perform other traditional tasks. Thus, in urging women to

work, Fidel Castro had in mind "suitable" jobs: that is, jobs that did not require physical labor.⁶⁵ Castro often stated that although women should participate in "farm work," they must not "do heavy agriculture."⁶⁶ Women, he pronounced, are most suited to be teachers and day-care workers.⁶⁷

In any event, by 1970 the FMC claimed to have incorporated 113,000 women into the workforce.⁶⁸ The Federation persuaded about one out of four women to go to work. What can account for the success of this campaign? Perhaps most important, the patriotic appeal of the harvest campaign and the energetic propaganda of the "Revolutionary Offensive" attracted many previously unemployed women. The increased availability of daycare centers and boarding schools, combined with a decade of vocational and adult night school training, also provided better opportunities for female employment.

Moreover, the government took steps in 1969 to make housework chores and household management more convenient and less time-consuming for women. The state extended store hours and gave working women priority at laundries, groceries, and department stores.⁶⁹ The government permitted women to stay with ailing relatives at hospitals and allowed women time off from work should illness strike a family member. Since the government never afforded men these special shopping and work privileges, Cuban leaders plainly viewed shopping, laundering, and caring for the ill as primarily female responsibilities.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the government did take practical steps to make work outside the home more attractive for Cuban women.

Women Resist

More than 75 percent of Cuban women, however, did not choose to join the work force at this time. According to a survey in a 1969 *Granma* article, the "weight of tradition" prevented women from entering the labor force.

Women cited such reasons as "a woman's career is marriage" and "the woman's place is in the home" for not accepting employment. Of the women who opted out of work outside the home, 59 percent, or nearly three hundred thousand, attributed their negative response to family obligations. Apparently, the 40 percent without family obligations simply valued their freedom from work.⁷¹ With the state's implicit permission, these women chose to remain unemployed.

In a 1969 report the Cuban Academy of Sciences argued that women were avoiding the labor force, in part, because of unstable homes and families. The report found the "Cuban family to be in a state of crisis."⁷² The lack of shared responsibility between spouses, the tendency of male laborers to be shifted among work sites, the disillusionment of women who still considered their families to be their chief priority, and a general disorganization of family life permeated Cuban society.⁷³ Such difficulties, the report contended, kept women in the home.

Moreover, some evidence suggests that both men and women in Cuban society continued to view the woman's role in marriage as inferior and subordinate to that of the man's. A 1970 survey, conducted among twenty-six divorced men and forty-three divorced women in metropolitan Havana, asked who should have the authority in a marriage: the man, the woman, or both? Over 60 percent of divorced men and of divorced women selected the man. At the same time, beliefs reflecting the philosophy of women's liberation or the revolutionary government's ideology concerning work appeared among only a sixth of the respondents.⁷⁴

After the 1970 sugar harvest failed to meet its ten-million ton objective, Castro expressed disappointment at the low number of women in the labor force. He also noted that, despite official efforts, prostitution still flourished on the streets of Havana.⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter, the government -- viewing prostitution as a growing, social problem -

- outlawed it. The authorities rounded up prostitutes, now considered criminals, and incarcerated them or assigned them to labor camps.

In speeches during this period Castro regularly lamented the break down of the family and lashed out at women and men for their irresponsible attitudes. He blamed women's reluctance to join the work force on unstable and insecure homes as well as on the daily burdens of housework and family worries. In response, in August 1970 Castro introduced the "Brigades of Militant Mothers for Education." The brigades were to assist Cuban women with their daily chores and encourage them to join the labor force. These roving groups of housewives counselled women, checked on student attendance, assisted in school upkeep, helped children in collective and individual study, and taught classes as substitute teachers.⁷⁶

To encourage women to work outside the home, the leaders redoubled their verbal pedagogy. In a speech to the Cuban Confederation of Labor, Castro implored workers to change the "traditional" attitudes of the old Cuba "when women lived off their husbands and served as household decorations."⁷⁷ A few months later Castro stated that "work . . . [is] the most vital necessity" and that women must join the labor force. Castro underscored his words by announcing the construction of more *círculos* and workplace cafeterias. The "maternity law" of 1974 permitted working mothers to take eighteen weeks of paid maternity leave. The law also offered new mothers an optional nine months of unpaid leave. In addition, the law offered six months unpaid leave for women with children under age sixteen to attend to "family matters." Men were not offered these benefits. Again, the leadership, for all its progressive policies, apparently viewed "family matters" as chiefly a woman's responsibility.

Legislating Sexual Inequality

Despite its continuing idealistic rhetoric, the Cuban government still plainly retained traditional attitudes toward women. The introduction to the new Constitution, for example, made no reference to fatherhood, but instead

stated that the government "protects the family, motherhood and matrimony."⁷⁸ Moreover, the March 1971 antiloafing law, adopted to combat serious absentee and vagrancy problems among workers, did not apply to women. Neither did the Compulsory Military Service Law.⁷⁹ Minister of Labor Jorge Risquet explained the rationale for excluding women from the antiloafing law:

There are men and there are women. The problem isn't the same for both. Women have the job of reproducing as well as producing. That is, they have to take care of the house, raise the children and do other tasks along these lines and this is no cinch. From the political point of view our people wouldn't understand if we were to treat women and men alike. While people are incensed on seeing a lazy man, the problem isn't always viewed the same way when it involves the case of an idle girl who doesn't study, work or take care of a house. . . . The problem isn't viewed the same and really, it isn't the same thing.⁸⁰

In a December 1973 speech Castro characterized women as "nature's workhorse where life is formed."⁸¹ The Cuban leader encouraged women to join the labor force, claiming that the workplace needed "female virtues."⁸² A year later, in a speech to the FMC, Castro referred to special "inequalities" between men and women. Since nature had made women "physically weaker than men," Castro claimed that women were entitled to "certain small privileges" and to "special considerations" and courtesies. He also called for greater efforts to instill in children proper standards of conduct and "proletarian courtesies," such as "men giving up their seats to women on buses":

If women are physically weaker, if women have to be mothers, if on top of their social obligations, if on top of their work, they carry the weight of reproduction, and are the ones that carry in their innermost beings the child to be born . . . it is just for society to give them all the

respect and consideration that they are worthy of. . . . If in human society there should be any privilege, . . . there should be small privileges and inequalities in women's favor. . . . Proletarian chivalry should exist, proletarian courtesy . . . and consideration toward women.

Castro continued:

Men . . . are . . . obliged to give their seat to a pregnant woman in a bus, or to an elderly woman. . . . You must always have special considerations for others. We have them for women because they are physically weaker, and because they have tasks and functions and human burdens which we do not have!⁸³.

A critic might well question whether Cuban leaders sincerely believed that women deserve the same rights as men. Certainly, many would support as a laudable objective for any society Castro's stated goal of supporting equal opportunities for women in politics and in the workplace. Yet although Article 41 of Chapter V of the 1976 Constitution states that sexual discrimination is prohibited, Article 43 states: "In order to assure the exercise" of women's right to work, "the state sees to it that they are given jobs in keeping with their physical makeup." In fact, the Cuban government barred women from nearly three hundred occupations that the leadership viewed as inappropriate for women.⁸⁷ While officials defended this decision by claiming to be concerned about women's wellbeing, many of the excluded jobs neither posed any obvious danger to health nor required any particular amount of strength. For instance, the government rejected all women as unfit to serve as assistant railway conductors, deep sea divers, and cemetery workers. Women were even excluded from painting houses that required work five meters or more above the ground.⁸⁸ Once again, Castro's paternalism overwhelmed both his egalitarianism and, perhaps, his common sense.

The government's peculiar notions of sexual equality also infected the so-called affirmative action programs designed to implement Article 43. One affirmative action regulation read in part: "In every new factory built in any Cuban town, it must be indicated what work is to be given to women so there will be time enough to proceed with the selection and training of those women" (emphasis added).⁸⁹ Thus, instead of allowing women to compete with men for the same jobs, the government simply labelled certain jobs as "appropriate for women." Castro rejected the more radical possibility of a quota system that would reserve a representative proportion of jobs for female applicants, in favor of a program that froze certain job categories for women, while closing off others to them. The policy of giving women protected access to certain "appropriate" jobs guaranteed women a place in the work force. Some might even argue that it ensured the most efficient use of Cuba's labor pool. However that may be, the policy undeniably categorized the least physically demanding and most unskilled jobs as "women's work." The government would deliver to women tasks it considered suited to female skills, while preserving the rest of the jobs for men. This approach, the leaders believed, would avoid problems inherent in prescribing exactly the same job for men and women. However, if one delves behind the leadership's high minded principles of sexual equality, one might well conclude from the foregoing that Cuban leaders themselves discriminated on the basis of sex in their labor policies.⁹⁰

