Abstract

The Cuban Women's Federation provides an ideal setting for the study of the changing role women can play in developing countries. Exclusive interviews with officials of the Federation at its headquarters in Havana provide an understanding of the historical factors that have led to the emancipation of women there: vocational training, creation of daycare centers, the battle for adult literacy, enhanced health care, continuing education, and the eradication of prostitution. Interviewees also offered statistical information that helps describe the current status of women in Cuba. Analyzing these descriptive data and the in-depth personal interviews results in implications for the continuing development of Cuban and other Third World women as scholars, workers, political figures, diplomats, artisans, wives, and mothers. Although women in Cuba have not achieved equality with men – especially in the political arena – the country's ideology as well as its laws are supportive of and conducive to the future attainment of parity for both genders.

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The Cuban Women's Federation: Organization of a Feminist Revolution

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THE CUBAN WOMEN'S FEDERATION: ORGANIZATION OF A FEMINIST REVOLUTION

Citizens: Women waited, patiently
and with resignation in the quiet,
dark corners of their homes, for the
arrival of this beautiful moment,
when a young revolution breaks
their yoke and unties their wings.

Citizens: Here, human bondage was
omnipresent: in the cradle, in the
color of the skin, in sex. You want
to eradicate bondage because of
birth, by fighting to the death. You
have destroyed bondage because of
skin color by freeing the slaves.
Now, the time has come to free
women!

--Ana Betancourt de Mora in the Constitutional Convention
of the Republic in Arms, held in Guaimaro, Cuba, in 1869

Introduction

Many aspects of Cuban society repulse Americans. We decry its government-controlled press, the stifling of dissent, the treatment of political prisoners and the rationing of the few consumer goods available. What few Americans understand is that Cubans take great pride in the strides this small island archipelago has made in an incredibly brief period following the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's regime in 1959. Health care and education have become superior to the systems found in most Latin American countries. By the thirtieth year of the Revolution, the situation for women, in particular, offered a model for other developing countries. Cuban women have managed to overcome centuries of paternalism and the underdevelopment that helped create a life revolving around home, marriage and the family.

By contrast, the socioeconomic status of most women in Third World countries has worsened in recent decades.[1] Their "relative access to economic resources, income, and even absolute health, nutritional, and educational status has declined" (Sen and Grown 1987:16). In a consistent argument, Beneria and Roldan (1987:3) agreed that "economic development in the Third World has had a differential impact on men and women and that . . . impact on women had been negative." Thus studying the gains made by women in Cuba is especially important; women's history since the Cuban Revolution represents one of few exceptions to the difficulties women typically face in comparable societies.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Cuban Women's Federation. The paper represents one of the growing number of studies conducted within the last fifteen years that asks how development has affected women. Previously, social scientists tended to neglect the effect of development on women's consciousness and struggle for equality. Now, however, increasing numbers of feminist scholars are focusing on issues of gender and class as they relate to experiences of Third World women in particular (Beneria and Roldan 1987:2).

Understanding the relative emancipation of Cuban women also is important for North Americans. As different as our histories, cultures and political ideologies may be, much is to be learned by analyzing the Cuban experience of a successfully interrelated social and political change. Although most scholars agree that women in Cuba have not achieved equality with men--especially in the political arena--the country's ideology as well as its laws are supportive of and conducive to the future attainment of parity for both genders.

Approach to the Inquiry

Few American and Cuban women have the opportunity to interact. Despite former President Carter's attempts to open the window between the two countries, the Reagan and Bush administrations denied visas to most would-be tourists intent on visiting Havana. Although journalists, Cuban-Americans and "bona fide" researchers may travel there, few manage to attend international conferences held in Cuba--just as few Cubans visit the United States. Thus the stereotypical Cuban woman remains, to us, either the foppish, ostentatious society matron, the sensuous showgirl or the heavyset peasant who is the mother of twelve.

Fortunately, as a university professor, I fit the category of researcher. Thus I was able to travel throughout Cuba. More importantly, I was welcomed by officials of Cuba's one organization for women. During my in-depth interviews with these administrators, I listened while they recounted the history of the women's movement there. We went on to discuss, to debate, to compare and to contrast the women's situation in our respective countries. And the more I learned about the status of women in Cuba, the more my hosts could elaborate on the issues that continue to face them.

I came away from my three weeks of independent field work in Cuba, conducted with the express purpose of exploring the women's situation there, with the understanding that the key to the development of Cuban women has been the establishment of the Federation of Cuban Women (Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas--FMC). Its 2.5 million members comprise about 77 percent of all women over age 14. Established in 1960, it replaced a number of social clubs of the pre-Revolutionary era.

My approach to this inquiry was systematic yet flexible enough, as Marshall and Rossman (1989:7) put it, to "get close to the people being studied, to understand the world as they saw it." This systematic inquiry occurred initially in the natural setting of the Cuban

Interests Section (Acosta 1982) in Washington, DC, and, later on, of the FMC offices in Havana. It represents a qualitative methodology that (1) values participants' perspectives of their worlds, (2) seeks to discover those perspectives, (3) considers inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, (4) is primarily descriptive and (5) relies on people's words as the primary data (Marshall and Rossman 1989). The method proved to be a useful way to amass large amounts of data quickly.[2]

Rather than proceeding linearly, the study was developmental. That is, my review of related literature (e.g. Benglesdorf and Hageman 1974; Greer 1985; Levinson and Brightman 1971; Molina 1978; Padua and Smith 1985; Perez-Stable 1977; Purcell 1973; Ryan 1986; Schneider 1985a, 1985b; Sutherland 1969)--coupled with preliminary discussions--helped frame and refine the study throughout. Only a rough protocol guided the interviews, which remained flexible and relatively unstructured. As Marshall and Rossman 1989:26) explained, "Often the primary research goal is to *discover* those very questions that are most probing and insightful." Such a goal is especially appropriate to an exploratory inquiry such as this one.

The Cuban Women's Federation offers an ideal context for exploring the changing role women can play in developing countries. The purpose of this field study was to investigate the FMC, a little-understood yet significant organization, through a series of lengthy in-country and U.S. interviews with elite Cuban women.[3] These exclusive interviews[4] with officials of the Federation at its headquarters in Havana provide an understanding of the historical factors that have led to the emancipation of women there: vocational training, creation of daycare centers, the battle for adult literacy, enhanced health care, continuing education, affirmative action laws and the virtual eradication of prostitution. The next section of this article deals with each of these key historical factors.

Interviewees also offered statistical information that helps describe the current status of women in Cuba. Unfortunately, little statistical information of this sort is available form published sources. As Jancar (1978:9) explained, Cuba had to be omitted from an important book on women under communism because of insufficient data. Thus, the descriptive data presented in the second substantive section of this article represent an important first step in understanding what may become a model for any organization dedicated to the empowerment of women.

The final section of the article, which discusses these descriptive data and the in-depth personal interviews, suggests implications for the continuing development of Cuban women as scholars, workers, political figures, diplomats, artisans, wives and mothers. By showing how Cuba managed to overcome many social and political barriers to women's equality at home and at work, this study also maps a course for women in other developing countries. (In essence, the FMC can be considered a case suggestive of a larger phenomenon.) Finally, analyzing the one mass organization for women in Cuba serves as a basis for comparison with the interest-group liberalism inherent throughout North America (Grunig 1986).

History of the Cuban Women's Federation

Housed in what had been an elegant private home in the luxurious Vedado neighborhood, the Federation's headquarters on Paseo Street are in a mansion of pink walls, marble floors, tropical plants and wrought-iron trim. Paid employees here work behind shuttered windows under the watchful eyes of a portrait of the revolutionary heroine Tania, who died with Che Guevara in Bolivia.

My interview with Nora Quintana (1982), head of North American affairs for the FMC, began with her recitation of pre-Revolutionary statistics. (Information unattributed directly in this section of the article comes from the interview with Quintana.) Before 1959, she explained, 62.5 percent of all Cubans were peasants; they lived in dirt-floored, palm-roofed huts. Most existed on about 1,000 calories per day; eleven percent drank milk, four percent ate meat and two percent ate eggs. More than a third had parasites.

More relevant to this study of the Cuban women's organization is the fact that only 13 percent of Cuba's women worked outside the home during the Batista regime. Of those, 70 percent were domestics. Almost 90 percent of all domestic service workers were women, and most of them were poor and black--vestiges of the slave culture in nineteenth-century Cuba (Azicri 1987:373-374). Most of the rest of the employed women were prostitutes. A few women served as midwives, factory workers, artisans or in agriculture. Randall (1974:1) described their situation as follows:

> In the scrapheap of unemployables, paid abysmal wages when they worked, struggling to feed their families, the condition of Cuba's women could only improve. However, few people were concerned with the liberation of women *per se*, when all Cubans, with the exception of a handful of landowners and entrepreneurs, were oppressed.

According to Quintana, women were the most oppressed group on the island at that time. Of course, middle- and upper-class women actually suffered (along with their male counterparts) as a result of reduced income in the wake of the Revolution. They also lost chauffeurs, maids and nannies and thus much leisure time.

At that time, half of all babies were born at home. The infant mortality rate was high. According to Evenson (1986:302), the infant mortality rate in Cuba declined from 60 per 1,000 live births in the year of the Revolution to 16.8, a rate rivaling most developed countries. In fact, she explained, "This rate is lower than that found in United States cities with large minority populations, such as Washington, D.C., which has an infant mortality rate of 25.1 per 1,000 live births." Still, Cuban families before the Revolution typically ranged from nine to fourteen children. (Contraception was available only to the rich.) Children had no rights. Mothers with babies often resorted to begging. The few organizations existing for women were religious.

Quintana called Castro's revolution a revolution for women as well.[5] By necessity, she pointed out, women had to work in the wake of the exodus of male businessmen, technicians and professionals after the overthrow of Batista on July 26, 1959. One year later, on August 23, 1960, and under Fidel's initiative, the first mass organization was created for women in Cuba. It boasted of about 17,000 members, called *federadas*, within a few months. It was initially designed to overcome the exploitive effects of "neocolonialism" on women, largely through basic education and the raising of political consciousness.

The main objective of the Federation, however, remains the integration of the social, cultural, economic and political lives of women. Analyzing the thirty-year history of the organization shows it to be at least somewhat successful in all four spheres.

Membership in the Federation is open to all women 14 and older who consider themselves "revolutionaries" and accept the standards of the organization. No men belong, although in its early years the Federation included men as "honorary members."

The Federation is governed by a 92-member national committee. Vilma Espin, wife of Raul Castro and the only full member of the Politburo who is a woman, is national president. Espin is credited as the organizer and founder of the FMC (Azicri 1987:363). She has been its only president. The FMC's complex, hierarchical structure consists of six levels, from the national down through provincial, municipal, block and delegation. Several delegations constitute a block (roughly corresponding with a neighborhood); several blocks from a municipality and so forth. All *federadas* or members make up a seventh, or rank-and-file, dimension.

The organization is governed by a 13-member paid secretariat and full-time, elected representatives, called "general secretaries," of 14 provinces and 169 municipalities (who are generally chosen on the basis of the quality of their work). Below the level of the municipality, secretaries are volunteers. The grassroots delegations of 50 to 100 members bring wide-ranging concerns to the attention of the national gatherings held once each year (or in extraordinary session as necessary).

In its first twenty years, the Federation managed to accomplish four interdependent objectives:

1. *Incorporating women into production.* According to scholars of the Cuban situation, self-sufficient production was Castro's primary goal after the Revolution (Randall 1974:1). Between 1969 and 1970 the Federation recruited thousands of women as volunteers to harvest sugarcane. In 1970 alone, women contributed 41 million hours of labor to the sugarcane harvest. Its goal, though, was to incorporate 100,000 women per year into the paid workforce. Later, the FMC became committed to finding women to run the many small businesses that were nationalized in 1968.

The ambitious development effort throughout Cuba necessitated the mobilization of all human resources--women as well as men. Prior to the Revolution, however, most women were not qualified to work outside the home. They required training in all skill areas. Women initially were taught to cut and to stitch, although families were typically suspicious of the government taking young women to the cities (fearful that their daughters would become prostitutes). Sewing was a logical place to begin because of its acceptance as a female-identified skill (Evenson 1986:300). While studying sewing, young women also received a basic education and were acquainted with the social and political goals of the Revolution.

The early years of the Revolution saw some 5,000 of these peasant women streaming to the national Academy (now the National Hotel) in Havana. With their training completed, they were sent home with sewing machines to set up similar academies in their rural locales. The first 1,000 received free sewing machines, in exchange for agreeing to teach at least ten other women how to stitch (Sejourne 1980). This job training was especially important for the vast number of prostitutes and domestics. (It also resulted in the availability of better clothing.)

By 1974, women accounted for 24 percent of Cuba's labor force (Jancar 1978:249). At that time, jobs still were segregated by gender. Women worked primarily in education, health, retail, agriculture, light industry (including textiles), food services and tobacco (in that order). There were no domestic servants.

2. *Creating daycare centers.* One of the earliest post-Revolutionary efforts involved the provision of accessible and affordable child care for working women.[6] Initially, day care was free. By the mid 1970s, however, it was restricted to working women and then for a small charge--about U.S. $100 per month. Several hundred centers provide three meals a day and launder the children's clothes. Every new housing development still must include a daycare center. In existing neighborhoods, the centers, called *circulos infantiles*,[7] took over what had been private homes (such as the site of the Federation's headquarters, which had been occupied by the owner of a sugar-cane mill).[8] In addition, the FMC created schools for training daycare workers--who remain almost entirely female.

3. *Eradicating prostitution.* Brothels were closed; pimps were jailed. Following a medical examination, former prostitutes were relocated to factories far from where they had lived and worked. Their children received special education in daycare centers as a way of helping them deal with what they experienced on the street.

4. *Educating all women.* Even peasants in the farthest outlying areas learned to read and write. (According to Azicri [1987:369], the rural population was the most oppressed of any social group during Batista's regime. Eradicating illiteracy provided almost instant social mobility for the average Cuban, woman or man. The Literacy Campaign reduced Cuba's illiteracy rate from 23 percent to 3.7 percent (Azicri 1987:369). Once literacy was achieved, night courses provided continuing education.

Teams of teachers also taught basic hygiene and first aid courses. First aid became a priority in 1961 with the Bay of Pigs scare. Although women were not expected to fight, they did want to support the war effort. That same year, the Militia was created. Both men and women continue to serve in this week-end military-preparedness effort.

These early efforts of the FMC have been criticized on two main grounds. First, impetus for the achievements it made came from the top down, largely from governmental leaders (beginning with Fidel Castro) rather than from the women themselves. As Azicri (1987:317) noted:

> Women were reacting to, rather than instituting, their own liberation--albeit modifying and/or adapting policies to changing circumstances whenever necessary. In this sense, the women's movement in Cuba has not been the architect of its own success . . . as much as the movement has been an active partner in the implementation of policies and programs established by an egalitarian socialist society.

This concern will be dealt with more fully in the analysis that follows.

The second criticism hinges on the fact that by the mid-1970s, women were "carrying a double yoke," in the words of Randall (1974:1). By being freed to work in the same capacities as men, Cuban women experienced the twofold burden of housewife and non-domestic worker. She noted, however, at the time that "whatever criticisms can be made, it must be acknowledged that by choosing a socialist path for themselves, the lives of Cuban women and men have been dramatically transformed. Working collectively, they are daily becoming 'new women' and new men'" (Randall 1974:1).

The problem of the double burden of working women in Cuba, also called their "second shift," has been explored in depth both from a legal (Evenson 1986) and economic (Nazzari 1983) standpoint. According to Evenson, equalizing the burden of working men and women resulted from an initiative of the national, institutional level rather than of the people themselves. Equity, however, would require a societal commitment that Cubans to date have been unwilling to make. Even more pessimistic, Nazzari (1983:263) concluded that the continuing economic dependence of women on men makes any "ideal society appear to be far in the future."

Contemporary Work of the FMC

By 1980, 33 percent of all Cuban women worked full-time outside the home. Although exact statistics are unavailable, many more were full-time students. Today women work in and study for careers formerly monopolized by men, such as medicine, law and journalism. By the mid-1960s, nearly half of all Cuban medical students were women. By 1984, more than half were women. By 1985, women constituted close to 70 percent of Cuba's first-year law students (Evenson 1986:317-318). Over 40 percent of academic

administrators in higher education are women (*Cuban Women in Higher Education* nd). For the first time, women can train to become officers in the armed forces at the Military Technical Institute (Azicri 1976).

The dearth of economic statistics makes it impossible to determine whether a disparity exists between men's and women's wages for these positions. Although Cuban law stipulates equal earnings for both, Nazzari (1983:259) concluded that, at least at minimum-wage levels, women suffer. She pointed to the fact that daycare staffs, exclusively female, are Cuba's lowest-paid workers. She acknowledged, though, that women's over-representation in the country's service sector does not necessarily mean that women on the whole earn less than men do because there is the counterbalancing force of the many female professionals in Cuba.

By 1980, however, the economic fate of the female worker in Cuba was in jeopardy. The local economy was slowing; the international economic depression was growing. Under the circumstances, officials of the FMC suggested a corresponding slowdown in the incorporation of women into the work force. Fortunately, these dire economic projections were not realized at that time. And by 1984, the climate for women had changed enough so that Castro promised that a similar favoring of men over women would not occur again. He declared: "We cannot be guided only by strictly economic criteria without taking into account the question of social justice. We are not capitalists, we are socialists and we want to be communists" (translated by Evenson 1986:315-316).

Still, the FMC faces a challenge in achieving equality for women in the workforce. Since the country shifted from a labor shortage to a surplus, only men and female heads of the household are guaranteed jobs. Women became a labor reserve. As a result, one recent priority for the Federation has become coordinating information about job vacancies.

More generally, the current work of the Federation encompasses five spheres: the administration of the organization itself, education, production and social work, foreign affairs, and political studies.

1. *The organization.* The Federation's 2,479,609 members each pays a fee equivalent to U.S. 75 cents every three months. According to Quintana, 94.6 percent of these women are paid up at any given time. Officials hope that through these dues and the sale of handicrafts--such as embroidered blouses and dresses--produced at the grassroots level, the organization may become self-sufficient. Independence from governmental subsidies is a major thrust of this sphere.[9] By the mid-1980s, in fact, the FMC had become 78-percent self-financed.

Over the years the FMC also has become more politically independent from the country's central government. According to the legal scholar Evenson (1986), Communist party leadership largely directed the Federation's activities until 1975. Ten years later, however, the reverse trend became apparent: Because of women's initiatives, she argued,

"the content of Party policy today is derived in large measure from information and proposals made by the FMC" (Evenson 1986:304-305).

2. *Education.* Even in the early days of the Revolution, the Battle for the Sixth Grade was won--everyone had an elementary education. The Federation now is fighting the Battle for the Ninth Grade, adapting its educational goals to the abilities and interests of older people. Exams are administered by the grassroots delegations; successful communities receive a flag that declares them "Free of the Sixth Grade."

Augmenting this movement for advanced education is a group of 1,575,568 women who call themselves "Mothers Fighting for Education." They support the work of paid teachers, helping students primarily during the holidays and after school. They may act as substitute teachers or play the role of grandmothers, actually going to school when problems arise for individual children under their supervision.

3. *Production and social work.* High turnover has characterized the female workforce in contemporary Cuba. The Federation attributes this to pressure from enduring responsibilities for housework and childcare, lack of economic incentives and the need for better services (such as household appliances) for working women. Thus, stabilizing the female workforce is a challenge for the FMC.

In the early days of the Revolution--when workers were in short supply--quality was of little concern in the production of goods and services. Employees in daycare centers, for example, qualified after six months of training. Now, however, that job requires a ninth-grade education and four years of internship experience. Similar upgrading of standards is occurring throughout industry, largely at the initiative of the FMC.

So, too, are standards for behavior increasing. Together with the Ministry of the Interior, the women of the Federation are battling many of the problems of youth, such as juvenile delinquency, truancy and unwillingness to work. Another brigade of about 13,500 social workers volunteers to visit the homes of the elderly who have no family. In fact, Salas (1987:351) explained that "the organization . . . supervises all social workers in the country, of whom the majority are women."

Another 63,000 FMC *brigadistas* volunteer in maternal homes, mainly in the countryside. Seven to eight months into their pregnancy, women are expected to check into these homes. From there they are taken by ambulance to a hospital to deliver. While there, the new mother receives instruction on child care. In this way, home births and attendant complications for mothers and infants have been reduced. (By the early 1970s, 98 percent of all births in Cuba were medically attended.) Neighborhood members of the Federation care for the expectant mother's children until her return from the maternal home and hospital. Another health initiative, important to the FMC's work since its inception, has been the vaccination of children against polio and tetanus.

The Federation also hosts monthly debates on health. Women come together to discuss issues such as sexual relations, contraception, pap smears and child raising. The FMC also sponsors television programs for women. The debate continues, in print, through Cuba's one magazine for women, *Mujeres* (Women). This Federation-sponsored publication reaches 273,000 readers per month. Editor Carolina Aguilar (1982) alluded to hundreds of requests for distribution throughout Latin America but said she could not afford to print enough to meet domestic circulation needs.

According to Aguilar, "*Mujeres*' contents reflect the life of a Cuban woman--how she works and how she fulfills her responsibilities at home." It mirrors contemporary society, dealing with the day-to-day activities of Cuban women--local artists, television and theatrical personalities and intellectuals. Features include personality profiles, cultural happenings, politics, health, education, manners, consumer services, history, fashion, international news, business, recipes, beauty, agriculture and parenting. One regular section, *Educacion para la familia* (Family Education) is part of the Federation's systematic campaign to convince couples that raising children is a process that involves both parents.

Both male and female readers contribute to the hundred-plus letters-to-the-editor *Mujeres* receives each month. Aguilar called the men who respond "more mature" than those who might read the magazine but be afraid of losing their anonymity by writing for advice. She considered all letters a valuable source of inspiration for future articles. "Because questions posed in the letters are so important," she said, "our staff often consults physicians, lawyers or members of the labor ministry for answers."

Letters to the editor are also important in *Muchachas* (Girls), a companion publication aimed at Cuban teenagers. Up to 600 boys and girls write each month. Their questions deal with problems with parents, premarital sex, love at first sight and how to find friends. As an example of a question and answer that appeared in *Muchachas*, Aguilar cited the story of "Elena." The non-virgin bride had been rejected by her husband, who considered her infidelity an affront to his manhood. Because *machismo* remains a problem throughout Cuba, the magazine's staff decided to open up the question to readers through a poll. Most who responded felt solidarity with Elena; they criticized the bridegroom as closed-minded.

In addition to conducting this survey of readers, Aguilar (who also edits *Muchachas*) asked the social services component of the Women's Federation studying sex education and the family to meet with school groups at the magazine office. The group's advice to all teens was carried in a subsequent article and the dialogue continued: Elena herself wrote again to say that she was about to re-establish a relationship with her husband.

The FMC continues to study and deal with young people's concerns in matters related to male-female relationships and reproductive health. For instance, it recently visited pilot schools, conversed with students there, and subsequently published a book *When Your Child Asks You*, to help parents explain pregnancy to older children.

4. *Foreign affairs.* This sphere of the FMC promotes relationships with women's organizations throughout the world. In 1978, for example, it sought to prepare Latin American and Caribbean women for leadership roles by hosting a three-month course in Cuba. It also works with foreign delegations visiting in country on an *ad hoc* basis.

5. *Political studies.* The Federation sponsors monthly political study circles. Male and female participants spend much of their time discussing contemporary speeches by political leaders such as Espin and Raul and Fidel Castro.

The FMC also promotes political solidarity through its "Friendship Brigades." Each brigade, led by four to six members within a municipality, studies a different country for two years. Discussion begins with an overview of the country--its flag, anthem and principal products--and proceeds to current affairs and foreign relations. This information then is shared with brigades in other municipalities. By 1982, the Federation had investigated 94 countries--including Canada, the United States and the Soviet Union--using this system.

Integrating women into the Cuban political system, however, remains a disappointment for the Federation--as well as for the Communist Party. Although more women had been elected to office by the middle of the 1980s than ever before (11.5 percent of assembly delegates at the municipal, 21.4 percent at the provincial and 22.6 percent at the national level), they have not made the same strides politically as they have educationally and in employment. Most encouraging, though, is the disappointment with which the percentages cited above are greeted in Cuba.

In addition to these on-going activities, the FMC has been responsible for the creation of specific laws and codes that have enhanced the lives of post-Revolutionary women in Cuba immeasurably. This legislation has translated the rhetoric of equality into reality. For example, when Cuba enacted affirmative action programs for employing women, the Federation was consulted on identifying preferential positions for women.

The Federation's efforts also have resulted in significant laws regarding maternity leave.[10] As of 1974, working women receive three months of paid leave--six weeks before and six weeks after delivery. They may choose one year of unpaid leave instead, but their jobs await them at the end of the year. Further, women are given time off for prenatal visits to the doctor and for infant check-ups. (Fathers may take one day's paid leave each month for a year after the child's birth to take care of a sick child.) Mothers also receive time off during the day if they breastfeed. This maternity legislation is considered one of the most advanced in the world (Evenson 1986).

The FMC, however, considers some legal "protections" for women as serving only to perpetuate the paternalism of prerevolutionary Cuba. For example, a resolution adopted in the late 1960s restricted women of all ages from working in areas (such as under water or on scaffolds) that might endanger their reproductive organs. As a result, the Federation managed to get this resolution replaced with a less inclusive list of restrictions in 1976. The

following year, a new law permitted women to work in any job--provided they had doctor's certificate attesting to their fitness.

At the insistence of the FMC, women became eligible for free abortions (although parental permission is required for girls under age 16). The need for abortions has decreased, however, because contraceptive pills have been available free and without prescriptions at the corner drugstores. No statistics are available on abortion in Cuba.

The Family Code (Ministry of Justice 1975), approved by popular vote after much debate throughout the country in 1975, is perhaps the best-known legal outgrowth of the FMC. The Federation initiated proposals, reviewed drafts and recommended changes in this legislation as well as in the 1976 Constitution (which called for equal status of men and women). Even junior-high aged students discussed the Code because of its perceived importance to their future. Because it was published as an inexpensive tabloid before its adoption, all citizens could study it. Its adoption date--March 8, 1975--coincided with International Women's Day of the International Women's Year.

The Family Code has resulted in equal rights for husbands and wives and for illegitimate as well as legitimate children. More specifically, the Code established equality of rights to property acquired during marriage, of divorce[11] and of responsibility for child care and home maintenance. It was designed to counteract the deeply rooted tradition of discrimination tolerated by both men and women. It continues to encourage men to become involved in housework and the care of their children, guided by the philosophy that both parents must remain responsible for the family they create.

Of course, enforcing the Code is problematic. Its value, proponents argue, is that it codifies a societal norm and encourages education and change. As Evenson (1986:312) put it, "The message was clear that the correct, revolutionary thing for a man to do is share in housework." Initially, the Code was the butt of disparaging jokes by men. According to Sanchez (1974), because the Code required a change in men's lives, many resisted it. Over the years, however, jokes have become directed at the men who ignore its provisions.

The Federation has begun documenting instances of injustice and discrimination against women that violate the Family Code. In the process, the FMC discovered that many women do not understand their rights or how to enforce them. Casal (1980) argued, however, that violations may be due more to the inevitable time lag between structural and ideological change than to misunderstanding.

Quintana pointed that although this program has failed to eradicate *machismo*, it has resulted in at least some men taking their children to daycare centers, helping with housework and doing the shopping. First proposed by a group of judges and subsequently approved at all levels by the Federation, the Family Code enjoys the on-going visible support of the Communist Party in Cuba. And although some observers credit enactment

of the Family Code with both advances and disappointments for women, Evenson (1986:309) argued that it articulated "an ideal against which progress could be measured."

Discussion

Vestiges of prerevolutionary Cuba persist into the 1990s. Scantily clad dancers at the Tropicana nightclub entertain tourists from Canada and Eastern Europe nightly. Billboards showing girls preceding boys onto a bus instruct *Ellas primeras* (Ladies first). Most important, women are not represented in a proportion equal to men in the workforce or in the political system.

Nevertheless, women experience an autonomy over their bodies that was unthinkable thirty years ago. They are educated and trained on a par with men and can--and do--hold any job that is available to their male counterparts. Further, they are able to work without jeopardizing the health or well-being of their children in any apparent way. And, they seem to be paid on an equal basis with men. They enjoy both legal and socially mandated protections to help ensure their continued participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of their country.

Thus the former stigma against Cuban women working outside the home, the relegation of women to sexually exploitive or domestic roles, their lack of education and good hygiene and nutrition as well as the socialization of women to subjugate themselves to men are past. These changes are all reflected in contemporary Cuban magazines, for just one example. Studying their content provides helpful insights into the status of Cuba's feminist revolution.

Perhaps more helpful, women in Third World countries still struggling against poverty and oppression should consider the lessons to be learned from the institution of a single, powerful organization such as the Cuban Women's Federation. Rather than waiting for development to "trickle down" in the aftermath of the Revolution, the FMC has helped Cuban women experience emancipation simultaneously with Cuban men from a regime they considered oppressive and exploitive, that of Batista, and from their own familial and social traditions. It has given women a new status. What aspects of the FMC, in particular, have helped all of this to happen?

First, the mass organization created a decentralized women's network of unprecedented size in Cuba. It mobilized women from different class backgrounds, with significant political potential. Whether elected officials or grassroots members, women find in the FMC an active and supportive voice for their concerns. The Federation's vertical lines of communication work both upward, where it articulates women's feelings and opinions, and downward, where it informs members of governmental policies and initiatives.

A dozen years ago, political representation of women in Cuba was approximately proportional to that of women throughout the Communist world (excluding the People's

Republic of China) and roughly equal to that of the United States as well (Jancar 1978:1). Further, the trend for political representation among Cuban women has been rising at a steady rate since the inception of the FMC. There is no reason to think that this trend is leveling off or decreasing.[12]

Thus, with the expected increase in political representation of women in Cuba, the Federation comes closer with each year of the Revolution to its goal of achieving both governmental and women's goals. The women's movement there cannot be considered an independent, feminist one. Rather, it works within the authoritarian nature of the political system. On the one hand, this may be considered the typical failure of a Communist state. On the other hand, it may account for the rapid success of the Cuban women's movement.

Further, the FMC has become successful in a way its creators may not have envisioned. Initially, it was responsive to the government that established it. Ultimately, that government became more responsive to the FMC. It is interesting to speculate about why this may have happened. The fact that both ideological and legal changes occurred must help to explain how the Federation managed to shed its governmental yoke and empower itself. Affirmative action laws alone would have been ineffective in shifting the culture from machismo to egalitarianism. Similarly, an ideology that embraces equity would have been inadequate for safeguarding women's legal rights in the home and in the workplace.

Beyond the hospitable legal and ideological context, then, what might have influenced the shift from government control to autonomy for the FMC? The role of Vilma Espin, its president, should not be underestimated. As a member of the Communist Central Committee and a close relative of Fidel Castro, Espin may be considered a part of that controlling government. On the other hand, she may have enjoyed a power unequalled by any other woman in Cuba. Her own empowerment may have led to an increasingly independent status for the entire FMC.

The growing level of education for all women in Cuba also may have produced a membership that, over time, refused to settle for following the dictates of the government. These highly educated women, whose accomplishments were showcased in the magazines read throughout the country, obtained the vocational training and work experience that prepared many of them for leadership roles within the Federation. At the same time, the social structure was diminishing the stigma of women working outside the home. Even more recently, these women came to hold professional as well as technical positions and thus increased both their confidence and their capability to run their own affairs. Their systematic study of foreign affairs and their opportunities for interaction with international delegations undoubtedly acquainted them with diverse political strategies to model in this endeavor. (Even such interactive processes as the interviewing that led to this paper may influence the direction toward independence that characterizes the FMC.)

Women in Cuba also have come to enjoy better health and--because of a shared work load at home and affordable daycare centers for their children--they have more time

available for self-governance within the FMC. Of course, with birth control readily available, they have smaller families to begin with. Finally, the FMC has approached financial independence from its government subsidies.

Taken together, these factors may have moved the Cuban Women's Federation to a status of independence far beyond what its government organizers envisioned. This shift could have been predicted in the work of Tajfel (1981). His theory suggests a change in the social status of groups that results from the convergence of social categorization, social identity and social comparison. This convergence creates a psychological sense of group distinctiveness and leads, in turn, to motivation for change. The change Tajfel predicted was for collective action among group members to change the social situation for women as a whole. In the case of Cuba, women's economic, political, intellectual and physical lives changed as well.

A number of scholars has postulated that such changes in the social and economic status of contemporary women have led to a rising gender consciousness.[13] However, the Federation never has considered itself a "feminist" organization. Instead, members consider themselves "feminine." Their policy statement at the Fourth Congress reinforced the philosophy that women's status will advance together with--rather than separate from--the advancement of their society at large.

At the Fourth Congress, held in 1984, the FMC stated (translated by Evenson 1986:321):

> All the advances which we report here are the result of a certain conception that, in an underdeveloped country like ours, women must fight for their own liberation at the same time they fight for the liberation of the nation and society, and that later, when they have produced transformations in the socioeconomic structures, it is necessary to continue struggling for equality between women and men in all aspects of life.

At the same time and for the first time in public, however, members of the FMC argued for women's *rights*, rather than *goals*. North American scholars such as Evenson (1986:321) viewed this as the FMC's "growing impatience" with the rate of progress for eradicating sexual discrimination in Cuba.

Contrast the size, unity of purpose and governmental approbation the FMC enjoys with the interest group liberalism inherent in North America. Masi (1981:42), for example, argued that the failure of the women's movement in the United States can be explained in part by the fact that feminists are split on the issues.

Historically, women in this country have disagreed both on what the issues should be and on the strategies that should address them. Over the years, we have failed to reach consensus on the pre-eminence of such concerns as temperance, settlement houses, freedom

for slaves, suffrage, wife abuse, shelters for abused women, racial equality, passage of the ERA and abortion. We may argue on the stand to take relative to these issues.

To help solve this fragmentation problem, Masi (1981:43) suggested that organizations of American women at least strategize together. The fourth Congress of the FMC, held in 1984, argued much the same point: that all women must take a harder-line approach at least to convincing men to share the burden of housework and child care so both spouses could compete equally in the workforce. Masi went on to argue that a lasting structure is one of the most critical elements of the women's movement in this country. In addition to being comprehensive, she explained, the structure must have the capacity to act--via a strategic plan and leadership.

The Cuban Women's Federation provides a model structure in all of these respects. In existence almost since the inception of the Revolution, this one organization has shaped policies and attitudes toward women in all aspects of their lives: marriage, motherhood, education, health, employment and politics. Of course, leadership has come from beyond its ranks as well as within the complex, pyramidal structure. The direction and support from the established source of power in Cuba--Castro and the Communist Party--may help account for its success. As Hewlett (cited in Darnton 1986) pointed out, reform for women historically has been accomplished more effectively by positioning a women's group within the establishment (whether political party or labor union) than by women's groups pressuring for change from outside.

The most recent feminist movement in the United States has adopted the latter approach. Our pluralistic system has led to competition among interest groups for the attention and favors of the powers that be in government. As scholars such as Miller, Hildreth and Simmons (1988) are quick to point out, women are not a homogeneous group--despite the implication in much of the literature of the gender gap that suggests solidarity among women.

The question for American women, then, may be whether the lessons to be learned from Cuban women who managed to cast off their governmental yoke and empower themselves apply in this country. Never has the U.S. government established such a federation that would enroll all women over age 14, representing more than 50 percent of the population. Thus we have not had the opportunity to initiate progressive action with governmental approbation and go on to develop our own capabilities and motivations to the point where we no longer require (or will tolerate) governmental oversight. Rather than looking to the past, then, we may want to envision a utopian future where such an assembly may evolve.

Women's groups in other developing countries, too, may have much to learn from this Cuban model of long-overdue emancipation. Working within the parameters of society--even when that society's goals are largely or entirely determined by males--can mean quick and major advances. The example of the FMC also shows that freedom from traditional

gender-based roles requires the collective action of a single, broad-based organization dedicated to revolutionary principles. Without working independently for liberation, however, the *federadas* have come a long way toward freedom from their husbands, their children and the society that had oppressed them for centuries. Whether this prototype can be superimposed on traditionally male-dominated societies that are less sympathetic to women's concerns remains to be seen.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive summary of relevant studies, see Sen and Grown (1987).

2. Recall that my field work in Havana encompassed just under three weeks. In addition, preliminary and follow-up interviews were conducted through the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, DC.

3. "Elite" is used here in the sense of a particular type of respondent--one who is influential or especially well informed in an organization. Elites are selected for interviews because of their expertise in areas relevant to the research. More specifically, they can provide an overall view of the organization and its relationship to history as well as to the current and broader societal, political, cultural or economic context (Marshall & Rossman 1989:94).

4. Interviews were conducted both in Spanish and English. Notes were taken during these sessions, typically lasting two to four hours each.

5. The phrase "revolution within a revolution" was first enunciated by Castro (1981) in his speech to the Fifth National Plenary of the FMC in 1966. Since then, it has reappeared throughout Cuba on billboards and posters and in the writings of the FMC.

6. Contrast this with the attitude in the United States, according to Hewlett (cited in Darnton 1986), that day care became a "dirty word" in the 1950s and that that attitude prevails.

7. For a comprehensive analysis of Cuban daycare centers, see Leiner (1974).

8. Quintant pointed out that such large homes are rarely necessary now. Two to three children per family has been the average since the mid-1980s.

9. The official relationship between the Cuban government and any mass organization, such as the FMC and others that include the Confederation of Cuban Workers and the Federation of University Students, is described in Article 73 of the Communist Party statutes as, "The Party guides and directs the work of the mass . . . organizations . . . while recognizing the organic independence and autonomy of those organizations."

10. Nazzari (1983:261-262) cautioned against undue optimism about these regulations. Because of Castro's recent system of economic management, the extra expenses entailed in employing women could result in prejudice against hiring them. As a result, employers choosing between male employees and female employees who might become pregnant would logically prefer to hire men. They would realize that

women's potential needs for maternity leave and continued absenteeism for child care increase the company's operating expenses.

11. According to Evenson (1986:313), the divorce rate in Cuba has more than tripled since the Revolution (to over 30 percent). However, because women retain custody of their children in virtually all cases, the burden of childcare falls inordinately upon divorced women.

12. Jancar (1978:253), however, predicted that the trend must level off at some point as it has in Eastern Europe and what was the Soviet Union.

13. For a review of much of this work, see Miller, Hildreth and Simmons (1988).

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