

## WOMEN WORKERS IN SOCIALIST CUBA, 1959-1988: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS.

*Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula.\**

Today, women are participating on all the fronts of economic life. Their incorporation; efficiency in the work process; cooperation in the work group; and participation in emulation, trade union activities, the fulfillment of plans, the discussion of plan figures and professional training have made it possible for them to make permanent advances in their cultural, technical and ideological development.

*Federation of Cuban Women President Vilma Espin, 1985 (1).*

At first it was difficult to direct, to order those men who had never received orders from a woman. But little by little we came to understand one another. And now everything has changed. The essential thing is to give a good example...to be ready to sacrifice oneself.

*Woman fisheries director, 1988 (2).*

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When the technocrats proposed labor contracting I asked what would happen to women? And what happened? Favoritism, cronyism, privileges. And we had to take steps so that the Party and the unions were involved in the recruitment of workers... We're not going to abandon contracting, but we are going to establish a mechanism to eliminate these problems.

*Fidel Castro, 1987 (3).*

One of the most striking developments in three decades of socialist revolution in Cuba has been the growth of the female labor force. In 1958 women constituted 13 percent of the salaried labor force; by the late 1980s they were almost 40 percent (4). This growth flowed from policies rooted in three factors: an idealistic concept of sexual equality, a political need to integrate women into the revolution, and a pragmatic belief that women workers could contribute significantly to national development.

It was essential that women work because the revolutionary leadership perceived labor as more than an economic instrument. They saw labor also as a consciousness raising experience with great moral, social, and political importance. Work for everyone, men and women, is thus a central policy of the revolution.

The six fold growth of the feminine work force from about 200,000 in 1958 to over 1.2 million in 1987 has had profound reverberations in every corner of Cuban society. Work has given women new freedom, self-confidence and independence as well as the satisfaction of moving into technical and professional fields which either did not exist in 1958 or were reserved for men only.

The growth of the feminine work force has also had inevitable economic and social costs. Women workers needed an expensive social support apparatus ranging from day care to night school. Women who once worked unpaid as family labor, became salaried workers. This meant new expenses for the state. And women's new role as worker shook the traditional family and contributed to a rising divorce rate and a declining birthrate.

Women workers also had to confront discrimination in the workplace. In the 1980's a new generation of women workers have increasingly raised questions about women's double day, the quality of jobs, working conditions, and incentives. Older workers sometimes complain that the new generation has little appreciation of the difficulties of women before the revolution. They fear that the new generation is more interested in material goods, in catching what *Muchacha* magazine calls "la onda" (the wave), that is, living with style (5).

The complaints of a new generation of Cuban women workers find Cuba at a difficult moment. Vilma Espín, head of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), insists that women must become 50 percent of the labor force (6). But since 1986 Cuba's capacity to advance women's employment has been limited. The island's

economy has been depressed, battered by droughts, low sugar prices (at least until 1988), problems with western creditors and exchange rates, and growing uncertainty about future levels of Soviet support.

Fidel Castro responded to these difficulties with a "rectification" campaign in 1986 which calls for austerity and self sacrifice. It puts new emphasis on moral incentives and voluntary work, problematic concepts for many women workers.

More positively, the rectification campaign has also meant an somewhat more open and critical attitude on the part of the media. This has permitted an airing of women's concerns about working conditions, discrimination, and the lack of social services.

Our study of the post-1959 experience of working women in Cuba reveals significant progress in terms of employment and new fields of work. It also reveals persistent contradictions which reflect the difficulty of a male-dominated state in reconciling its egalitarian ideological goals with deeply entrenched traditional cultural values. Public attitudes are often no less contradictory and raise questions about the Cuban concept of gender equity.

This uncertainty is reflected in conflicts between Cuban institutions, mass organizations, officials, administrators and individuals over issues attendant to women's employment. These conflicts reveal inflexibilities, competition, and a lack of coordination in the Cuban state apparatus.

This paper will briefly review development of the female labor force in the first two decades of the revolution and then focus more intensively on women workers in the 1980s.

## **WOMEN AND WORK PRIOR TO 1959**

By 1959 the participation of women in the Cuban work force was relatively high compared to other Latin American nations (7). The gradual development of the island's urban service and commercial economy, particularly after World War II, provided jobs for women. They became secretaries (a male job until World War II) and telephone operators, clerks and saleswomen. Most of the island's teachers and nurses were women. In the industrial sector women worked in textile and tobacco and food processing plants.

The growth of a substantial middle class following WWII increased the demand for domestic help. By 1959 at least one quarter of all working women were domestic servants: cooks, laundresses and nurse maids (8). Women also found work in the

“informal” sector as street vendors and prostitutes. Estimates of the number of prostitutes in 1958 range from 25,000 to more than 100,000 (9).

In the countryside women worked largely as family helpers -generally unpaid- in tobacco and other agricultural activities. A few worked as sugar cane cutters and *henequeneras*. Almost none worked in the sugar mills which dominated the island's economy. Women workers were defended, at least on paper, by protective legislation. In 1934 the Cuban government passed an equal pay for equal work act and a maternity law that provided twelve weeks of paid maternity leave. Health standards were established for workplaces that hired women. A 1937 decree forbid employers to fire women workers when they married to avoid paying future maternity benefits (10). These laws, though well intended, were largely unenforced.

As in other Latin American countries, a gulf determined by race, class, and region existed between the idealized role of women and the reality of women's lives. The dominant white Hispanic culture viewed women's employment, especially that of white women, with disfavor, although this view was changing, influenced in part by North America. But for most, the home was women's proper sphere, attuned to their gentler natures, a haven from sexual marauders (11).

## THE EARLY YEARS: 1959-1964

The early years of the revolution witnessed a dramatic growth and transformation of the service sector. Maids and prostitutes were trained to be typists, secretaries and textile workers. Rural women were brought to Havana to learn sewing and dressmaking, the first stage in a deliberate strategy which would lead to more complex tasks in the future.

The rapid expansion of the service sector and particularly education and health provided thousands of jobs for women, a surge that was aided by the baby boom of the early 1960s. Housewives were encouraged to volunteer their spare time to agricultural, educational and health efforts.

The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) played a major role in encouraging women to go to work. Founded by Fidel Castro in August 1960, the FMC is headed by Castro's sister-in-law Vilma Espín. By the 1980's more than eighty percent of women over the age of fifteen were members.

In creating the FMC and pushing for women's employment Castro was taking a significant social gamble. Many men wanted their wives to stay at home. They were uneasy about the independence afforded women by their new incomes. They feared

a loss of honor should their wives be seduced at the workplace. *Revolución* was confronting *machismo*.

Castro was willing to challenge the patriarchal power of husbands because this was a socialist revolution. "Productive labor", that is, work outside the home was perceived as the path to women's liberation, and to women's integration into the revolution. Women's values had to be transformed so that their children's values would be transformed. Men were unhappy. Cuba's divorce rate soared (12).

Women went to work... and then quit in large numbers, a phenomenon that the revolutionary leadership found frustrating. Women quit working because of family pressures, from boredom, because of a lack of support services, or because the extra income was meaningless as there was nothing to buy in the austere economy of the early 1960s. From 1959 to 1964 the net gain of women workers in Cuba averaged eight thousand per year (13). Nonetheless, it was a beginning.

## THE TEN MILLION HARVEST

In the first years of the revolution, the government had sought to break the island's "sugar mentality" and diversify the economy. Some sugar fields were planted with new crops; attention turned to light industry. But for a variety of reasons this effort failed. By 1963 Cuba's sugar production had fallen to 3 million tons, the lowest level in many years. In order to service its sugar export commitments diversification was scaled back. Sugar again took priority. In 1966 Castro announced a plan to reach ten million tons of sugar by 1970, a goal which took on great moral and political importance.

To achieve the ten million tons women workers, plucked from a labor pool of over a million women of work age, would replace men in urban factories. The men would go to the countryside to work in sugar. The labour union journal *Trabajo* observed that "In offices, teaching, and stores, women are better situated than men, who should be working where there is a greater necessity of physical force" (14).

The Cuban government was counting on the revolutionary verve of the Cuban public. Che Guevara's "new man" was the symbol-selfless, highly conscious of his commitment to the community, imbued with a love of physical labor, indifferent to material rewards.

In 1969 FMC teams visited half a million homes seeking to recruit 100,000 new women workers. Minister of Labor Jorge Risquet perceived these visits as "an ideo-

logical dialogue between (women) and the revolution (15). The FMC claimed that 113,372 women joined the work force as a result (16). But many quit. The net gain for the year was 24,000 women workers (17).

Many husbands continued to oppose their wife's employment. Women began to complain about "double exploitation". Some had to get up at 4 a.m. to cook supper before going to work or face a furious husband in the evening.

As women went to work they often found themselves in gender determined fields. Some jobs were considered appropriate, others forbidden. And women workers were frequently organized in sex-segregated units (18). Women's double role as worker and homemaker meant frequent absences from work. This made advancement difficult.

Many of the women who went to work in the 1960's did jobs that were in some way traditional. They sewed, nursed and taught, made cigarettes and cigars, picked fruit, planted trees. But they also began to enter new fields. The world of machines began to open to them. They learned to operate cane lifting machines and lathes. They went to the Soviet Union and East Europe to study engineering. It wasn't easy. A woman who went to work in a steel plant in 1962 was told by her male colleagues: "you'll never make it!". Seventeen years later she was still there (19).

But the addition of women workers could not save the ten million ton harvest from failure. The goal was not reached. The rest of the island's economy was thrown into chaos. In the 1970's Cuba would move away from the heroic economy towards a more stable and institutionalized system of growth.

## STABILITY AND RATIONALIZATION

The ten million ton harvest was followed by a long era of relative economic stability (1971-1985). The revolution's attempt to "build communism now" was abandoned. A new emphasis on better administration and material incentives to increase worker productivity began. Consumer goods, perceived as an impetus for production, were given a new emphasis. Productivity increased. And high sugar prices in the early 1970's fueled rapid economic growth ... for a while.

The economic growth of the early 1970's provided new jobs for women. Textile production alone increased by nearly 50 percent between 1970-1972. More than three quarters of Cuba's textile workers were women (20). By 1974 women represented 25.3 percent of the work force (21). The retention rate for women workers improved.

A series of laws were adopted to facilitate womens' employment. Working women were given special shopping privileges. A 1974 maternity law offered eighteen weeks paid leave of absence and a year's unpaid leave to working women.

In the early 1970's a family code was proposed to ease the situation of women workers. It required husbands to assume equal responsibility for childcare and housework, and gave women the right to divorce husbands who failed to share domestic duties. The code was the subject of great debate. Adopted in 1975, it served primarily to raise men's awareness; housework was now officially their affair.

The family code reflected a conclusion by the state that it could not afford to duplicate all the services that housewives traditionally provided, nor could it provide sufficient numbers of electrical gadgets to ameliorate housework. Men would have to take up the slack.

Paradoxically the intent of the family code was partially undercut by a 1975 decision that only mothers --not fathers-- should be called at work to pick sick children at day care centers. Men continued to be barred from providing personal care to family member patients in hospitals. They were also denied the option of attending to family duties by the vagrancy law of 1971 which obliged men between the ages of 17 and 60 to either work or study (22). Cuba has, as yet, no paternity leave.

Despite these difficulties, women's employment grew dramatically during the 1970's. Seventy percent of the jobs created during the decade were filled by women (23). By 1980 there were approximately 800,000 women workers.

By the 1970's women were not only working as electricians and carpenters and tractor drivers and sugar cane cutters. They were also working inside sugar mills. In 1978 seventy-five women were employed in the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes mill, working as accountants, typists, telegraphers, and on the production line as sugar technicians (24).

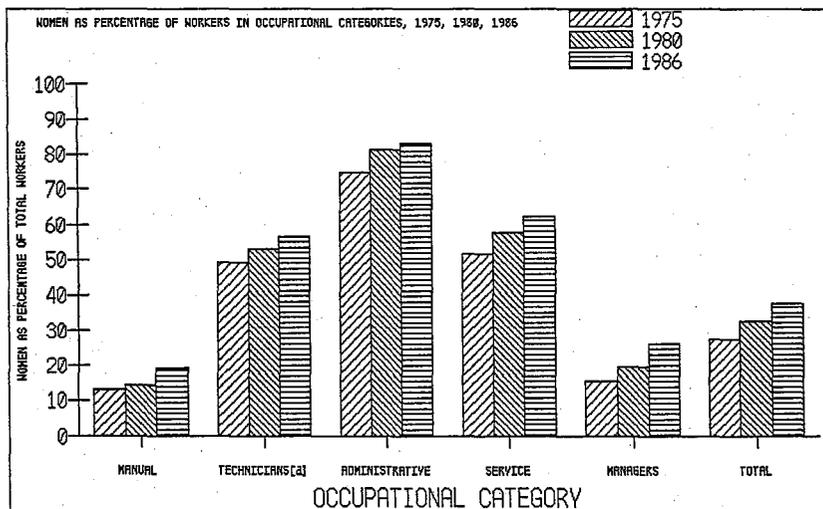
The rapidly expanding universities and technical institutets were creating a whole new corps of professional women: mining engineers, veteranarians, geologists, geophysicists, jurists, ships officers, economists, university professors, journalists, military officers (25).

Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of women workers according to occupational category. It reflects the increasing number of working women as well as their gradual penetration of formerly male areas such as manual labor, and technical and managerial work.

The success of women workers often depended on the attitude of their male colleagues. Some women were welcomed; others harrassed and rejected (26). Many young women faulted their work places for not providing proper training programs.

As the number of working women grew, they increasingly sought help from the government for their problems. At the FMC's congresses in 1975 and 1980, delegates demanded priority for working women's children in boarding schools. They decried the discrepancy between school hours and work hours, school vacations and

TABLE 1



(a) "Technicians" includes teachers

Source: "Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 1986", p. 199

work vacations. And they demanded more day care facilities (27).

But women's demands often went unanswered. The amount of day care available, about one opening for each twelve or thirteen working women, remained unchanged for most of the 1980's. A new day care center cost USD 250,000 in materials plus the expense of a large staff. The state was unwilling to commit the resources to fill the need.

In 1975 a financial management system the "SPDE" was adopted to spur productivity and profitability. Its emphasis on costs made women's maternity leaves a sore point with factory managers. Although the social security system paid for their leaves, the absence of female employees for six to twelve months created expensive headaches for managers. Some hired additional female employees to serve as a buffer. As profits became more important, women became less desirable as employees.

Thus women workers would become enmeshed in one of the central dilemmas of Cuban socialism: equality vs. efficiency. Castro wanted both. On one occasion he observed:

*We can't go just by a strictly economic criterion, without ever taking into account social justice. We're not capitalists, we're socialists, and we want to become communists!* (28).

Nevertheless, the Cuban government soon admitted that managerial discretion

“has often worked against the mass of women by allowing some administrators to make arbitrary decisions that on occasion border on favoritism”, such as the hiring of attractive but unqualified single women (29).

FMC director Vilma Espin complained in 1983 that administrators in non-traditional fields were often hostile to women workers. The male director of an unidentified workshop told a reporter from the women's magazine *Mujeres* in 1982 that

*...men are better workers. At least I prefer them in my work center. They don't have the problem of childbirth or missing work because the child or their mother or father is ill. See what I mean? We men are less problematical... Women have and will always have many limitations* (30).

In the 1980's Cuban leaders, the FMC, the Cuban press and women workers have repeatedly complained about discrimination against women workers. There have been tense confrontations, such as the threatened mass firing of working mothers at a large Havana taxi center in 1984. Neither the **Frente Femenino** (the women's section of the national labor union) nor the FMC was able to resolve the crisis. It took a critical article in a national magazine to avert the firing of the women drivers (31). Although Vilma Espin had urged women to “report each case” of discrimination, women seemed to have little recourse.

## VILMA ESPIN SPEAKS OUT

Women's share of the work force climbed impressively in the first half of the 1980's. By 1986 women constituted 37.7 percent of the labor force (32). They continued to move into more diverse fields as indicated in Table 2.

Cuba's growing feminine workforce confronted a series of persistent problems. These were addressed in a remarkably frank article by FMC chief Vilma Espin in **Cuba Socialista**, the revolution's leading ideological journal, in March 1986. The time had come, she said, to address women worker's difficulties head-on (33).

Vilma Espin acknowledged that in a relatively poor nation like Cuba many “objective” economic obstacles existed to women's full equality. but there were also significant “subjective” problems such as the notion that household tasks and childcare were women's tasks alone; the application of different standards in the evaluation of male and female workers; the promotion of men over qualified women; the limiting of women's access to jobs out of false concern for their reproductive capacity; the refusal to promote women to avoid male resentment; the con-

TABLE 2

*Women Workers by Sector*

SECTOR	PERCENT OF ALL WORKERS	
	1983	1986
Industry	29.9	29.5
Construction	12.2	14.0
Agriculture	19.2	22.4
Forestry	16.3	17.4
Transportation	17.1	18.5
Communications	46.1	47.5
Trade	46.9	49.0
Communal and Individual Services	40.4	41.9
Science and Technology	48.2	48.0
Education	66.3	67.1
Art and Culture	42.5	43.3
Public Health	68.4	69.5
Finance and Insurance	63.2	69.7
Administration, office workers	43.3	44.7

Sources: Magaly Pérez and Noemi Pascal, *"Estadísticas sobre la mujer cubana"*, (Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1985) p. 17; *"Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 1986"*, (Habana: Comité Estatal de Estadísticas, 1986), p. 203.

sideration of women's sexual history in their work evaluations; and the misuse of Cuban labor law to fire women workers (34).

Espín noted that while the origin of these troubles was "the footprint of centuries of oppression", she reminded Cubans that "deep-rooted customs cannot justify incorrect acts" (35).

Espín argued that men's failure to share family duties with their wives was setting a pattern which their children would follow. She acknowledged that certain policies instituted under the revolution, such as requiring working women to take ill children home from the day care center, reinforced this double role.

The question of fetching children at day care centers was actually discussed as some length in the National Assembly. Education Minister José Fernández had said that he had no objections to fathers picking up sick children at the day care centers. But the Labor Minister worried that men might use such license to avoid work (36).

Fidel Castro replied that there were ways of combatting absenteeism other than a policy that discriminated against men and impeded women's advancement. Fidel said the women-only hospital patient attendant policy, which he initiated in the 1960's, posed a "real hard-ship" on some women. He predicted, however, that if men were permitted to do these tasks, few would respond (37).

Espín concern about the sharing of household tasks is borne out in Cuban studies which show that working women spend considerably more time per day doing house work and caring for children than men do (38). This extra burden is repeatedly cited by Cuban men and women as an impediment to women's advancement.

The inflexibility of day care hours is another problem. Day care centers in Cuba are open from seven a.m. to seven p.m. five days a week, and in recent years, on "working Saturdays". These hours do not correspond to factory shifts. At the Ari-guanabo textile factory which has nearly two thousand women workers, most between the ages of seventeen and thirty, factory shifts begin at four a.m. noon and eight p.m. Each working mother must thus make private arrangements for child care for at least a portion of her work hours (39).

Day care centers are often far from the work site and the home. Workers at one Guantanamo factory complained that "Those of us who live in the south of the city are assigned to day care centers in the north, and vice versa" (40). If the mothers arrived even ten minutes late the centers refused to accept the children.

One solution to this dilemma is for women to work at home. Since the 1960s the FMC has conducted programs of "homework" for seamstresses and tobacco rollers. A representative of the work center periodically visits the women's homes to assess their work. Most of the women have children or elderly parents to care for. Some are single heads of households. In 1967 fifteen thousand women were working at home. While we do not have the current figures, we believe that the numbers remain relatively small (41).

## GENDER AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

Another significant problem for working women is the criteria use in hiring male and female workers. According to Vilma Espín many male administrators tend to consider physical appearance and marital status when hiring or promoting women (42).

While women are frequently asked about the size of their families, men are not. Espín urged that family situation be considered in hiring and promoting **both** men and women.

Promotion criteria also differ. According to Espín, men are often promoted over qualified women. Some administrators claim that workers "won't understand it" if women are placed in positions of authority (43).

Espín noted that often the women in greatest need of employment are those least

desired by management. For example, the municipality of Mella in Santiago de Cuba has a substantial number of female headed households and a high rate of female unemployment. The major employer in the area is the Mella sugar mill complex. Of its 5000 employees, only 150 are women. The subdirector of personnel admitted in 1987 that more than twenty women, including many single heads of household, apply for every job opening. Yet on one occasion when more than a hundred jobs became available, only men were hired. The sugar mill's personnel sub-director observed that

*The great problem is that the majority don't have the training required. I don't deny that women can do many things ... But next year we are going to study this more seriously. I don't doubt that 30 percent of our jobs could be carried out by women.* (44)

When women do reach managerial status, and this is infrequent, they tend to manage plants whose personnel are mostly women. Even in fields dominated by women workers, such as health and education, the percentage of female leaders is relatively low.

This absence of women managers is blamed on women's lack of leadership qualities. When a local party leader was asked in 1987 why there were only male bosses in the all-women workshops in this jurisdiction, he replied that it had never occurred to him or to the party that was a problem.

*The FMC periodically appears before the party and they don't say anything. I don't mean to imply that it's not our problem ... but the compañeras have to insist on it ... The party here has not felt the pressure of the FMC.* (45)

Vilma Espin points out that while administrators' say women workers hurt plant productivity and emulation by their home problems and absences, union figures show that more than 85 percent of women workers achieve distinguished worker status. (46)

Another concern of Espin is the way women's sexuality is sometimes used to discriminate against them. She cited the case of an unmarried woman in Las Tunas province had been fired for becoming pregnant. In Matanzas, a cafeteria worker was fired for adultery while her lover, also married and a party militant, had not suffered any sanctions. (47)

These decisions contravene the communist party's thesis on the "Full Exercise of Women's Equality" of 1975 which declared "there cannot be one morality for women and another for men". (48)

Nonetheless, an advertisement for a training program for industrial products clerks in 1986 requested applications from men and "women of certifiable moral character". (49) "Who," Espin wondered, "has the power to place such an ad?" (50)

## REPRODUCTION AND DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination disguised as a solicitous concern for women's reproductive capacity has a long history in Cuba. During the 1960s the revolutionary government used the reproduction argument to categorize hundreds of jobs as preferential for women. Others were forbidden. This in effect institutionalized a sexual division of labor.

Digna Cires, the director of the Frente Femenino in the Cuban trade union organization, told visitors in 1986 that too many jobs had been prohibited, and that some of the regulations were, in fact, discriminatory. <sup>(51)</sup> Nonetheless the ministry of labor has been unwilling to revoke the prohibitions entirely.

The FMC leadership has fought discriminatory legislation for many years with mixed success. As late as 1985 the 3rd Congress of the FMC found maternity related laws still "an obstacle and discriminatory" <sup>(52)</sup> Although the number of discriminatory laws has been reduced, approximately one hundred jobs remained forbidden to women in 1986 <sup>(53)</sup>.

The FMC stated in 1986 that while it agreed "in principle" with efforts to protect pregnant women, it viewed regulations which barred all women from a particular job as unscientific, discriminatory and unrealistic. The mechanization of work in Cuba, particularly in sugar harvesting, was making men's presumed physical strength irrelevant. FMC chief Espin pointed out that ...

*We had to forbid some vanguard "macheteras" (cane cutters) from doing their jobs because the resolution applied to them ... (but we now) have examples of female cane combine operators, construction workers, truck drivers and so forth who have remained in perfect health and carry out their work efficiently.* <sup>(54)</sup>

She said that gender based jobs were being reassessed on a "truly scientific basis". <sup>(55)</sup>

Gender based prohibitions are not absolute. Some women have negotiated the right to hold "men's" jobs with the assistance of the union and the FMC. For example in 1987, henequen cutter Nora Torres Garcia was told that she was doing forbidden labor. She engaged a lawyer who, with the help of the local FMC office, complained to the provincial office of the Cuban Employment Commission. She was advised to get a medical certificate approving her henequen cutting. She was eventually reinstated.

Torres Garcia later observed,

*... I have worked in the countryside since I was a little girl. My mother was left alone with a large family to maintain. I was the oldest and so I had to help her cutting cane and making carbon. Let me tell you from experience that both of these are much more difficult than cutting henequen.* <sup>(56)</sup>

Torres Garcia's fellow workers-many of whom were retirees-confirmed that women had cut henequen for some thirty years.

The FMC does not always come to the rescue of women workers. A reader who wrote to the FMC's **Mujeres** magazine that she was fired for refusing a transfer to a job far from home was told she was in the wrong. **Mujeres** cited Resolution 4669 which allows the firing of workers who refuse to accept job transfers within their province, no matter how distant the workplace may be.

## THE MISUSE OF LABOR LAW

One of Vilma Espín's concerns has been the misuse of labor laws to avoid hiring women. Such cases often reflect the efforts of cost-conscious managers to avoid paying maternity benefits. For example, the Institute of Advance Pedagogy refused to hire a pregnant professor despite the dire need for teaching staff. (57) A money collector in Santiago de Cuba was fired after becoming pregnant. Management argued that carrying the money bags would be a strain. (58)

There is also some resistance to Resolution 511 which provides for the setting aside of a certain number of jobs for women in new factories. In one case directors of an electrical engineering plant reduced the number of jobs the Ministry of Labor ordered set aside for women, claiming that there were no qualified women available. When confronted by the CTC's **Frente Femenino**, the personnel director admitted that he preferred to hire men. (59)

Cuban laws are also manipulated to punish women for attending to family responsibilities. In one case a woman missed a day of work without permission because her husband was gravely ill. Although she notified the factory of the situation, she was fired for violating the law on absenteeism. Her husband died. She sued. A municipal tribunal found in her favor. (60)

In another case a female sugar worker in Holguín was frequently summoned from work by the day care center because of her three year-old daughter's illnesses. Management sanctioned her, claiming her absences were unjustified although she had turned in the appropriate medical certificates. The provincial union found in favor of management. She sued. A provincial tribunal agreed with the union. She appealed. The Supreme Tribunal threw the case out for lack of evidence of discrimination. It later refused to consider her case claiming a statute of limitations had expired. (61)

Sexual discrimination in the workplace appears to be system-wide and systematic. It has not been hindered by either Fidel's exhortations or by party directives. Some managers are bold enough to stipulate in advertisements in the periodical **Trabaja-**

doers that "men only need apply" for jobs easily filled by women (62).

## WOMEN'S SELF LIMITATION

While Cuban women are increasingly employed in new fields, many still limit themselves by choosing traditional -and more poorly paid- "women's" jobs such as office worker or receptionist. "Male" jobs such as carpentry or mechanics are scorned. The FMC and other mass organizations have attempted to counter the conservative notions of parents, relatives and boy friends who are influential in career decisions by pushing young women into technical schools in non-traditional fields.

In Cuba, as elsewhere, there is a tendency to devalue work done by women. Cuban officials are aware of this. But there has been no consistent effort to add prestige to women's work, or to get men to enter traditional "female" occupations.

In the health field, while a few men are becoming nurses, the number of women doctors is being limited. When the number of women medical school graduates exceeded that of men, Fidel Castro announced that in view of Cuba's internationalist responsibilities, the entrance requirements for male candidates would be reduced in order to assure an ample number of male doctors (63).

Employment discrimination is not simply a matter of an ignorant or willful factory managers. In case after case the officials from the CTC, the *Frente Feminino*, the Ministry of Labor, and the Communist Party failed to defend women workers. No clear grievance procedure has been established.

FMC chief Vilma Espín was particularly distressed by the ineffectiveness of the Communist Party. In her 1986 article she called on the party to vigorously combat discrimination and actively promote women to positions of greater power, and to not leave such tasks solely to the FMC. "The party cannot passively observe those who commit injustices!" she wrote (64).

Recent research has found that some -and probably many- Cuban women see work as an unpleasant necessity. In interviews with Cuban textile workers in 1984, Marie Withers Osmond and María Acosta found that the women viewed their jobs primarily as part of their family caretaker role. Their salaries helped to better the family standard of living. The women found their work tedious and exhausting. Most did not intend to remain employed indefinitely (65).

One problem for women textile workers has been poor working conditions. Many of Cuba's factories pre-date the revolution; the machinery is old and breaks down frequently.

A Cuba study of the Ariguanabo textile factory (Cuba's second largest) in 1986 found the fifty-four year old plant's labor force -it employs 4,621 workers- to be highly unstable. Workers at Ariguanabo were divided into three eight-hour shifts. The noise created by the spinning machines was deafening. Research indicated that workers walked an average of fifteen kilometers daily. Temperatures occasionally reached 40° Celsius (66). Between 1963 and 1986 19,600 workers had quit, an average turnover rate of seventeen percent.

In 1987 the FMC itself undertook a study of women's role in the textile industry. One finding was that women seemed to be less aware than men in the importance of learning to master new machines and technologies(67).

## WOMEN AND THE RECTIFICATION CAMPAIGN

The "rectification" campaign begun by Castro in April of 1986 to respond to "negative" tendencies in the revolution and to stimulate production has been a problematic one for women workers because of its emphasis on voluntary labor.

Volunteer labor is important in determining one's integration into the revolution. But for women who are already heavily burdened by their tasks as housewives, workers, and members of mass organizations, it is extremely difficult.

In Havana some 70,000 volunteer workers organized in microbrigades are constructing housing, medical facilities and day care centers. Some of the microbrigade workers are housewives and retirees, although most are workers on leave from their overstuffed factories and workplaces. Microbrigade work days tend to be substantially longer than regular factory shifts.

The heroic schedule of the microbrigades poses a challenge to mothers (and fathers) who otherwise face unemployment. Castro has applauded the brigades for routinely putting in ten and twelve hour days. He praised a brigade of women tile layers in Havana who for five months had been working more than fourteen hours daily, including Saturday and sometimes Sundays (68).

Marta Leyva, a chemical analyst who currently installs tile in a microbrigade works from six in the morning until six at night and until ten on alternate days. She has two small children.

*The day that I work until six I can be with my sons until they go to sleep. Sometimes we take a walk. I haven't been able to arrange daycare, and I know there are many women in my situation (69).*

The exhaustion of women extends into the office of Fidel Castro himself. At an all night conversation with Fidel in spring 1988 a visitor noticed the translator was struggling to stay awake. She later confessed to the visitor that she was exhausted from the combination of regular and volunteer labor (70).

Another major component of the rectification campaign has been an effort to reduce overemployment. Castro has complained that administrators were employing two or three times more workers than necessary (71). In 1986 there was an estimated surplus of 10,000 public health workers in Havana alone (72). In November of 1987 Castro indicated that "factories which once employed 1400 are now producing more with 600 workers" (73).

The impact of this on women workers can be seen at the Planta de Herrajes, a factory which makes materials for the construction industry. Its work force has been reduced from 1900 to 915 in recent months. To make up for the plants deficiencies, the remaining workers, many of whom are women, are working ten hour days, volunteering two additional hours, and also volunteering on Saturdays and Sunday mornings. In addition three times a month the workers, on completing their work day, go off to work all night in microbrigades, and then return to the factory in the morning. The reporter was rather flabbergasted by this, but the workers assured her it was so. One woman worker did note that this schedule "makes some of the *compañeras* knees ache....and that others complain about their veins" (74).

The "rectification campaign" clearly marks a major test of whether the growth of women's employment which has increased steadily since the mid 1960's can be maintained.

One advantage offered by the rectification campaign has been a surge of day care construction, particularly in Havana. In 1986 Fidel Castro made the construction of day care facilities in Havana a primary goal of the microbrigades, saying that the needs of women workers had been ignored. He considered it "tragic" that working women had to pay as much as 80 pesos plus meals for private child care. He ridiculed "technocrats" who "simply couldn't imagine that day care was indispensable to national production" (75). Said Castro, "*If you asked the Ministry of Construction to build one day care center ... why they practically fainted!*" (76).

By the end of 1987 fifty-four new daycare centers had been completed in Havana alone. Plans were underway for the construction of fifty more in 1988. Castro estimated that each center would serve more than 200 working women. In 1987 only one of the fifty brigades building daycare centers in Havana was directed by a woman (77).

Castro's interest in daycare reflects concern not only about women workers, but also about declining birth rates and juvenile delinquency. Birth rates declined in the early 1980s to below replacement level, while juvenile delinquency, seen as a reflection of disengaged and selfish youth, is an increasing concern among Cuban officials. Castro commented that children learn "to integrate into society, to collabora-

te with others" in day care. In this regard he thought the *circulos* might be more important than universities (78).

## CONCLUSION

The incorporation of women into the work force is a fundamental component of the revolution's efforts to establish full feminine equality. The encouragement of female employment has dramatically altered the characteristics of the female work force since 1959. Private domestic service and prostitution have both been largely eliminated. Equal and universal access to education and job training programs have greatly expanded women's opportunities.

The level of women's employment grew slowly in the 1960s, then more rapidly in the 1970s till the mid 1980s. It may now have reached temporary plateau. Nonetheless, population data suggests that in the 1990s as the population of working age declines, the prospect for women workers will again improve (79).

A new openness in the media stimulated by the rectification campaign has shed more light on the condition of working women in Cuba, revealing enduring and systematic sexual discrimination. Economic austerity measures have lessened worker income and increased prices for consumer goods. Employee cutbacks threaten to increase female unemployment. Renewed emphasis on voluntary labor places a greater strain on working women. At the same time rectification has produced substantial government commitment to expanding day care services.

The rectification campaign has revealed substantial disagreement between organizations, state institutions and individuals over policies regarding women's employment. Vilma Espin has called for equal representation in the work force while Fidel Castro has stated that such promises cannot be made.

The lack of local autonomy continues to impede the resolution of difficulties. Local day care centers and supermarkets are not free to determine their own hours, and thus cannot be responsive to local needs. Currently such decisions are made on a national basis. Whether or not rectification allows for greater local authority may have a substantial impact on working women.

The success of the program to get women to work has had paradoxical effects. As women went to work, they had less time to attend FMC meetings. Success was destroying the organization. To make the FMC more relevant, in recent years it has taken a more vigorous position in defense of women workers. The FMC's women's magazines have played a powerful role in indentifying discriminatory practices.

Many contradictions remain in policies that affect working women. The government continues to urge men to share domestic responsibilities, yet forbids them to take paternity leave. Parents are urged to spend more time with their children while pressure increases to donate more time to work. Officials decry the feminization of certain professions while "protective" laws impede women's employment in a number of fields. And no efforts are made to encourage men to enter traditionally "feminine" fields.

The recent domestic debates over problems and solutions are a refreshing acknowledgment by the revolution of the limits of social change through decree. The motivations of and problems face by working women in Cuba are complex. Sorting out the contradictions will require more vigorous attention by the party, the state, and the FMC. A key to this process would be elevating women to positions where they can contribute decisively to the making of national policy.

## NOTES

The authors would like to thank Professor Phyllis Passariello and the Center for Cuban Studies for their assistance. The comments of members of the 5th Latin American Labor History Conference (Princeton University 1988) are also appreciated.

1. *Draft Thesis: Fourth Congress of the FMC*, (Havana: FMC 1985), p.8.
2. *Granma*, August 18, 1988, p.2.
3. *Granma*, June 27, 1987, p.3.
4. Claes Brundenius, "Growth with Equity" in Sandor Halebsky and John Kirk, eds., *Cuba: Twenty-five Years of Revolution, 1959-1984* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), p.195. There is some debate on the accuracy of these figures. They are best taken as a rough order of magnitude. See discussion in Jean Stubbs and Mavis Alvarez, "The Cooperative Movement in Rural Cuba", in Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León eds., *Rural Women and State Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 148-149.
5. *Muchacha*, December 1987, pp. 38-39.
6. *Granma*, October 17, 1987, p.1.
7. The 1953 Cuban census reported that women comprised 13.7 percent of the labor force. The rate in Argentina (1947) was 16.6 percent; Colombia (1951) 12.4 percent; Venezuela (1950) 12.2 percent; Costa Rica (1950) 10.4 percent; and Nicaragua (1950) 8.6 percent as reported in Ramiro Pavón González, *El empleo femenino en Cuba* (Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977), p.40.

8. There exist substantial disagreements over exactly how many women worked as domestic servants prior to the revolution. Estimates range from 25 percent of the female labor force (Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978) to 70 percent (Margaret Randall, *Women in Cuba, Twenty Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981) p. 23.

9. Armando Torres, former secretary-general of the Superior Council for Social Defense, estimated that there were 10,000 prostitutes in Havana and 30,000-40,000 on the island. Oscar Lewis, Ruth Lewis, Susan Rigdon, eds., *Four Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 279.

10. Kathryn Lynn Stoner, "From the House to the Streets: Women's Movement for Legal Change in Cuba, 1898-1958", (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Indiana, 1983), p. 227.

11. For a discussion of the Cuban honor/shame tradition, see Mirta de la Torre Mulhare, "Sexual Ideology in pre-Castro Cuba: A Cultural Analysis" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1969).

12. The divorce rate rose from 8.5 percent of marriages in 1959 to 30.2 percent in 1974. Nicola Murray, "Socialism and Feminism: Women and the Cuban Revolution" in *Feminist Review*, No. 2, 1979, p. 64. By 1987, nearly one of every two Cuban marriages ended in divorce.

13. *Trabajo*, September 1964, p.74.

14. *Trabajo*, October 1964, p. 65.

15. Ana Ramos, "*La mujer y la revolución en Cuba*", Casa de las Américas, March-June, 1971, p. 68.

16. *Mujeres*, May, 1970, p.42

17. Ana Ramos, "*La mujer...Casa de las Américas*, March-June, 1971, p. 66.

18. The male director of a chicken farm in Camaguey explained in 1983 why all the workers at the farm were women:

*To care for birds seems a trivial effort at first view. Nevertheless, it requires special qualities of patience and care on the part of the worker. This is why women, with their innate faculties for lavishing care, represent the highest percentage of workers in poultry centers... (Mujeres, April 1983 p.41)*

In 1987, goose-plucking is identified as a task appropriate for women. (*Granma Weekly Review*, February 1, 1987, p. 5).

19. *Mujeres*, February 1979, p.7.

20. Claes Brundenius, *Revolutionary Cuba: The Challenge of Economic Growth with Equity*, (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1983), p. 151, Table A.2.9.

21. Fidel Castro, speech at the closing of the Second Congress of the FMC, November 29, 1974, in Elizabeth Stone ed., *Women and the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981), p. 57.

22. *Cuba Review*, Vol. IV N° 2, September 1974, p.6

23. Brundenius, *Revolutionary Cuba...*, p. 60.

24. *Mujeres*, April, 1978, pp. 48-50.
25. *Mujeres*, Various, 1970-1980.
26. For examples see *Mujeres* December 1986, p.2; *Bohemia*,
27. See *Memories: Second Congress Cuban Women's Federation* (Havana: Editorial Orbe, 1975); *Memorias del 3er Congreso de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1984).
28. Fidel Castro, speech at the closing of the Third Congress of the FMC, March 16, 1980, in Stone, p.119.
29. *Mujeres*, January 1983, p.10
30. *Mujeres*, August 1982, pp. 20-21.
31. *Mujeres*, August 1984, pp. 11-13.
32. *Mujeres*, April 1987, p.8.
33. Vilma Espín Guillois, "La batalla por el ejercicio pleno de la igualdad de la mujer: acción de las comunistas", *Cuba Socialista*, Año 6, No.2 (March-April 1986), pp. 27-68.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 34,39.
36. *Granma*, March 7, 1985, pp. 1-3.
37. *Granma*, March 7, 1985, p.3.
38. A 1975 study conducted by Cuba's Institute for Internal Demand found that working women spent on average eight times as much of their day (four hours) on household duties as men, and spent an average of one hour less per day than men at work. Max Azicri, "Women's Development Through Revolutionary Mobilization: A study of the Federation of Cuban Women", in Irving Horowitz ed., *Cuban Communism: Fourth Edition* Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1981), p. 291.
39. *Muchacha*, September 1987, pp. 10-11.
40. *Granma*, February 2, 1988.
41. *Mujeres*, August 1987, pp. 50-51. Vilma Espín estimates that there are some 200,000 female headed households in Cuba. *Granma*, September 30, 1987.
42. Vilma Espín Guillois, pp.34,40.
43. Vilma Espín Guillois, p. 34.
44. *Granma*, March 18, 1987, p.3.

45. *Ibid.* Women are often as quick to express discriminatory views as men. A debate over the promotion of women at a textile plant in Pinar del Rio prompted one woman worker to comment:

... *management requires authority which comes naturally to men.*

*Managers have to think of the plant above everything, and women are incapable of this.*

*Mujeres*, April 1987, p.8.

46. Vilma Espín Guillois, p. 41. For years officials have claimed that women are, in fact, more responsible workers who tend to work harder and are absent less than men. Administrators claim the contrary. It is one of the perplexing contradictions concerning women's employment in Cuba.

47. *Ibid.*, p.44.

48. Stone, p. 101.

49. Vilma Espín Guillois, p.57.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

51. Interview with Digna Cires. Havana, April, 1986.

52. *Memorias del Tercer Congreso de la FMC* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1984), p. 78. (74)

53. Comment of FMC official to Professor Kathryn Lynn Stoner in Havana, 1987.

54. Vilma Espín Guillois, pp. 38-39.

55. *Mujeres*, June 1987, p.48.

56. *Mujeres*, June 1986, p.45.

57. *Vilma Espín Guillois*, p.41.

58. *Ibid.*, p.44.

59. *Ibid.*, p.83.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*, p.44.

63. Interview with Isabel Largaña and John Dumoulin. "*Interview with Isabel Largaña and John Dumoulin*". Havana, January 1985.

64. Vilma Espín Guillois, p.44.

65. Marie Withers Osmond, "Women and Work in Cuba: Objective Conditions and Subjective Perceptions", paper presented to American Sociological Association, August, 1985, p.23.

66. *Muchacha*, September 1987, pp. 10-11.
67. *Mujeres*, April 1988, p.15.
68. *Granma*, September 19, 1987, p.4.
69. *Granma*, October 30, 1987, p.2.
70. Interview with Walter Correy, a Portland, Maine lawyer who accompanied Catholic church delegation to Cuba. April 1, 1988.
71. *Granma Weekly Review*, January 25, 1987, p.2.
72. *Latin American Weekly Report*, December 11, 1986, p.2.
73. *Granma*, December 2, 1987, p.3.
74. *Mujeres*, March 1988, p.54-55.
75. *Granma*, December 2, 1987, p.4.
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Granma*, October 30, 1987, p.3.
78. *Granma*, December 11, 1987, p.1.
79. Sergio Díaz-Briquets, "Age Structure, Fertility Swings, and Socio Economic Developments in Cuba" in Sergio G. Roca ed., *Socialist Cuba, Past Interpretations and Future Challenges* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), p. 169.