

Cuban Women and Politics

by Isel Rivero y Mendez

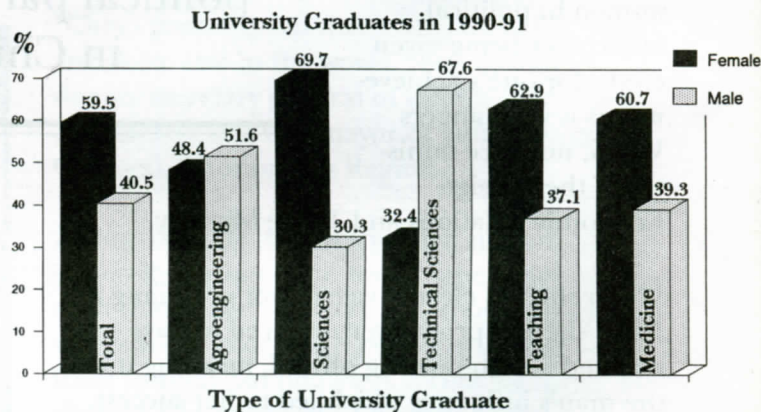
Today, 33 years after the revolution, Cuba is poised before a future ominously reminiscent of the past. And the women? As early as 1869 Ana Betancourt had pleaded with the "founding fathers" to provide for women's rights, since women, both black and white, had participated in a war of independence. But the new era, vis-a-vis women, was little different from the old. Women had to wait until 1917 to win the rights of divorce, to child custody, and to administer their property. The First National Congress of Women was held in Havana in 1932; as a consequence of pressures formulated by this Congress, women won the vote in 1935.

The bibliography on Cuban women is very limited. Yet women made every Cuban revolution, including the current one, possible. It is women's labor that has sustained the revolution to date.

The Federation of Cuban Women was created in 1960. Vilma Espin, a former commando, was its founder and president. As wife of Raul Castro (Fidel's brother) she also was the sole woman (alternate) member of the Politburo. The federation mobilized women for every major campaign declared by Castro: the literacy campaign, the primary health care and voluntary work brigades, and the mobilization of surveillance committees for the "defense of the revolution." In exchange, the government abolished prostitution and reintegrated prostitutes into the formal labor sector. The Family Code, which attempted to legislate labor relations at home, was part of the federation's work, the result of its having claimed that revolutionary men were no different from counter-revolutionaries: at home every man was a bourgeois. The government also legalized abortion, made provisions for prenatal care, and changed the penal code so that rape was punishable by the death penalty. Still, 33 years later, Vilma Espin (now replaced in the Politburo) concedes, "In many households, even today, girls receive an education geared toward assuming greater responsibilities in household duties; boys are educated to face the world." No wonder that in certain Havana circles the *companeras* are claiming

that the real revolutionary thesis is "Machismo-Leninismo."

Indeed, women are merely 21.5 percent of the Communist party membership. A full 53 percent of "economically active" women are now unemployed, including those who are highly educated.



During the last three years, the Foundation for Cuban Women has been created in New Jersey by a group of committed Cuban feminists. With a membership that stretches from academia to the service sectors, this group seeks to establish a feminist agenda outside the boundaries both of the conventional parties in exile and the Federation of Cuban Women.

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About the author: Isel Rivero y Mendez is a Cuban writer and poet living in New York City.