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Women in Socialist Cuba: Political and Economic Equality

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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by Julia Elizabeth Rogers

May 2020

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Political Science, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

The public presentation requirement has been waived due to the COVID19 pandemic.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Dr. Kristin Wylie for serving as my thesis chair. I am grateful for your encouragement and advice over many hours that helped me to improve this project. Thank you to my readers, Dr. Charles Blake and Dr. William Van Norman, for their expertise and assistance. Thank you to Dr. Hak-Seon Lee for leading our colloquium class and offering guidance throughout this process. Finally, thank you to my friends and family for their support and love.

## **Introduction**

Gender equality is recognized as a fundamental human right and goal by the United Nations. The Millennium Development Goals explicitly prioritize promoting gender equality and empowering women. Global commitments to gender equality emerge not only from concerns of justice, but also the recognition that gender equality is crucial for peace, democracy, and development. States across all regions of the world have taken steps to promote gender equality, but gaps remain (United Nations n.d., United Nations Millennium n.d.). In Cuba, women's rights during the 20th century were ahead of many developed nations. Examining current and past gender equality efforts in Cuba, with an emphasis on women's participation in labor and politics, this thesis analyzes the interaction of State activities and cultural norms. It finds that actions of the Cuban State have not always been conducive to gender equality, and that without cultural backing, initiatives are likely to be ineffective for fostering changes. More broadly, rhetoric from the State deviates from the lived experiences of Cuban women.

The Cuban Revolution, and subsequent transformation to socialism, altered the position of Cuba globally and transformed many aspects of Cuban life. In the United States, Cuba is known for its revolution that landed Fidel Castro in power, Cold War alliance with the USSR, and role in some of the tensest moments of the post-World War II period. However, Cuba provides a fascinating case for examination in many regards. As the longest enduring socialist State in the Western Hemisphere, with the combination of long-lasting colonialism and a racially diverse population, the island is in a unique spot. The advancement of Cuban women is considered a major success. How did this occur? In this thesis, I center gender equality to investigate the goals and rhetoric of the Revolutionary regime. I examine secondary accounts of

Cuban women's economic and political empowerment to understand effectiveness of gender equality initiatives and diagnose breakdowns.

Cuba is a critical case because it both confirms and refutes assumptions about gender equality. Women entered the formal workforce, but as expected, continued with informal work in the home. However, the literature expects that as women grow stronger in the labor market, political power will increase. Yet women are not represented in the most important decision-making bodies in Cuba. As a non-democratic state, Cuba has a powerful government, but is not able to rapidly alter cultural beliefs. What we learn from this case can be applied to other countries facing difficulties in gender equality implementation.

The central research question explored in this thesis is: How do domestic and global factors combine to affect the rhetoric and experiences of gendered and racial groups with respect to economic and political opportunities in socialist Cuba? I examine whether the divergences between expectations and experiences conform to the general literature. I find that women did achieve new economic and political positions in Cuba's Revolutionary society, but the state feminist, top-down structure did not succeed in guaranteeing equality. The legal and rhetorical changes were not always aligned and were met with resistance by the population. The lack of intersectional concerns left Afro-Cuban women behind. Although there were attempts to bridge State initiatives with the populace, primarily the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), they still faced problems. Overall, gender equality improved through the Revolution, but women, especially doubly burdened groups, continue to face difficulties.

From gender equality research we obtain a better understanding of phenomena, practices and tools that affect equality in our societies. Theoretical explanations can translate into improved lives around the world. Gender inequality limits development and peace.

Understanding the application of gender equality is crucial to end violence against women, improve maternal health, lift women out of poverty, and increase the political and economic presence of women. Women and girls around the world continue to receive threatening, discriminatory treatment (United Nations n.d., United Nations Millennium n.d.).

This thesis first reviews theoretical insights from literature on socialism, intersectionality, global norms, state feminism, and traditional and changing gender roles. Next, I will focus on women's opportunities through labor and politics in two main chapters. Using qualitative methods, I utilize government statements, speeches, policies, and previously reported data, personal accounts, and secondary sources about the island. I then conclude by considering future implications for Cuban women and women's movements elsewhere.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The essence of the State and the role it plays with limiting or empowering the governed has long been contested. This chapter examines the ability of the State to further women's empowerment, leveraging theoretical insights on socialism, intersectionality, global norms, state feminism, and traditional and changing gender roles. Conventional theories of the State fail to address how race and gender are impacted by the actions it takes. However, scholars focused on race and feminism have countered this by examining these theories and demonstrating the exclusionary role the State performs. Due to this conclusion, appealing to the State is controversial (Hawkesworth 2012).

As nations faced questions of how women would be incorporated into the modernizing State, throughout varying types of government ideology (notably capitalism and multiple branches of socialism), there was consensus. Women would enter the workforce with the objectives of increasing economic development and creating freedom for themselves. However, this answer did not come about as a gift from the nation. Systems stemming from the State had been the exclusionary force to begin with. Women had purposefully maneuvered to arrive at a place where they were not denied equality (Hawkesworth 2012). How do women's rights continue to be expanded? Understanding the circumstances and practices leading to equality is paramount given the modern commitment to lessen the divisions between sexes (Bergqvist, Bjarnegard, and Zetterberg 2013). The Cuban State expresses a commitment to equality, and proclaims its ideology as superior for this realization, yet important gender gaps remain.

### **Socialism**



Given that equality is the emphasis under socialism, States with this ideology could prove effective for advancement of minorities and women, yet there are discrepancies between theory and practice. Socialism sees the world divided into the capitalists or bourgeoisie, who hold the means of production, and the workers or proletariat, who provide labor and are exploited (Berberoglu 2017). Socialism is associated with centrally planned economies, which allow the government to shape the allocation of resources based on need (Rosser and Rosser 2018). While foundational socialist theory did not question women's place in social hierarchy, Marx and Engels saw that subordination within the family unit was another form of societal oppression. Marriage exploited women as child bearers. Ending the role of women as transactionary objects—through sex work or in marriage—was a vision of Marx (Berberoglu 2017). Yet the actual prospects for gender equality under socialism have varied over time and space. Socialist feminism combines the traditional feminist battle against male supremacy with struggles against capitalism, holding that the two forces are interconnected in the oppression of women (Eisenstein 1979). Intersectional feminism centers the intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression conferred by class, gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity-based differences (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989).

The Soviet Union is a useful example to examine the gaps between socialism in theory and in practice. Next, I discuss the societal effects of several shifts in policy towards women and family, which exhibit varying degrees of congruence with Marx and Engels' views. Soon after the Bolsheviks took power the highest legislature approved the Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship. The policies centered on women's equality and a gradual disappearance of the traditional family structure and institution of marriage. This was in line with the overall extinction of the State that Marx and Engels had projected. The Code was needed due to the

conviction that capitalism had placed at odds the requirements demanded by work and family. This was especially painful for women. Industrialization in the Soviet Union saw an increase of women in the formal workforce. However, the role required of women in the home did not adjust and problems ensued. The Bolsheviks concluded that capitalism could not fix this situation. Moving household duties to formalized wage labor was the solution under socialism, with the State assisting with childcare. Civil unions would not be based on economics, and society would move toward sexual freedom for men and women (Goldman 1993).

Household work was viewed, particularly by Lenin, as mundane. By ending the obligation for these tasks to be done in the home, women would be expected to participate in political and social life more freely. Duties that had been traditionally filled by women for no wage suddenly became socialized. While these sectors were then still made up of majority women, it moved the labor outside of the home. In addition, women worked in fields beyond those traditionally considered to be feminine. However, women were often the first to be laid-off from work due to problems with or changes to the economic plan (Goldman 1993).

The Women's Department of the Party, or Zhenotdel, was created in 1919 as pressure had mounted for official treatment of women's issues, particularly on a local level. A congress of working class and peasant women, drawing from the entire country, was organized under the Zhenotdel and took place in 1927. This gave women the opportunity to freely voice their problems – predominantly unemployment (Goldman 1993). The Federation for Cuban Women utilized congresses as well, therefore we may gain information studying the outcomes in the Soviet Union.

Alexandra Kollontai, the highest-ranking woman in the early Soviet Union, approached feminism with an exclusive focus on class. She asserted that the feminist movement in capitalist

society seeks to only advance the position of bourgeois women and further widen the gap between the classes overall. She instead envisioned women's equality through socialist revolution. This change allows all people, not only upper-class women, to escape from maltreatment. Kollontai argued that women must enter the fight against capitalism (Berberoglu 2017).

However, Kollontai's theoretical views were not incorporated into long-term Soviet goals under leader Joseph Stalin. The Zhenotdel was dismantled in 1930 (Schrand 1999). Two years before, the government had initiated a five-year plan for rapid industrialization (Goldman 1993, Schrand 1999). At this stage, unemployment was high, particularly for women — a factor Schrand theorizes likely played a role in discontinuing the Zhenotdel. The government expected future economic gains, but with traditional gendered divisions of labor as more realistic outcomes. The goals of socializing domestic work were discarded in May 1930 (Schrand 1999).

The unexpected labor shortage that ensued by the end of 1930 forced a rapid shift back to mobilizing women into the workforce. Due to women's massive inclusion in the workforce being unforeseen, adequate services for childcare and household labor were not in place. In this period, women faced a double burden of paid labor and unpaid household labor. The State focused on meeting their economic goals, not allowing sufficient additional resources to be used to socialize housework. Additionally, as plans were minimally adjusted, the benefits were not always realized due to lower level, cultural-based inclinations to not treat women workers seriously (Schrand 1999).

The unpredictability of the economy left the government without a cohesive message. Women being viewed as secondary workers by the State translated into varying practices of recruitment. Managers often assigned women unfavorable positions and would move them

frequently resulting in lower skill levels. Educational opportunities were encouraged, but for many women infeasible given the expectation of adding this to the double-burden they already encountered. Organizers regarded services promised by the government, especially childcare, as unimportant. This is linked to the masculine culture that coincided with the focus on industrial activity. In the Stalin era, the State dramatically shifted away from goals centered on gender equality as they attempted to meet the goals associated with ‘socialism in one country’ (Schrand 1999).

The Soviet case offers several key insights. First, as a socialist state we see a class-focused approach, but also with gender issues explicitly undertaken by the government to a degree. Liberation of women is stressed, while in a capitalist society this direct stance of fighting social issues is unlikely. Yet, women’s issues remain second-string, especially under economic hardships. However, is this evident under other circumstances? Particularly, what variants occur across cultural and geopolitical contexts? Cuba, as a Latin-American, racially diverse, and non-superpower state juxtaposes the Soviet Union in several ways. In capitalism and socialism women face constraints, but what differences are consistently notable?

The role women play in contributing to capitalist society is taken advantage of as free or underpaid labor. Labor in the home includes raising children, and the many tasks in caring for the whole family (Eisenstein 1979). Examining the United States, women entered the workforce in large numbers in the second half of the 20th century. However, institutions have not adapted. Devotion to work in many office settings is rewarded. Taking time off, or adapting schedules to meet family needs, for women and men, is stigmatized (Blair 2015). Underrepresentation of women in high-level positions is a key sign that barriers are still in place. One factor is the “double bind” women must confront. The ideal worker and leader have typical masculine

characteristics, but when women exhibit these traits they are often perceived as negative. However, if women maintain traditionally feminine behaviors they are often passed over or can be seen as inadequate (Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh, and Magliozzi 2019). Women in the paid workforce continue to earn less pay than men. In addition, working women are still expected to fulfill the duties of mother and wife (Eisenstein 1979). Blair et al. (2015) refers to the ‘second shift.’ Mothers spend twice to three times as long on work related to the household or children. Therefore, women have less leisure time and are frequently more tired. Income inequality increases the burden on women, as poor men are found to retreat more from household duties (Blair et al. 2015). The stability women provide to families by enabling the future generation to enter the workforce and managing consumption enables the capitalist system to continue (Eisenstein 1979). By examining gender differences in economic systems, we see multidimensional identities at work – these cannot be ignored.

### **Intersectionality**

Investigating the experiences of women requires intentionally including members of other marginalized groups of society, rather than a singular “female” perspective. Instead of confining discrimination to one aspect of identity, it is critical to address the intertwined aspects. Failure to do so excludes doubly-burdened groups. Specifically, the impact of race and class on women’s experiences must be taken into account (Crenshaw 1989). This approach, known as intersectionality, has been built upon since Crenshaw introduced the term to academia in 1989 by reviewing the treatment of black women in the United States (Carbado and Harris 2019). This theoretical lens assists in moving towards accounting for all people, not exclusively the dominant group (Crenshaw 1989).

As previously explained in regard to gender, socialist theory sees class as the most salient identity facilitating the liberation of the proletariat, subsuming other societal divisions such as race. While socialism has faced attacks for not specifically addressing issues other than class (Anderson 2010; Berberoglu 2017), Marx did not come from a time of extensive global movement that allowed groups to interact similarly to today. Despite this, Marx was a harsh objector of slavery and in lesser-known writings discussed issues related to race and ethnicity. He observed the barrier slavery had created from forming an overall class consciousness that would be capable of creating radical change. The split of the proletariat enabled the bourgeoisie to maintain power. He perceived slavery as the key factor perpetuating global capitalism as it allowed advanced industrialization with cotton, created a valuable colonial world, and initiated world trade. However, Marx took argument with those that denied the difference between capitalism with and without slavery (Anderson 2010).

In the United States, W.E.B. Du Bois, an important scholar and activist leading up to and during the civil rights movement, professed alliance with socialism for 45 years. Much of what Du Bois focused his work on was critical examination of how blacks fared in society. However, his focus on intersections between race and class differed from the traditional socialist model. Du Bois, similar to Marx, saw the link between growing global capitalism and slavery. He analyzes colonial history to see the movement of slavery to a racially-based institution. Originally, preference for enslaving people (over indentured servitude) was economically driven. However, due to the similarities of the wealthy class to white servants versus differences in culture of enslaved Africans, the two groups began to diverge. The industrialization of the northern United States entailed less reliance on slave labor. Such economic underpinnings contributed to northern support for the eventual emancipation of enslaved people.

However, Du Bois contends that emancipation only brought on different social issues. He saw economic conditions as another factor that would limit the success and acceptance of African-Americans (Foner 1970). As socialism presents itself as a solution for the economically oppressed, it should alleviate this hurdle for blacks. Du Bois takes a critical view of this in the case of the U.S. He contends that white supporters of the movement do not envision a society that changes the inferior position held by blacks. The lack of statements on basic equality between blacks and whites disturbed him. He believed the Socialist Party of America to see the issue as a distraction from overall aims. Based on history, Du Bois concludes that if there is not a distinct effort to include blacks in the proposed wealth distribution and new political scene, then it will not happen (Foner 1970). This matches Crenshaw's assertion of intentionally considering the condition of intersectional identities. Class, race and gender operate simultaneously. However, if society fails to acknowledge this, what are the consequences? In Cuba, the first priority was class, followed by gender, while racial considerations were not supported. Therefore, this case will give insight into the condition of multiply burdened groups, when they are not fully recognized. While lack of intersectional concerns by the State can limit advancements in equality, how are other actors involved?

### **Global Norms**

To bring about more advances in gender equality, analysis of past progress at different levels is vital. The global feminist movement has only been a capable force since the 1970s. After World War II, the conception of the United Nations came about with the purpose of preventing atrocities and destruction of human life. Its charter outlines its duty to protect human rights without boundaries of sex, among others. The Commission on the Status of Women, an offshoot of the Social and Economic Council, further progressed the commitment of the

organization to women's rights. The council was key in securing inclusion of gender neutral protections in the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations).

In 1975, the United Nations began the Decade for Women. During this time period, with the assistance of the U.N. organized women's conferences, the women's movement at the international level became a more powerful, widespread force (United Nations; McCarthy 2015). While these events proved pivotal, achievements at women's conferences and summits require intensive preparation (Chen 1995).

NGOs with a focus on women became an asset to the movement. The Cold War strained unified action, but ideology was not always at odds, and women's NGOs worked in all types of countries (McCarthy 2015). Collecting data on violations of women's rights is useful for building coalitions among other similar groups and lobbying policy makers. Women's NGOs can shape policy discussions by presenting pre-written documents including resolutions, pushing for inclusion of their own representatives in official State delegations, and strategy sessions with delegations daily at the events. NGOs find more success when they are present at every level of action, local to global (Chen 1995). Alliances between non-governmental and governmental women increase the chances of public policy measures passing (Bergqvist 2013).

While government actors favored feminist linkages to western ideals, the feminist movement itself saw strength in avoiding such divisions. Before World War II, little attention had been given by the British Foreign Office to diplomacy efforts related to women. The anti-communist interests of the government made appealing to and understanding the views of women in other countries necessary, while domestically prompting women to become involved in the bureaucracy of the Foreign Office (McCarthy 2015).



The women's liberation movement was heavily influenced by other social movements that took place in the later part of the 1960s. A notable shift attributed to the mobilization was transforming personal and private experiences to be viewed as political. As women had generally been in the home, the failure to link these experiences to political change limited the types of issues that could be revolutionized. During the American Revolution women were excluded from the Constitution barring them from voting, the ability to own property, and generally act independently from their husbands. The feminist movement demanded suffrage and the end of slavery. However, with the passage of the 19th amendment and other social progress the gains were limited to white women. The initial linkage obviously did not last, and divisions of feminism by race and class remained powerful. Around Europe and the United States, messages on women's place in society differed. Women entered the workforce and became more educated, but the notion of equality was not a popular position. This was contrasted with the rhetoric of equality, but continuing disparity in practice of socialist countries (Morris and Withers 2018).

### **State Feminism**

Given domestic concerns, regimes of various ideologies and economic policies are expected to respond in different manners to the issues of race, gender and their intersection. While actions by the State may be well-intentioned, the effectiveness of societal changes directed from the top is limited. The cultural and historical contexts of gender and race require changes in thoughts and actions, which must come from the society. Differences between State goals and the objectives of the populous must be remembered in Cuba.

Engaging with the State to advance women's rights was viewed by socialist feminists as reinforcing the institution that upheld oppression. They add that the State system equates universal interests and male interests. The ongoing debate includes the thought that most of

society's large institutions are similarly perpetuating the patriarchy. Unlike all institutions, the people have the power to demand the State change. Pressure can be applied to change the initial view that race and gender did not cause political issues (Hawkesworth 2012; Eisenstein 1979).

Continuing the ideology that working through the State can assist women's interests there are several possibilities as to how this is done. State feminism adopts women's movement ideals into government departments and policy directives. Thus, equality becomes a direct objective of the State. A less institutionalized approach uses women already in government positions, but not specifically tasked with feminist priorities, to advance feminism. These women are referred to as "femocrats." Some scholars link this under the category of state feminism as well. There are mixed results of these operations. While some countries were successful in transitioning these policy objectives into reality, others maintained the institutional framework but had little real progress. In fact, the adoption of state feminism could be used to purposefully appease the social movement, but yield no changes (Hawkesworth 2012).

As the global women's movement grew, States participated in resolutions and conferences on the subject of women's equality. Subsequently, the establishment of degrees of state feminism became much more common. However, in many situations these agencies or departments allocated with these tasks were not given the proper tools to succeed in implementing the large scale changes the State had promised the international community (Hawkesworth 2012).

In Latin America, women were key participants in unseating non-democratic rulers. In spite of this, once the old system had fallen, women were often excluded from the institution-building phase of democratization. This can be attributed to the nature of politics during times of substantial change versus established parties and systems, which has led women's interests and

voices to be sacrificed. In the former, extensive alliances between citizens are necessary. In the latter, groups diverge and politicians cater to a specific constituency (Hawkesworth 2012).

A trend seen worldwide, women involved in government in Latin America are frequently relegated to feminine spheres and view their involvement primarily as promoting the party men. Despite rhetoric put forth, women's highly gendered role has translated into the political structure of socialist and communist movements as well. Women who work in the bureaucracy express unease with their positions. The pressure to exceed expectations to prove worth left many women feeling overworked or incompetent. Chaney also acknowledged the frustration women find in bureaucratic work due to its untimeliness or ineffectiveness and internal political problems. This leads to many women not staying in these positions for long-term careers and thus a lack of women at the top of the bureaucratic structure. In order to break this trend educational equality is necessary. Predictably, women who had been trained in professional fields that were common to men were more likely to be employed in sectors that were not traditionally feminine. Chaney asserts that the feeling of incompetence would continue if women did not enter these types of educational programs. (Chaney 1979).

### **Traditional and Changing Gender Roles**

Examining Cuba requires understanding the expectations and norms for women that are present throughout all of Latin America. While Cuba differs in certain aspects from other parts of the region, the shared Spanish-influenced history is especially relevant for gender relations. The role of women has consistently been "subordinate or dependent" (Chaney 1979, 32). This is not to be mistaken with idleness; women must perform their duties while maintaining attention to how her actions will affect the man (Chaney 1979).

Chaney discusses a fundamental characteristic that women can possess in Latin America: *decente*. This distinction denotes a reputation that is honorable and polite, among other things. The *decente* woman was a model emanating from the upper class. It includes the practice that men are expected to seek sexual fulfillment from other women, as the wife is a symbol of purity and family dignity. A woman who is not either a good wife and mother, or preparing to take on those roles from her father's home cannot be considered *decente*. Living alone for a woman would be shocking. The image of women who would be wild and destructive without the supervision of husband or father and church is prevalent. For young women, leaving the supervision of family for short outings would also be contentious (Chaney 1979).

These views of women can be attributed in part to the dominance of Catholic thought in Latin America. Catholic institutions of higher learning continued to use views from Aristotle and subsequent followers that girls were the outcome of damages to males during pregnancy. The underlying assumption is that while women are necessary for continued childbearing, they are weaker, less capable of reasoning, and more drawn towards sin. The ideal woman to emulate is the Mother of God, Mary. Her virginity is central to Catholic teaching. She does not question her son, but supports and continues to make a home for him (Chaney 1979). These principles are applied to other women through the expectation of *decente*.

Women in Latin America were given few opportunities to direct their lives. Decision making inside and outside the home was controlled by a male member of the family. Predictions articulated that as labor became less focused on physical strength, women would not face the same limitations in the workforce and ideals of equality would spread. However, when applied, industrialization "does not automatically free them [women] to enter careers on an equalitarian basis with men or to participate in the decisions affecting the economy and the polity" (Chaney

1979, 28). Working women only did so out of economic necessity and as a reserve labor force. Even when women held prominent, well-respected jobs, it was not equated with liberation (Chaney 1979).

Chaney uses the term *supermadre* to describe women leaving the home to work. The roles they assume are based around motherhood, but applied to a larger scale. Leadership roles are reserved for men. Even as socialist rhetoric has stressed equality and women's participation in civil society, women's involvement in Latin American parties is characterized as supporting men or focusing on feminine activities. However, Chaney also acknowledges that Latin American women are skilled at silently persuading male family members to act as the woman wants (Chaney 1979). Despite these skills, broader gender roles proved challenging to alter.

Traditional gender roles persisted more absolutely in Latin America, while women in the United States and Europe saw changes in social and economic expectations during and after the World Wars (Chaney 1979). Women in the U.S. made up 34 percent of the labor force in 1950 (Toossi 2002), compared to 24.1 percent in Latin America (Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos 1992). In Cuba in 1959, the number of women in the workforce was near 15 percent (Evenson 1986).

## **Conclusion**

Given the theoretical insights from socialism, intersectionality, global norms, state feminism, and traditional and changing gender roles, we can begin to form expectations for the Cuban case.

We see that women may be taken advantage of under both capitalism and socialism, especially in times of economic downturn, but we can expect the rhetorical emphasis on equality to be greater under socialism. One way that socialist states will display this commitment is with

women-focused organizations incorporated into the State structure. However, when any State fails to address concerns in an intersectional manner inequality will persist unevenly. Socialist states are well positioned to confront class, but may not adequately address its intersections with gender and race.

States of different types can be affected by global norms, and actions by international organizations. However, this process is difficult and can be viewed as western leaning. Despite work on a national or international level, problems may persist due to path-dependency: the failure of domestic laws and adopted international norms to alter society given history and long-term influences (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020). NGOs play a fundamental role in this process, and will be best positioned if they are active at every level.

There has been success in bringing the personal realm into politics, and we can expect to see national changes as global perceptions change. Conversely, State-led change will likely be controversial and limited in scope. Lack of resources and displacement of organizations can lead to continued exclusion. Latin American countries, including Cuba, may face particularly formidable challenges to altering gender roles due to entrenched association of women with the home.

Cuba commends itself as leader in gender and racial equality. How does government rhetoric differ from experiences of citizens? Given the challenges in theory and in practice elsewhere, we expect the outcomes in Cuba to be less equal than proclaimed. Through detailed study of the economic and political outcomes in Cuba we will determine if, to what degree, and why these assumptions hold.

## **Women in Cuba: Labor — Employment and Home**

### **Introduction**

This chapter centers the experiences of women in labor in socialist Cuba to assess women's empowerment. First, I consider the historical background, then rhetoric and actions by the State, and lastly compare this to lived experiences and explore limitations. Labor is one of the most cited issues in the empowerment of women. Discrimination and obstacles present themselves in many ways, by various actors. What are the important factors in the Cuban situation? How does the Cuban case differ from and conform to general understandings of the influence of women's roles in the formal workforce on their empowerment? I find that despite encouraging State rhetoric, policies and cultural roles limited the labor advancements of women. Similar to Cuban women in the political sphere, women did make advancements at the beginning and throughout the Revolution. Yet, research shows that increased work opportunities did not mirror a shift in roles in the home, increasing the responsibilities for women. Additionally, women were not supported by a membership-based labor organization with equal backing to that of politics. It is evident that when initiatives come from the top, without popular support, success will be limited. My findings affirm the understanding that women across economic structures face obstacles in the labor force.

### **Historical Legacies**

While the Cuban Revolution sought to change many aspects of society, we know that State actions vary in effectiveness due to path-dependency (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020). Thus, reviewing past practices and norms regarding labor overall and intersectional possibilities will allow for better understanding of the current society and the work of women.

A foundational aspect of the Revolution aimed to lessen class disparities and increase prospects for workers. Interestingly, Amaro and Mesa-Lago assert that other factors including race, location, and job type had a large impact over clear class consciousness because it did not exist in pre-Revolutionary Cuba. This is not to say that inequality was not obvious, but classes were fragmented in a manner that did not grant non-elites substantial collective power. Specific class data are sparse, and the Revolutionary government has not taken initiatives to uncover historical information. It is relevant to note that from 1943 to 1957, underemployment and unemployment were high, totaling between 20 and 30 percent (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971).

Cultural norms that differentiate spaces of men and women weigh heavily on labor issues in Cuba. While Cuban men are supposed to occupy areas outside the home and the street, women primarily reside in the home — a situation that allows for safety and maintenance of family honor. The conventional jobs of women included mother, wife, and housekeeper. Women primarily left the home out of economic necessity (Moreno 1971; Smith and Padula 1988b).

Geographic location shapes many economic factors such as types of work, resources, and opportunities for non-dominant groups. Forty-four percent of Cubans lived in rural areas according to the 1953 census. Migration to Havana and other urban centers was prevalent during the early 20th century. Similar to other countries, cities had more resources and higher income opportunities were available. Illiteracy and school absenteeism were prevalent in rural areas (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971). While Havana and a few other areas had advanced technology for the time, most of the country did not and remained highly traditional. Agriculture and sugar mills dominated rural Cuba, which created periodic lack of employment or underemployment during the down season. Women in the countryside often worked on family farms as unpaid labor until marriage (Rosendahl 1997). Women had a small number of job opportunities to work



in the sugar industry, but were excluded from the mills. Additionally, racial discrimination varied greatly by geography (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971).

While racial discrimination was distinct from that in the United States, it did exist. Literature specifically concerning Afro-Cuban women is limited, therefore I will first examine racial discrimination more broadly. In 1953, 12.4 percent of the population was reported to be black and 14.5 percent mixed-race or “mulatto.” The number of Afro-Cubans decreased with immigration from Europe, but additionally race is subject to different categorizations than in the U.S. and due to cultural norms, data tend to under-represent the Afro-descendant population. Havana and the Oriente, or eastern province of the country, with more Afro-Cubans and racial blending, saw less discrimination (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971).

Afro-Cubans did hold teaching and military positions but were also more likely to hold low-level jobs, including domestic work (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971). It was commonplace to deem Afro-Cubans unprofessional for customer relations or sales jobs simply due to appearances. Black women particularly were not hired for front-office jobs (Smith and Padula 1996). In 1950, a law was enacted to afford equal employment opportunities to Afro-Cubans in clerical roles. However, there is a lack of information about any resultant changes. Systematic institutionalized separation of housing districts between blacks and whites did not occur as it did in the U.S., yet high-income urban areas were almost exclusively white. Afro-Cubans created distinct social organizations to counter the exclusiveness of upper-class, white groups.

Outside of rural areas, women did enter the paid workforce. The expansion of service-sector jobs after World War II allowed women to shift into new roles. Estimates suggest that in 1958, Cuban women made up roughly 13 percent of the workforce, which was in fact higher than many other Latin American countries (Smith and Padula 1988b; Mesa-Lago 1981).

The type of work women participated in resembled gendered expectations. According to Smith and Padula (1988b), women worked in roles of telephone operators, clerks, saleswomen, and manufacturing roles in tobacco, textile and food plants. Afro-Cuban women accounted for almost 90 percent of stemmers (for cigars) in the 1950s. Not unlike other countries, at the onset of the Revolution nursing and teaching fields were dominated by women (Smith and Padula 1988b, 1996). A large part of employed women worked in the domestic service sector, with estimates ranging from around 30 percent (Rosendahl 1997; Smith and Padula) to 70 percent (Randall 1981). Those substantial differences stem from the use of official statistics versus informal estimates. Additionally, sex work and other informal industries were common. Estimates on numbers of sex workers in 1958 range from 25,000 to 100,000. Considering estimates of women in the formal economy was 200,000 to 290,000 in the same year, this is a staggering amount (Mesa-Lago 1981, Smith and Padula 1988b). Women were underrepresented in commerce and industry, and particularly in agriculture, fishing, mining, construction, and transportation, accounting for 3 percent of laborers (Moreno 1971).

Working women were given special protection under the law. Equal pay for equal work and 12 weeks of paid maternity leave were established in a 1934 law. Health standards were laid out for work conditions. In 1937, firing women upon marriage to avoid maternity leave costs was prohibited. However, the implementation did not result in great transformations (Smith and Padula 1988b). While changes in the labor patterns for women took place leading up to the Revolution, the more rapid development sought by the government would require altering limitations society placed on Cuban women.

## **Rhetoric and Formal Policies**

The literature tells us that socialist countries overtly addressed women's equality sooner than capitalist countries (Morris and Withers 2018). State feminism appears to be a useful tool, harnessing the power of the State to promote women's equality. However, in practice it has proved difficult with insufficient resources. Many feminists remain skeptical that working within the State only preserves the male-dominated system (Hawkesworth 2012). While the State can be a powerful actor, it has limited effectiveness on transforming social issues due to path-dependency (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020).

The Cuban government saw incorporating women into the workforce as a multidimensional tool: Not only would women be afforded more economic independence, and gain more confidence, freedom, and skills, they would also contribute to economic development and become better revolutionaries (Smith and Padula 1988b). In Marxist literature, work is the most essential component for gaining equality (Cole and Reed 1986). Thus, work for all Cubans was an important political tool. However, the incorporation was not without side effects. How did the government encourage women to join the paid workforce and to what extent did they try to and succeed in lessening their household burdens?

Notably, after the failed Moncada attack, Fidel Castro's famous speech envisioning the future of Cuba, "History Will Absolve Me," did not speak of racial and gender equality in specific economic terms. The first years of the Revolution were turbulent due to the scale of changes, with unemployment only slightly decreasing from pre-Revolutionary rates. However, as the government became more established, the unemployment rate declined and strategies for development changed. In a 1963 speech to the Congress of Women of the Americas, Castro highlighted the exploitation of women before the Revolution and cited the planned economy as a

liberator of women from restrictive economic opportunities. As labor is needed, “it is logical that the Revolution concern itself with creating those conditions...[and] circumstances that will enable the woman not to be a slave of the kitchen.” Castro proclaimed that in Cuba, “the woman, like the Negro, is no longer discriminated against” (Fidel Castro Speech to Women’s Congress). This declarative rhetoric is an oversimplification and would be difficult to establish so soon after taking power. However, this type of statement did not mean discussion on equality for women’s work was closed. In seeking vast economic changes, he asserted on March 16, 1980, in an address to the third Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) Congress that “we’re not capitalists, we’re socialists,” in that social justice must be a factor in decisions (Smith and Padula 1998b).

### *Integration into the Labor Force*

Socialism concentrates on the importance of labor and the end of the exploitation of workers and women (Berberoglu 2017). Yet, in reality women are often treated as secondary workers. Women are mobilized when needed, but the first to suffer consequences of economic downturns (Goldman 1993).

Elimination of sex work and domestic work were priorities of the young Revolutionary government. They wanted to eliminate the island’s reputation as a haven for foreigners’ sexual desires and free women from what the government viewed as enslavement. However, the cultural biases surrounding these practices were not explored. While Cuban sex work did attract international tourists, Cubans themselves were the principal consumers. Despite the cultural gap, sex workers did receive assistance from the State. After being outlawed in 1961, anyone associated with sex work would face consequences. Sex workers were often sent to schools where they had job and etiquette training. If women refused this rehabilitation program they would be imprisoned. Schools for domestic workers opened in April 1961. They taught math and

Revolutionary history and ideals. While usually continuing their day jobs, the women were trained for secretarial, clerical, and daycare positions in the evening. The schools closed in 1968 after having educated thousands of women (Smith and Padula 1996).

Women took the first step to formal workforce participation with voluntary and contract work. In dire situations, Cuba turned to voluntary women workers. They aided with hurricane recovery, worked for free when men were called for military duties (Bay of Pigs and Missile Crisis), and cut crops during labor shortages. While this temporary work allowed women workers to prove themselves, it continued the pattern of preferencing male work — a pattern not isolated to Cuba (Smith and Padula 1996).

After shifting the economy away from the dominance of sugar and seeking to diversify at the onset of the Revolution, Castro announced the ten million harvest plan in 1966. The goal was to achieve ten million tons of sugar by 1970, an ambitious task. To accomplish this, more workers were needed in the countryside. Men were seen as more capable for this physical labor, while women stepped into the positions men had held (Smith and Padula 1988b). In 1968, Castro established a preferential hiring program for women. Certain jobs, particularly in the textile industry, were reserved for women (Evenson 1986). The FMC reported mobilizing 113,371 women after outreach in 1969, however the net gain amounted to 24,000 after many women quit. Traditional feminine roles were still common for women, but some entered more machine-focused roles and were sent to Soviet-bloc countries to study engineering. However, the harvest goal failed and forced serious economic changes on the island (Smith and Padula 1988b).

### *State Inclusion Initiatives*

Before the Revolution, Cuban women were primarily associated with the home, not the public sphere (Chaney 1979). Therefore, changes were needed to create conditions that empowered women to work.

In 1969, the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), the national trade union and mass organization recognized by the constitution, established the Feminine Front (*Frente Feminino*) as a secretariat within the confederation. They would observe and encourage the success of women (Evenson 1986). Women were informed of resources the government provided, and unemployed women were made aware of open positions (Smith and Padula 1996). In the 1980s they were renamed the Department of Women's Affairs. The department differs from the FMC in that it is not a member-based organization, instead delegates are chosen by CTC members. CTC delegate makeup of women worsened at the higher levels, despite levels of around 45 percent at the base. Operations range from national to local levels. Specific operations of the department include following promotion and hiring outcomes, investigating discrimination cases, and running classes that aim to increase women's on-the-job potential (Evenson 1986).

With the sporadic tendencies of the first decade, the government shifted to concrete administration, material incentives, and productivity in the 1970s (Smith and Padula 1988b). The labor participation rate for women began increasing again, Mesa-Lago reported 20.6 percent in 1974, while Castro asserted over 25 percent (Mesa-Lago 19881, Smith Padula 1988b). However, with more attention given to costs and profitability, the absence of women workers due to maternity leave frustrated managers. The effectiveness of including women came into question again (Smith and Padula 1988b).

As Castro referenced circumstances the State would assist women with, childcare was a central concern. Daycare centers were a pressing need for working mothers. The first “children’s circle” was opened in 1961. At first, there was widespread public fear that this was a method of control for the new government. Women’s work, not overt liberation, was the central theme (Chase 2015). Randall reported 800 centers operational in 1981. Despite the importance of daycare centers for labor, the government viewed education of children as the primary goal (Randall 1981). Space was limited, with roughly one spot per 12 to 13 working women. Women were vocal about the need for more. However, due to the high cost of building and operating centers, the State was hesitant to build more. This signaled a lack of long-term commitment to equality. Additionally, the mothers whose children were able to secure a spot worked around daycare hours (7 a.m. to 7 p.m.) that did not line up with all types of work. Considering factory shifts starting at 4 a.m. or 8 p.m., other childcare had to be secured, which was not necessarily easy. Locations of centers were not always efficiently assigned, and far from home and work to begin with. In 1986, as a broader effort to remedy flawed aspects of the Revolution, Castro ordered the construction of more daycare centers. These were primarily in Havana, where 54 were built, increasing service to an estimated 10,800 women. However, some argue that this initiative was driven largely by the decline in birth rate and increase in delinquent behavior by youth (Smith and Padula 1988b).

Other government initiatives were designed to assist working women. Cueing, a notorious feature of Cuban life, often required waiting in several different lines for necessary items. To counter this time extensive process, working women were given priority shopping benefits. In 1974, maternity leave was extended to 18 weeks paid leave, and up to one year unpaid (Smith and Padula 1988b). Extra material incentives were given to workers who

surpassed production goals or worked weekends or extra hours. However, women were less likely to be available for extra work, despite needing material incentives such as washing machines or other household appliances (Evenson 1986).

Despite the existence of daycare centers, the responsibility for children and family continued to fall legally to women. Only mothers were allowed to leave or miss work to care for sick children, or stay and attend to family members in the hospital. Castro implemented this policy soon after the Revolution, and later expressed an understanding of the difficulty it may put some women through, but cited his doubts men would perform these tasks anyway. Changing the policy was debated, however the Labor minister voiced concerns men would purposefully avoid work. Paternity leave was not available. Thus, the mechanisms the government enacted to implement equality were undermined by their own policies (Smith and Padula 1988b). Reinforcing traditional feminist literature regarding controversy of working with the government, the actions of the Cuban State bolstered traditional gender roles (Hawkesworth 2012).

Given the difficulties surrounding childcare, some women were limited in employment possibilities. Working from home was permitted in certain cases, and especially assisted women in single parent homes. However, in 1967 only 1,500 women were reported to be part of this system (Smith and Padula 1988b).

The intent of the Cuban government was to create more opportunities for women in the labor force. However, several policies implemented continued to be guided by gendered assumptions. As we know, laws alone do not necessarily bring about transformations (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020). To understand the impact of top-down changes, the societal



reception must be examined. While data is lacking, the absence of targeted opportunities for Afro-Cuban women suggests that gains were not equally shared (Crenshaw 1989).

### **Resistance and society**

Actions by the State are limited in fostering social changes when they are not aligned with the attitude of the masses. A top-down strategy will face resistance (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020). Given the historical legacies of traditional gender roles and racial divisions, expecting women of all class backgrounds and races to work and receive equal opportunities challenged the societal norm (Amaro and Mesa-Lago 1971, Smith and Padula 1988b).

Cultural changes rarely occur over short periods of time, creating difficult situations for the State. However, in examining the role of the Cuban State, contradictions, lack of organization and cohesion, and structural limitations are evident. While this may limit effectiveness, examining broader society and changes from the bottom is still compelling. Despite missteps on gender equality initiatives by the State, how did the population respond and adapt to changes sought by the government? How were the lives of women altered for better or worse?

Overall, the percentage of women in the labor force grew from 13.1 percent in 1958, to 15.8 percent in 1968, and then 18.0 in 1970. However, over the next two years no improvements were seen, with 17.9 percent in 1972 (Smith and Padula 1988b). After changes to the economy in the 1970s, more women workers entered the labor force permanently. In 1980, women made up 30 percent of the Cuban workforce (Smith and Padula 1996). Across sectors women gradually gained more positions. Administration, service, and technical areas (including teaching) continued to have the most women. By 1986, each sector was half or more than half women. Manual labor and managerial positions remained less common among women, but saw increases. In 1980, more than 20 percent of managers were women. Yet, this was not proportional to the

overall labor force (Smith and Padula 1988b). Evenson reports that although women were working, leadership positions were difficult to obtain. The reliance on women for childcare concerns, both culturally and legally, led to women spending less time at work overall, limiting promotion potential (Evenson 1986). Other reasons fewer women achieved high-level status at jobs include a different set of standards for women (including personal factors such as sexual history), and to avoid upsetting men workers (Smith and Padula 1988b).

As cited above, women entered the workforce but did not necessarily remain. What conditions led to this? Despite women often being impermanent members of the workforce, the experience outside the home was new for many. This allowed women to form a new consciousness (Evenson 1986).

### *Home Life*

In the Soviet Union, leaders envisioned the eventual demise of the family as the principle unit of society (Goldman 1993). This was not the case in Cuba. However, there was a shift to seeing private and personal matters as political, which the literature tells us is key for women gaining visibility and essential for the success of the liberation movement (Morris and Withers 2018).

As Cuban women entered the workforce at greater numbers, the unpaid labor in the home was not eliminated. Balancing these tasks resulted in a “second shift” (Hochschild 2003). Additionally, new Revolutionary or party responsibilities often entailed a triple shift for women on top of their paid jobs in the formal workforce and unpaid household labor. This triple burden matches the experiences of women in the Soviet Union (Goldman 1993). Difficulties at home resulted in strenuous hours and stress and difficulty in relationships (Evenson 1986; Smith and

Padula 1988b). As Vilma Espin noted, this was a “subjective,” or cultural obstacle (Smith and Padula 1988b).

The changes sought by the Revolution threatened to shift the power structure that had existed in Cuba since the 16th century. As they lost power, men resented the actions of the State. However, this evolved. At the onset, a working wife was surrounded with social stigmatization for husbands. The increased public role of women contested the previously discussed Latin American notion of *decente*. Resistance to the intended gendered social changes acted as a factor for leaving Cuba. However, views did evolve. While at the onset of the Revolution it was prideful for women to stay in the home, the opposite became true. By the 1980s, women were expected to work outside of the home and explanations were needed if they did not. However, women often favored low-skilled and lower-stress positions that allowed them to complete household duties (Smith and Padula 1996).

Evenson contends that the incorporation of women into the labor force ended the dependence on marriage for economic survival. The rates of divorce in Cuba increased substantially, with the majority of filings submitted by women (Evenson 1986). This is surprising for a traditionally Catholic country. Women complained that men did not share the responsibilities of the home (Murphy, Schutte, Slagter, and McAllister 1991).

### *Systemic weaknesses*

The Cuban system sought a transformation from pre-Revolutionary society. We know the State is able to shift policies, but it is less able to shift economic and social incentives. This creates a gap in the official versus substantive changes (Hawkesworth 2012, Schrand 1999).

One reason women cited for dropping out of the formal workforce was lack of incentives to continue with formal work. With costs for housing, healthcare, education, and other

necessities limited, extra income could go to other material goods. However, due to shortages, extra income was often not effective (Evenson 1986). Some women who had previously worked, now could afford not to, given free services. While the State hoped for workers focused on moral rewards, women continued to be motivated by economic factors (Smith and Padula 1996).

Childcare provided by the State was insufficient, and often family members, especially grandmothers had to step in. The influence of older generations on children led to continued traditional views on gender (Fleites-Lear 2003). This furthered the difficulty in changing social norms, already known to be difficult due to path-dependency (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020).

While sex work had largely been eliminated by the 1970s, the financial incentives of the 1990s saw a re-emergence of sex workers targeting access to dollars and other amenities. (Smith and Padula 1996). This was the most obvious example of women's advancements being jeopardized during the Special Period. Fleites-Lear contends that the new Cuban sex worker was educated, worked in another capacity, and had a family. Less obvious transactions became common, although the worth could exceed that of a month of government work. The FMC denied the scale of the occurrence at first. Additionally, the power of the Cuban State suggests that they allowed the practice to occur despite rhetorical opposition (Fleites-Lear 2003).

Afro-Cuban women in particular encountered divergences between policy and lived experiences. Evenson notes that past racial inequities in Cuba were not addressed by the State and that biases remained present. Afro-Cubans were noticeably less present in leadership positions (Evenson 1994). However, analysis of Afro-Cuban women gaining labor opportunities is minimal. Spence Benson explains Afro-Cuban women have often felt invisible in the Cuban narrative. When present, Afro-Cuban women are hyper sexualized. The State decree of racial and gender equality in Cuba led to the lack of intersectional concerns in policies (Spence Benson

2016). In accordance with Crenshaw, this leads to further disparities between marginalized groups (1989). As expected, top-down directives lacking intersectional considerations did not put an end to racism.

The experiences of women in Cuba did not fully reflect the vision put forth by the State, and working women faced challenges on multiple levels due to cultural opposition. Who, or what groups, continued to advocate for changes? What limited said groups? Were sought changes implemented or effective?

### **Bridging the Gap**

Smith and Padula raise questions about the nature of women's incorporation in Revolutionary Cuba, and argue the "definition of woman from Cuba's traditional past remains unchallenged" (1988a, 154). While women's voices were heard on the political front through the FMC, and labor concerns were somewhat addressed, a more grassroots organization specifically for women's work may have assisted in achieving equality. The Department of Women's Affairs (or the Feminine Front before 1980) sought to increase opportunities, but its autonomy and effectiveness were limited by its connection to the State and top-down structure (Smith and Padula 1996). This is consistent with many feminists' concerns that utilizing the State will not lead to progress given its patriarchal foundation (Hawkesworth 2012).

The FMC did promote labor needs of women throughout the Revolution and gave working women outlets to voice concerns, but labor was not the principal goal of the organization. The Secretariat of Production was added to the FMC in 1966 and tasked with integrating women into the workforce. Yet, their lack of success in recruiting women during the sugar harvest resulted in changes. The labor minister, Jorge Risquet, ridiculed Cuban women for not playing their part. Responsibilities were shifted to the Feminine Front. However, the FMC

worried this move would not have the desired effect on equality given the focus and male-dominance of the trade union (Smith and Padula 1996).

The economic boom of the 1970s assisted in women's labor gains (Smith and Padula 1996). This reinforces the secondary status of women workers in the mind of the State, utilized during economic prosperity (Schrand 1999). In 1971, the Feminine Front trained over three hundred activists to assist with workplace issues and retention of women in the workforce. However, women continued to enter professions with limited growth opportunities. Additionally, with the goal of full employment, many women worked in inefficient, doubled jobs. This was most evident in the service industry where two women would perform the same job that only required one. In 1990, the FMC asserted that women had not been equally encouraged to enter agricultural, forestry, and transportation work as they believed necessary (Smith and Padula 1996). This reflection shows a gap between broader government policy and FMC ideas. Again, showing that state feminism does not automatically lead to greater equality (Hawkesworth 2012).

Despite attempts, discrimination was not sufficiently dealt with and continued to be evident even on a large scale (Smith and Padula 1988b). The Cuban government sought to include women into the labor force on the surface, but did not have an effective plan to fix lived burdens. Without a forceful organization to leverage women's labor issues and initiate changes in cultural perceptions, Cuban women continued to face difficulties (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020, Hawkesworth 2012, Smith and Padula 1996).

## **Conclusion**

Equality in labor for socialist societies is of paramount importance. Inclusion of women in labor was of major importance to the Cuban government for philosophical and practical

reasons. Some women who had worked before the Revolution found themselves moving into new roles. Sex work and domestic service, previously prevalent, were eliminated. Women were looked to for temporary and volunteer roles crucial in the first years.

The government sought to contribute to the fulfillment of more equal rights. However, by including gender differences in rhetoric and labor laws, the effort was fragmented. The FMC continued to advocate for women workers while the Feminine Front and Department of Women's Affairs held the main responsibility for labor. While dedicated to assisting and protecting working women, the organizational structure inside the CTC made the department's actions easier to be sidelined. Cultural resistance was a widespread issue at first, but did evolve.

Wives and mothers continued their work in the home and held the main responsibility for childcare despite work status. Working a "second shift," but a strain on women. Women entered, but often did not remain in the workforce. Incentives and programs the government instituted were often not designed in a manner that eased women's triple burden.

Changes to the economy have been increasingly difficult for women. With the government lacking resources to provide basic necessities, much less the services women depended on, hardships occurred. However, women are no longer economically dependent. They have access to education and a wide range of professions. This holds substantive importance by fulfilling human rights. Alleviating poverty and systems of dependence are key for decreasing violence against women (United Nations).

Cuba's case in regard to labor conforms to several expectations. The socialist focus on class equality leaves gender and race issues overlooked. Therefore, the non-dominant group continues to be left unaccounted for (Crenshaw 1989). State feminism attempts to mitigate this, but in practice faces challenges implementing changes due to insufficient resources and the

nature of top-down changes (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020, Hawkesworth 2012). In addition to labor equality, political equality is crucial for women's advancement. In the next chapter I will discuss the State rhetoric and experiences of Cuban women in politics.



## **Women in Cuba: Politics**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I examine the political position of women in Cuba. How do cultural norms and Cuban society differ from State rhetoric on women's involvement in politics? Is there a gap and why? I will lay out the historical influences from before the Revolution, examine the positions and initiatives directed by the State, investigate education as an intersection of culture and State, then move to reactions and efforts from the masses of Cuba. Throughout, attention will be given to the intersectionality of gender, class and race in order to avoid excluding groups of women. Cuban women have more political opportunities under the Revolution, however, they are still underrepresented in the most important bodies of power. Yet, education and the work of the FMC have provided important discourse on women's possibilities and changed the lives of many women.

### **Historical Legacies**

In order to understand the outcomes for women in Cuba, we must examine the historical context of economics, political institutions, and culture. This is emphasized in the theory of path-dependency which asserts that despite domestic laws and adoption of international norms, changes can fail to alter society given history and long-term influences (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020). How have raced, gendered and classed institutions shaped the current situation in Cuba?

#### *Pre-Revolution*

Since colonization, the status and lives of women across Cuba have varied greatly by race, religion, geographic area, and class. During the twentieth century Cuba sought to establish itself as a more modern, independent nation, with separation from practices imposed by Spain and the United States. The rejection of colonialism and expansion of freedoms, inclusive of

women's advancements, was undertaken gradually. The Spanish civil code, with many patriarchal elements, was maintained as law. In 1917, after much debate, amendments were added guaranteeing property rights for women. Women began to be more involved in the public spheres. While political involvement was not the norm, it did exist (Cruz-Taura 1994, Smith and Padula 1996).

Race was a central issue to nation building in the independence movement and the early Cuban Republic (Sawyer 2006). Afro-Cubans fought in the War of Independence hoping for a more equal society (Gonzalez and McCarthy 2004). Although revolutionaries, including Jose Martí, regarded white racism as a problem, racial identities were marginalized to form a "raceless" national existence. While the first constitution in 1901 gave all men equal rights, race was not mentioned and systematic racism remained in place. Under U.S. occupation Afro-Cuban veterans were barred from many public service positions. Informal discrimination continued while formal equality was cited to justify the perception of racial consciousness as unpatriotic. Fear of Afro-Cuban control is a continuous theme in Cuban politics. Social scientists advised the whitening of Cuba. Immigration policies favored Spain and other European countries over mainly Creole Caribbean populations (Sawyer 2006). Black political parties were banned and in 1912, a protest resulted in the massacre of more than 4,000 Afro-Cubans by Cuban forces. This repression served as an important signal on how racial uprisings would be tolerated.

After 1912, Afro-Cuban groups did not disrupt the political system (Gonzalez and McCarthy 2004, Sawyer 2006). Despite the ban on racial political parties, social and religious groups and charities formed. In addition, leaders of Afro-Cuban networks looked to form international alliances mostly with artists, professionals, and religious personnel from the U.S. (Sawyer 2006).

The Women's Club (Club Femenino) was founded in 1917 with primarily philanthropic goals, but members were nearly all upper-class, and therefore white, women. Education, literacy, and white-collar job opportunities for women increased in the early twentieth century, but continued to favor the dominant white and wealthy group. Still, the majority of opportunities were in Havana. Women across Cuba had very few legal rights. Despite being passed in 1918, divorce remained socially unacceptable due to concerns about the "degradation of the family" and contradiction of Catholic Church teachings (Cruz-Taura 1994, Smith and Padula 1996). In 1923, the Women's Club coordinated the first National Women's Congress. The event included 31 organizations, but with representation almost exclusively from the upper and middle class. Topics included sex work, single mothers, work, and suffrage. The second congress was held in 1925. There were many different beliefs about the actions that would best assist women. Some activists saw inspiration in Mexico, some in the Soviet Union. Many others stressed traditional ideals regarding family life (Smith and Padula 1996). Throughout Cuban politics at this time, efforts to modernize were met with criticism mainly from a religious angle, including many women (Cruz-Taura 1994).

President Machado arranged an extension of his term by pledging to enact women's suffrage in 1927. However, in actuality this was not delivered as expected. Congress had to approve the conditions and form under which women would be allowed to vote, and the implementation was delayed (Cruz-Taura 1994). As public concern over Machado's repressive policies (towards political opponents) and illiberal tendencies mounted and economic depression set in, students took to the streets to protest. Women participated and were met with the same consequences faced by men (Cruz-Taura 1994, Smith and Padula 1996). When Machado left the position in 1933, the following governments made promises to extend voting rights to women.

They were finally able to do so in 1936, with the approval from an interim constitutional commission. In this first election, seven women were elected to the House of Representatives (Cruz-Taura 1994).

After 1940, Cuban politics entered a period of relative stability with increased freedoms (Smith and Padula 1996). The Constitution of 1940 promised progressive measures for its time. Full equality between all citizens regardless of race, color, sex, or class and rights of illegitimate children were formally guaranteed. Married women were recognized to have the same authority in decision making as their husbands, but subsequent articles undermined those rights by reasserting the husband's dominance (Cruz-Taura 1994, Smith and Padula 1996). However, many aspects of the Constitution needed legislative backing to be implemented throughout society. This did not occur. Additionally, widespread corruption emerged after elections in 1944 and continued, creating low trust levels in the government (Evenson 1994). This created precedent for the law to not be followed culturally (Cruz-Taura 1994).

U.S. business interests had played a part in the Cuban economy since before Cuban independence, however huge increases of investment in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century benefited white Cubans at much higher levels. The upper class was exclusively white. The many changing government leaders would preach support for Afro-Cubans, never delivering. Afro-Cubans had lower levels of educational attainment and faced higher unemployment and incarceration. Although Afro-Cubans joined the Communist Party and other leftist groups, they did not have substantial power. In 1945, about nine percent of legislators were Afro-Cuban (Gonzalez and McCarthy 2004). Fulgencio Batista, leader of coups in 1933 and 1952, was of mixed ancestry (claiming to be Indian), but supervised segregation and corruption that disadvantaged the Afro-Cuban population (Gonzalez and McCarthy 2004, Sawyer 2006). He, too, faced discrimination

from certain social clubs, signaling the entrenched nature of race-based discrimination (Evenson 1994).

Afro-Cubans and women were treated particularly unfairly. More broadly, the country was unhappy with political outcomes. After the coup in 1952, student groups continued to strike, but were limited with Batista controlling the military and press. Factions of the population hoped he would step down peacefully as before, while other groups took action to force change (Guerra 2012).

### *Revolution*

The Cuban Revolution is well known for its masculinist character (Chase 2015, Guerra 2012). Popular memory of the Revolution is primarily focused on the 26th of July movement led by Fidel Castro. The first major action by the group—the attack on the Moncada barracks—was a military disaster. Most involved were killed and the remaining jailed (Chomsky 2015). Although this type of action garnered attention and is now considered a major victory in Cuba, it increased the difficulty for women to participate (Chase 2015, Guerra 2012). Initial anti-Batista organizing was targeted or at least very accessible for women to take part in. Despite the abandonment of the Platt Amendment in 1933, the Batista government maintained a close economic relationship with the United States. Corruption in this tie was rampant. Consumerist tendencies adopted from the United States were seen to have heavily influenced middle and upper-class women (Chase 2015).

Women of the Revolution used motherhood as a unifying factor and as a means to continue to protest the Batista government without the brutal consequences similar outcries from men would have received. While leaving the home and becoming involved in politics was untraditional, it was understood to be out of absolute necessity due to the deaths of sons. In 1957,

mothers flooded the streets of Santiago in a funeral-like procession to mourn the loss of family members. Although many of the women that protested had not lost a son themselves, by making their presence exclusively as mothers they avoided further upsetting the patriarchal culture. Women approving of the Revolution through these protests gave it further moral legitimacy (Chase 2015).

In Cuban cities, women's political organizations encouraged women to enter the anti-Batista movement, but often in a manner that reinforced following the path of male family members. These groups played a role in assisting families of those killed and were also able to gain access to prisoners on assumption of innocence. As violence continued to rise, one of the major groups, the Frente Cívico de Mujeres Marianas, approved of the revolutionary groups responding in increasingly aggressive manner. In their view, the government threatened sacred family life (Chase 2015).

For young women especially, entering into the political scene was complicated. Families disapproved of the lack of supervision and closeness with men. A common narrative was a daughter being corrupted by her revolutionary boyfriend. However, the movement did not want to lose the favorable moral position or be subject to logistical concerns such as pregnancy and fighting. Strict rules on conduct were enacted. Women also risked subjugation to sexual violence in prisons. With the lack of a comparable experience for men, this isolated women. In other parts of Latin America women turned to feminism to combat this gendered violence. Despite having feminist leaders in Cuba, feminist rhetoric was not incorporated into revolutionary goals (Chase 2015). This fits a pattern in Latin America where women's voices are sacrificed during times of substantial upheaval, meaning they are less important. The same problem is a threat to state feminism. Women's rights are often only prioritized when it is convenient (Hawkesworth 2012).

The mostly urban acts of rebellion have been overshadowed by the July 26th movement. Still, women participated in the movement and guerilla aspects in the Sierras. Fidel had not permitted women to take part in the Moncada attack, instead they accompanied the group as nurses. While many men of the movement were in jail, women continued operations and distributed information across Cuba. Preparing to return to Cuba in Mexico and throughout operations in the Sierras, women made conditions possible for the survival of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July movement. Celia Sánchez was the first woman to participate in combat during an engagement with Batista forces in 1957. She was praised for her dedication and impact on the movement overall, but Fidel worried about the reaction her family would have to carrying guns. In 1958, with more women arriving to the Sierra and ready to fight, the all-women “Mariana Grajles” platoon was formed to participate in combat. Fourteen women, the majority young and white, committed to this role and at the same time continued to cook, clean, and sew for other soldiers (Smith and Padula 1996). Despite breaking barriers, this demonstrates the maintenance of distinct spheres for men and women. Additionally, this serves as a signal of the blindness by revolutionary leaders of double-burden women faced (Chase 2015).

With worsening conditions under Batista, Afro-Cubans joined in the revolt as well. However, Castro’s forces were led by majority upper or middle class and thus white men (Gonzalez and McCarthy 2004). Similar to gender, race was not highlighted as an essential cause of the Revolution at the beginning (Evenson 1994). Given the lack of intersectional concerns, this led to Afro-Cuban women being doubly excluded.

Women have been active in Cuban politics for decades, but often in separate spheres and with divisive splits between class and race. Additionally, advances promised by the government have a history of falling short. While the Revolution is often noted for themes of masculinity,

women did participate on both the urban and Sierra fronts, despite gender issues not playing a central role. Given path-dependency, the legacies of gender politics extend into the Revolutionary society and continue to influence women (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020).

### **Socialist Rhetoric**

Since the departure of Batista, the Cuban regime has been classified various ways and had assorted reactions and relationships with other countries. The Cuban government maintains that its objectives and actions are aligned with the wishes of the Cuban people despite a one-party state. Officials argue that in democracies such as the United States, people are not really picking their candidates, as the influence of powerful interests and money dominate (Luciak 2007). One way the State has demonstrated dedication to its people was by highlighting women's political opportunities and liberation under the Revolution. In doing so, the State sought to change cultural norms surrounding the traditional sphere of women.

Recognition that working women were overburdened was apparent with the 1975 Cuban Communist Party (PCC) survey: women reported an average of 13 working hours Monday-Friday in addition to 11.5 hours on the weekend to complete work inside and outside the home. Changes were needed. The Family Code took effect in 1975 after a process of feedback from citizen groups. Cuba looked to other socialist countries in drafting the Family Code, but the emphasis on gender equality was the most advanced for its time. Legal rights were not based on assumed gender roles. Full equality between men and women was stressed, including responsibilities in marriages. While other socialist countries have attempted to socialize household work, Cuba did not. Per the Code, housework and childcare were equally the responsibility of both parents (Evenson 1994). Failure to comply could serve as grounds for



divorce, although this was rare. Rapid change was not expected, with the Family Code intended primarily as an educational tool (Evenson 1994, Luciak 2007).

The 1976 Constitution's purpose was to formalize the expectations and goals of the Revolution that had been developing since 1959. A party commission wrote the document, followed by minor revisions after responses from mass organizations. The constitution categorized Cuba as socialist, and established free health care, education, rights to work, vacation time, leisure time, and social security for all citizens. Discrimination based on race, sex, or national origin was outlawed. Further, the constitution acknowledged the State must pursue action to ensure equality (Evenson 1994).

The Cuban Communist Party (PCC) operated as the obvious most important political force. Hosting their first congress in 1975, women comprised 13 percent. The percentage increased to 18 in 1980. No women sat on the party Secretariat committee, a group of nine. By the third congress Fidel Castro made a call for more equal representation of women (Smith and Padula 1996).

Beginning nationwide in 1976, the Organs of the People's Power (OPP) allowed Cubans to vote for municipal, provincial, and national legislatures. Until 1992, votes to the provincial and national legislatures were indirect through the municipal and provincial legislatures, respectively. At the municipal level, neighborhoods meet and nominate two to eight candidates for each seat based on reputation and prominence. The PCC through the Cuban Confederation of Workers (CTC), and candidate commissions had direct control over elections to the provincial and national bodies. There is only one candidate per seat.

At the municipal level, women's representation has been lower than at the higher levels. In the first election, women comprised eight percent of assembly members. The rate of women's

participation has increased, and in 2003 was 23.4 percent. Still, in 2002, presidents of municipal bodies were 89 percent men. Particularly in the first ten years of elections, men won elections at higher rates. For example, in 1984, 16.3 percent of candidates were women, while only 11.5 percent of those elected were women. In the first provincial and national elections, women made up 17.2 and 21.8 percent, respectively, of those elected. In 2003, they had increased to 37.6 and 35.9 percent, respectively. In elections following the 1992 reforms, the number of women decreased (Luciak 2007).

The differences in numbers of women's representation across levels is common in Latin America, where equality initiatives primarily focus on national legislative bodies (Chaban et al. 2017). The difference of systems in place in Cuba can account for this. While gender quotas are officially denied, the PCC does take measures to boost the number of women in the legislatures it more explicitly controls. The denial of quotas suggests a rejection of the problem women face, but there has been some rhetoric calling for change. Speaking of the working commissions, the National Assembly president admitted that, "if we were to do exactly what the people want...the situation of women would not improve. Thus we need to...force the hand a tiny little bit" (Luciak 2007, 73). This reveals that traditional gender norms continued to be prevalent, but state feminism can be effective to force changes at high levels (Chaney 1979, Hawkesworth 2012)

Heading the PCC and official positions in the government, Fidel Castro is known for his extensive speeches and looked to as a messiah-like figure in Cuba (Guerra 2012). As Castro continued to consolidate power after 1959, many of his speeches masculinize the Cuban people and Revolutionaries. Citing social justice as a necessity at a press conference on July 26, 1960, he proclaimed that, "men are slaves to all kinds of miseries" (Castro Press Conference). In a more than three-hour general address to the Cuban people, Castro denounces imperialism and

“the exploitation of man by man,” and goes on to list rights including “right to equality of women” (Speech to the General Cuban People). Concerning the literacy campaign of 1961, he calls on workers to join saying it will be, “great work for them and their sons” (Castro Speaks). While Castro apparently did want to include women in Revolutionary Cuba, his rhetoric tended to center the perspectives and experiences of men.

Regarding race, Castro initially struggled to put forth a coherent message. In March 1959, he declared an effort to eliminate segregation. However, this relied on integration without explicit measures such as inclusionary policy or remuneration to counteract years of separation. The U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 resulted in changes, with Castro consolidating his power. Counter-Revolutionary voices were not tolerated. This included limiting discourse on race (Sawyer 2006).

Tensions with the U.S. remained high. Castro marketed Cuba’s success with racial harmony, compared to the relative lack of harmony in the U.S., to the international community. In 1962, issues concerning race were declared to be resolved in Cuba (Sawyer 2006). While addressing a PCC Congress in 1986, Castro made surprising remarks that acknowledged ongoing problems regarding discrimination (Evenson 1994). He cited historical background in making it impossible to instantly equalize women and Afro-Cubans (de la Fuente 2001). While critiques concerning women had been heard and acknowledged through the FMC, this was the first time a leader spoke recognizing the racial discrimination after 1962 (Evenson 1994).

### **Transforming Cuban Society: Education**

Education alleviates poverty and is necessary for political participation and leadership. The Millennium Development Goals’ most urgent target for gender equality promotion is ending

disparity across primary and secondary education, then all levels of education (United Nations Millennium n.d.).

A hallmark of the changes in Cuba after the Revolution was education. Better education and education in socialist thought would shape young Cubans of all genders to become active participants, conscious of the values of the new regime, and leave behind old ideologies.

Similar to other aspects of life in Cuba, education before the Revolution was vastly unequal. During the Batista reign, more than 20 percent of the country was illiterate, including more than half a million women (Smith and Padula 1996, Randall 1981). In 1953, Castro shared his vision of Cuba with high standards for universal education, “the happiest country is the one which has best educated its sons...” (Breidlid 2007).

The 1961 literacy campaign was the first step to transform education. Volunteers of teenage students, girls and boys, were sent into the countryside to learn about hardships faced by fellow citizens and teach them (Smith and Padula 1996). The students lived with rural families and contributed to the work they did on the land (Randall 1981). Often bred by racism, young women’s families worried how they would be treated. These urban young women also surprised some peasants by wearing pants and smoking. By the end of the year, 700,000 Cubans had become literate. Volunteers were rewarded with scholarship opportunities to become teachers (Smith and Padula 1996).

At the same time, new schools were opening and enrollment was rapidly increasing. More teachers, mostly women, were hired. However, even with new training programs the need for teachers was still unmet and older students (often girls) filled in. Primary education was made mandatory in 1967, and enrollment soon surged to triple the amount before the Revolution (Smith and Padula 1996).

Revolutionary education was fundamental for achieving a proper socialist society reactive to moral incentives. Education was meant to encompass more than instructional knowledge. Attention was given to building a consensus on attitudes towards the State and a sense of solidarity (Breidlid 2007). Students were encouraged to be rebellious in the spirit of the Revolution, but loyal (Grenier 2017). Schools were directed to include work aspects that would destigmatize manual labor. Projects were part of the school day, and on breaks students were encouraged to perform agricultural work. Course material was made to include Marxist theory and the heroes of the Revolution, exclusively men (Smith and Padula 1996).

At the secondary level, technical and rural boarding schools became popular. Some schools encountered fewer girls, as parents still worried about lack of supervision. However, other schools worked diligently to recruit even numbers of boys and girls. Despite cohabitation, and acknowledgment that administrators could not prevent students from having sex, birth control was not provided. Students who got pregnant were required to leave the school. Lower attendance and higher dropouts were a problem in rural areas for girls, mostly due to marriage or pregnancy (Smith and Padula 1996). While the government understood the importance of education for transforming society, the lack of birth control signals a disconnect between achieving equal opportunities for women. If women were more likely to have an incomplete education, how could they equally participate in politics? The State's focus on education to fix class disparities resulted in the lack of intersectional concerns and reaffirms traditional gender norms that primarily saw women as mothers and wives (Chaney 1979, Crenshaw 1989).

The declaration of racial equality in Cuba has resulted in the outlook that if race is an issue, it must be solved but is not an institutional level problem. Anti-racism was addressed by teachers, focusing on parent outreach if necessary. However, nearly 70 percent of teachers

responded that they agree there is no racism in Cuba. Of those teachers, only 9.3 percent agreed they have to respond to race issues in the classroom (Kempf 2014). Given the attitude that problems are already solved and leaving decisions up to the teachers, we can expect racism to continue to occur in school settings.

Adult education levels were still considered unacceptable. Teachers were frequently required to volunteer for evening classes after the regular school day. Additionally, the “Battle for the Sixth Grade” was introduced in 1961 with the goal of achieving this level though two years of courses. Housewives were a prime target group (Smith and Padula 1996). Specific schools for former sex workers, maids, and peasants focused on training women for new jobs (Randall 1981, Smith and Padula 1996).

The gains made for Cubans, especially women, were dramatic at the onset of the new government. By 1970, women made up 55 percent of high school graduates and 45 percent of students in higher education (Evenson 1986). However, the masculinity of the Revolution did not disappear, and women continued to face obstacles despite successes in the classroom (Smith and Padula 1996). Not treating racism as an institutional issue allows discrimination to continue with political and economic consequences for Afro-Cubans, especially Afro-Cuban women.

### **Federation of Cuban Women**

As we know, the State has limited capacity to change cultural practices. State feminism faces constraints (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020, Hawkesworth 2012). These factors are evident in the Cuban case regarding political equality. Thus, the inclusion of the population is critical to achieve further changes. The creation of the FMC in theory allows for a link between society and government on women’s issues — avoiding the problematic nature of top-down initiatives.

The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC abbreviation in Spanish) was created in 1960 to mobilize and improve conditions of women in revolutionary Cuba. This was meant to unite multiple women's groups that had formed during the war and ousting of Batista. Other organizations were disbanded (Smith and Padula 1996). The State and members would work together to create a mutually beneficial organization (Randall 1981). Vilma Espín led the organization, with oversight from Castro. The organizational structure was similar to the PCC, with a national council of eight specialized divisions (Smith and Padula 1996). Membership is voluntary and can begin at age 14. However, participation would be a factor in decisions and opportunities granted by the State. Initially, women were recruited in door-to-door campaigns. In 1970, delegations (of about 50 members) numbered at 27,370. In 1980, 51,912 delegations amounted to about 80 percent of the target population (Randall 1981, Smith and Padula 1996). The FMC became the largest women's organization in Latin America, a success and source of pride for the government (Smith and Padula 1996).

The FMC created a link between the government and women to encourage Revolutionary citizenship. However, institutional designs often encounter more difficulties in practice (Hawkesworth 2012). We must examine the FMC and overall experiences from the local and citizen perspective.

As mentioned above, the FMC became a large organization and acted quickly to change developments on the island. FMC operations were extensive. In the early 1960s counterrevolutionaries were still a severe concern. With many government functions unarranged, the FMC took the lead in many areas. Members organized and worked in daycare centers, school programs for poor women, factories to keep output at needed levels, and first aid groups assisting militias. The FMC played a large role in the literacy campaign of 1961. Importantly the FMC

also keeps documents and information regarding women in Cuba (Murphy, Schutte, Slagter, and Lopez McAlister 1991).

Activities were possible with volunteerism and dues of \$3, that was automatically deducted from paychecks if members were working (Smith and Padula 1996). Two magazines were published to aid in publicity and share accomplishments. Work occurred at the local, regional, municipal, provincial, and national level, with committee meetings (Smith and Padula 1996, Randall 1981). Opportunities at the local level allowed women to socialize outside of the domain of male family members and become more involved with society. Women gained leadership experience overseeing the organization of their local groups. While this was meant to translate into women holding positions of power in other areas, those possibilities were limited, with FMC activities taking up time. Over time, conditions for membership increased (Smith and Padula 1996).

The widespread activities and committees were required to adhere strictly to directions from Havana. Militancy was a key theme in the ongoing Revolutionary struggle. While the membership continued to increase, drops in attendance were noticeable. The meetings were viewed as tedious and not useful. The number of activists with heightened involvement also decreased. Many of the initiatives FMC had led at its onset were moved to different organizations in the 1970s. Women who had grown up under the revolutionary government were not drawn to the FMC (Smith and Padula 1996).

The first of five FMC congresses was held in 1962. They attracted a large amount of attention as key party leaders attended. Recommendations were able to be influenced at the local level, but ultimately reviewed nationally. Discussions would be followed by votes on resolutions,



usually unanimous. Topics were limited to family and women's issues, with questioning foreign or economic policy deemed inappropriate (Smith and Padula 1996).

While many view the FMC as a powerful tool for Cuban women, it has faults noted by members and outside observers (Randall 1981, Smith and Padula 1996). Critiques of the organization include its position that women's equality must go along with advancement of the whole society. Does this signify is not a feminist organization (Evenson 1986)? Others contend that the interests of housewives are represented over those of laborers. The overarching structure is seriously questioned. The organization was not formally incorporated into decision-making procedures. The infrequent occurrence of the congresses undermined their capacity to yield large-scale changes (Smith and Padula 1996). The literature tells us that inclusion of feminist organizations at every level of government is essential for policy change, but without established channels this proved difficult for the FMC (Chen 1995, Hawkesworth 2012). Further, there is debate on whether the FMC was purposefully created to be weak — a prevalent concern with state feminism overall (Hawkesworth 2012, Smith and Padula 1996).

While the FMC did participate in global conferences, great importance was placed on ideology as one of the core objectives of the FMC was “demonstrating that only through socialist revolution...women are truly free” (Randall 1981, 134). Cuba participated in all of the United Nations Conferences on Women, held in 1975, 1980, 1985, 1995. Vilma Espín, head of the FMC and Cuban delegation attending, spoke at the 1995 conference in Beijing emphasizing the impact of resources provided to developing countries. Paired with researched evidence, the international network and human rights agreements have assisted with negotiations between the FMC and the broader Cuban government. This is particularly true for health issues. Johnson (2011) argues that this is evidence that the FMC does not operate as a government pawn. While the Cuban people

have limited opportunities to structure discourse on most issues, the FMC has been influential in doing so in a systematic way on women's issues (Johnson 2011).

The FMC has enormous potential with its large membership, but in reality, has faced many difficulties. During her anthropological fieldwork in a town in southern Cuba, Mona Rosendahl reported the problems the local chapter encountered. The messages sent from Havana seemed radical or overly ambitious to many locals. The elected leaders were not sincerely interested and lacked experience, problems important to the local women were not discussed, and the municipal branch did not step in when assistance was requested. In 1991, some women asserted that they already had equality and continuing work with the poorly functioning FMC was pointless. One thought was to increase independence from the PCC, to allow for agenda setting on broader issues (Rosendahl 1997).

## **Conclusion**

The Cuban government explicitly made commitments to gender, racial, and economic equality. However, the incorporation of these values into daily lives of citizens is ambitious given path dependence (Cingranelli and Filippov 2020). From the Cuban case, it is clear that equal opportunities under the law and rhetorical encouragement do not suffice to solve discrimination and inequality that has persisted for centuries. Cuban women do participate in politics on the island. This is important for achieving gender equality for all women and across all sectors of society. Yet in politics they continue to face glass ceilings and lack of institutional backing similar to women in other countries. Specifically, efforts to include Afro-Cuban women in politics were lacking, meaning they have been less accounted for (Crenshaw 1989).

The call for national unity suppresses critiques for changes to social order. While declaring conditions in Cuba as advanced and equal, the government signals to citizens that their

attitudes are already satisfactory. This top-down approach, requiring rapid evolution beyond generational change, forms a society that permits stark differences between legally and rhetorically advocated positions and reality of norms. The FMC positioned women to advocate for their goals in an acceptable manner, however, they still faced difficulties. Thus, state feminism alone is insufficient in achieving equality (Hawkesworth 2012, Smith and Padula 1996).

While on some levels Cuba attempted to conform to global norms, others are rejected as western and improper for the island. Ideological concerns and Cold War competitions encouraged the dismissal of systemic problems in order to appear favorable. To achieve meaningful changes acknowledgment of persistent gender and race-based inequities is necessary. Women have made tremendous gains since the beginning of the Revolution and continue to advance, but with changes in Cuba's political and economic structure likely in the near future some achievements have the potential to recess (Cruz-Taura 1994, Evenson 1994, Grenier 2017).

## Conclusion

Investigating gender equality in labor and politics in Cuba allows for a better understanding of the current and future situation of women on the island. However, it also contributes to understanding gender equality in practice more broadly, which is essential to facilitating women's empowerment globally.

When discussing women's issues it is critical to include perspectives from women that are in groups that face other burdens — principally race and class, introduced by Crenshaw with the term intersectionality (1989). The Cuban case serves as an example of the necessity to prioritize the multidimensional aspects of women's experiences. The historical record and lack of accounts of Afro-Cuban women under the Revolutionary government prompt questions of continued discrimination. While the State was focused on class inequalities, the lack of acknowledgement of racism is concerning. Unfortunately, due to the lack of accounts, incomplete intersectional analysis continues in this work and is a limitation of this paper.

Likewise, state feminism creates complications for women's movements. As the literature leads us to expect, there are problems with the Cuban government's intervention. It is inherently difficult to translate State directives into cultural realities, and at best takes time. In Cuba, this is evident with the perceptions of the roles of women in the public and private sphere. While there are changes over time, the Cuban experience supports the feminist assertion that the State itself is a gendered institution. While leaders preached equality, Cuban laws continued to treat women and men differently. This upheld traditional gender roles and increased the burden of working mothers.

Examining the labor and political situations of women in Cuba is critical for multiple reasons. Labor and economic opportunities are incredibly important to give women options

outside the home. The incorporation of women into leadership positions both in work and in politics demonstrates societal beliefs about women's capabilities and commitment to equality. Often, women must first gain incorporation into the workforce to be seen as important political actors. While the Cuban government has encouraged the incorporation of women into the labor and political realms, both have faced challenges.

The female labor force before the Revolution was majority lower-class, and often employed in domestic service. This bourgeois concept was quickly eliminated. Women of different backgrounds were trained to participate in Cuban society in new ways. Although women did not gain equal entrance to all types of fields, more options were available. Concerning for Cuban women was the double responsibility they now faced. This has been seen in many nations when women leave the home. The Cuban government attempted to relieve this "second shift." However, the planning was not often effective and lacked resources. Without a women's labor organization separate from the Confederation of Cuban Workers, women were not able to position themselves for important gains. The FMC did continue to support working members, but lacked sufficient power. Despite the potential of these organizations, working women continued to be taken advantage of in Cuba. However, this is generally true in socialism and capitalism systems.

The FMC was a powerful actor in encouraging women to enter the public sphere and allowing them to gain leadership experience that makes political positions possible. The involvement in politics is not equal, but a point of pride for the Cuban government. Despite high numbers of women in the top legislative bodies, at the municipal level where the local communities have more power, fewer women are elected. This is evidence of the continued problem of top-down implementation of gender equality. However, due to the limited power

legislative bodies have in Cuba, the PCC and Secretariat Committee are hugely important.

Women are not present in these power positions, the bodies that have the greatest ability to make changes on the island. Glass ceilings remain in Cuba, similar to many developed countries. As the FMC became obsolete in the opinion of many young Cuban women during the late 1980s and 1990s, opportunities for women's advancements may face more limitations (Smith and Padula 1996). Yet, the Cuban people now have more exposure to other countries and the international women's movement from internet sources and post-Cold War tourism. Continued observance of women's political opportunities in Cuba is crucial.

This paper did not attempt to analyze changes in Cuba in the 21st century or since the death of Fidel Castro in 2016. However, we can form certain expectations given this research. While the government may champion equal rights for all Cubans, work is continuously needed to achieve equality. The acceptance of social issues is key. As conditions seem likely to be rapidly evolving, equality in Cuba should continue to be researched. Has technology and globalization altered the Cuban women's movement or gender equality issues? Are women able to independently voice concerns with the current structure? What unofficial groups have been actors in advocating for women's rights?

Going forward, these findings support the importance of intersectionality in the women's movement and suggest more efforts be made at the grassroots level to encourage bottom-up initiatives. Legal equality is vital, but not the only step that is needed to improve the situation of women.

We know that Cuba has participated in United Nations and other international conferences. The island has enjoyed recognition as a pioneer in gender equality. However, information is still lacking in this area. While the workings of the Cuban government remain

difficult to investigate, as changes occur and openness appears to increase, investigation of the preparation, results, and attitudes within the government concerning the international women's movement would be beneficial. The Cuban case in this sense would be useful for understanding other nations who continue to struggle with women's rights and particularly those at odds with western philosophies. Further, more of an emphasis on intersectionality is needed. Again, though often difficult to investigate in Cuba, many other countries face similar challenges with ethnic or racial disparities between women. Successes, or the lack thereof, can inform efforts by the domestic and international women's movements to empower women across nations and cultures.

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