

Vilma Espín: Her Role in The Federation of Cuban Women and the Evolution of Women's
Roles in Revolutionary Cuba, 1960-1975

by

Alexandra C. Fenton

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
List of Abbreviations Used	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Formative Experiences of Vilma Espín	17
2.1 Youth: Family and Education	17
2.2 University of Oriente: The Learning Curve	19
2.3 Revolution	26
2.4 Revolutionary Victory	37
Chapter 3: Women Before the Revolution, Women in the Revolution	44
3.1 Women’s Roles in Pre-Revolutionary Cuba	44
3.2 Women and Revolution 1956-1959	64
3.3 Mariana Grajales	70
3.4 Conclusion	73
Chapter 4: Foundation and Education: Espín and the Beginning of the FMC	76
4.1 Feminism and the FMC	84
4.2 Educational Works of the FMC	87
4.3 <i>Mujeres</i> Magazine	98
4.4 Formal Education	102
4.5 Concluding Thoughts	108

Chapter 5: Revolution Building: Espín, the Family Code and the Introduction of Women into the Labour Force	111
5.1 Resolutions 47 and 48	129
5.2 The Family Code	133
5.3 Conclusion	140
Chapter 6: Conclusion	143
Bibliography	152

Abstract

In 1960, Fidel Castro's newly founded revolutionary government created the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) in an attempt to bring women into the revolutionary process. Vilma Espín, herself a former revolutionary, was asked to lead the FMC in the changes that it brought to women living all over Cuba. This thesis will examine the personal influence that Espín had on the FMC, analyzing her significance in the running of the mass organization, and assessing how during these early years of the revolution women's roles evolved under the guidance of the FMC.

List of Abbreviations Used

ALN	National Liberation Action
ANAP	National Association of Small Farmers
ARO	Oriente Revolutionary Action
CENESEX	National Centre for Sexual Education
CTC	Cuban Trade Union Central
FMC	Federation of Cuban Women
M-26-7	26 th of July Movement
MINFAR	Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MNR	National Revolutionary Movement
UFR	Revolutionary Women's Union

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For my parents, Terry and Gordon, and to Emily, Paul and Nick

Chapter 1: Introduction

In January 1959 the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista's government, and in 1960 the new revolutionary government created the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas or Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). The FMC was intended to incorporate women into the revolutionary movement and would drastically change the course of women's lives throughout the country. Under the guidance of the FMC's longtime president, Vilma Espín, the FMC instituted programs to educate women, help them cope with family life, find jobs, and obtain better access to health care, as well as participate in a variety of other projects aimed at raising the standard of living for Cuban women. Using a combination of primary and secondary source material, the purpose of this thesis is to examine both the importance of the FMC in bringing about a change in women's roles in the period between 1960 and 1975, and to show the crucial influence that Vilma Espín had, as an individual, over this mass organization. By analyzing Espín's biographical details, alongside information about the work of the FMC and by comparing women's roles during pre-revolutionary times, the thesis will illustrate the profound influence that Espín and the FMC had on Cuban society in the early stages of the revolution.

Since 1898, when Spanish control of the island was overthrown, Cuba had largely been dominated (in cultural and commercial matters as well as in national politics) by the United States. Reaction to that external control came to a head in 1953, the

centenary of the birth of José Martí, who had led the movement for independence from Spain. Between 1920 and 1950 Cuba had suffered from problems of widespread corruption and authoritarianism in government, which culminated in the military coup of 1952 that brought Fulgencio Batista to power.¹ Batista's coup, which came at a time of great political unrest, planted the seeds for the revolution. Many Cubans (especially young people and university students) were enraged by the undemocratic nature of his actions, and began to protest against his regime, Vilma Espín among them.

In the period following Batista's coup, Fidel Castro (who had been nominated to run as a candidate for Congress in the aborted 1952 elections) had begun to plan an assault on the Moncada barracks in Santiago as a violent protest, which he carried out on July 26th 1953² accompanied by 110 men.³ Although the battle lasted only about an hour, and many of the rebels were either imprisoned (including Fidel Castro) or killed, the Moncada attack had lasting significance in Cuban history because of what the assault came to represent. While Fidel Castro was imprisoned, he remained politically active. In June 1954 Fidel Castro released an influential statement that explained the goals of his movement, which was entitled "History will absolve me" or "La historia me absolverá". Castro's words were circulated clandestinely as a pamphlet, raising

¹ Julia Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 20. Batista, running for the second time as President in 1953, knew that he could not win the election. Instead he staged the coup, continuing the lack of democratic practices in Cuban electoral politics that had existed for decades.

² The date for which the revolutionary movement was named – July 26th Movement or M-26-7.

³ Hugh Thomas. *The Cuban Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), 52.

awareness about the revolutionary movement.⁴ Vilma Espín, who later married his brother Raúl, was actively involved in the political underground at this time. In May 1955, Fidel Castro and 18 of his comrades were released from prison,⁵ and shortly thereafter Fidel Castro left for Mexico in order to begin training a guerrilla army in an attempt to overthrow Batista by force.⁶ Fidel Castro's return to Cuba in late November 1956 on the *Granma* yacht would herald the true beginning of the 26th of July Movement's (M-26-7) revolution.

The women of Cuba did not play a very significant role in the political upheavals of the early 20th century, largely because in Cuba at that time it was not socially acceptable for women to assume major societal roles, much less participate in revolutionary movements. In the pre-revolutionary period in Cuba, women were expected to act in a traditionally feminine manner, remaining within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers and daughters. Although feminist movements had begun to gain some popularity in the early 20th century, women were still largely marginalized in society, and had little political power.⁷ It was not until the beginning of the revolution that women's roles began to change, with women becoming increasingly active in

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69. In his statement, Castro condemned the brutality of the military, the illegality of Batista's actions, and the poor conditions in which many Cubans lived. He called instead for the return of power to the people, ownership of land for tenant farmers, a greater share of profits to industrial workers (including those in the sugar industry), the seizure of assets obtained dishonestly during previous regimes. He also stated that, if his insurrection had been successful, that there would be no more political persecution, and that Cuba would become a safe haven for those suffering political oppression in other countries (Castro, *La historia me absolverá*).

⁵ Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution*, 77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷ Women in prerevolutionary Cuba were largely uneducated and did not generally participate in public life – women at this time were expected to marry, bear children, and devote their time to the cultivation of the domestic realm. This is discussed in greater detail later.

politics and society, both by joining the revolutionary movement, and taking advantage of the new freedoms which the revolution would bring.

After the Batista government was overthrown, Fidel Castro established the Federation of Cuban Women in 1960 with the idea that it would help to mobilize the women of Cuba to aid the revolutionary cause. The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which was at first largely made up of female revolutionaries and supporters of Castro's movement, continued the task of mobilizing women into the public sphere, helping to change the way that women were viewed in society. Margaret Randall explains that the objectives of the FMC were to "raise the ideological, political, cultural and scientific level of women in order to incorporate them into the tasks assigned by the Revolution and so, to allow them the role they are entitled to play in the new society."⁸ Vilma Espín, who became the leader of the FMC in 1960, made it her life's work to ensure that women were well equipped to take up their new, public role in Cuban society.

This thesis analyzes the significance of Espín's work and of the FMC, from 1960 to 1975 in order to assess the FMC's (and thereby Espín's) most influential period. The discussion of Espín and the role of the FMC in this thesis begins with biographical information about Espín and the pre-revolutionary social conditions in Cuba, which help to serve as a reference point for the analysis of the FMC in Chapters 3 and 4. By 1975 the FMC had already embarked on most of its major projects including education, childcare, and employment, as well as support for prostitutes and domestic servants, seeking to provide them with further education and training. The year 1975 is

⁸ Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1974), 15.

particularly significant because that was the year that the FMC introduced the Family Code, a legal document explaining women's rights within the home, and which was an important victory for the organization.

In their analysis of the rise of the FMC and its influence throughout the 1960s, Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula explain that in "the beginning there were years of frenetic and innovative activity", but that as the years went on "innovation was gradually superceded by bureaucracy, routine, and a certain measure of boredom."⁹ After 1975 the FMC became in many ways a less effective organization, with more emphasis on the maintenance of existing programs such as pre-school education and childcare centres, rather than on the creation of new initiatives. As a result this thesis focuses on the period leading up to and including the Family Code. In this way the thesis analyzes the importance of the FMC and Espín during their evolution and at the height of their power and influence.

In English language scholarship, Vilma Espín is largely omitted from narratives regarding the Cuban revolution. Indeed, the roles of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara dominate discussions of Cuba in terms of the early revolutionary years, and both Espín's contribution to the revolution and her leadership of the Federation have been relatively ignored.¹⁰ In Cuba, Espín was, and still is, an extremely important figure, and there have

⁹ Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula. *Sex in Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁰ In Louis A. Pérez's definitive history of the Cuban revolution entitled *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, there is relatively little discussion of women's contribution to the revolutionary cause, nor is there analysis of the projects initiated by the FMC. The most incisive English language analysis of women's involvement in the Cuban Revolution was done by Margaret Randall in her books *Cuban Women Now*, and *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later*, both of which are largely made up of interviews with Cuban

been several books written in Spanish about her in recent years.¹¹ Besides small encyclopedia articles and references in books of Cuban history, in English there has been very little written about her. Chapter 1 will provide a brief, but detailed biography of Espín, including a wealth of information about her life that cannot be found in most English language sources. The biography will then serve as a basis for analyzing Espín's work with the FMC. The following chapters will develop and assess the connection between Espín, the FMC, and the evolution of women's roles, stretching from the pre-revolutionary period to 1975.

The most common materials in scholarship regarding women in Cuba are collections of interviews such as Margaret Randall's *Cuban Women Now* (1974) or her later work *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (1981), as well as Octavio Cortázar's documentary entitled *With Our Memory on the Future* (2006), which are intended to illustrate the views of ordinary women who lived in Cuba at the time.¹² Randall's *Cuban Women Now* is considered a seminal work in the field of Cuban women's history which contains many interviews with women living after the revolution about topics pertaining

women. Although *Cuban Women Now* contains an interview with Vilma Espín, the purpose of the book is not to deal with Espín and the FMC, but rather to evaluate the Cuban feminist movement. Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula's book *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* is perhaps the best secondary source pertaining to women's involvement in the revolution, because it contains an in-depth analysis of the relationship between power and gender in the Cuban state. Titles such as James D. Rudolph's *Cuba: A Country Study*, Julia E. Sweig's *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Jorge Ibarra's *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba 1898-1959*, all of which are important for understanding Cuba's past, do not give adequate attention to the FMC and women's contributions to the success of the revolution.

¹¹ Since Espín's death in 2007, there have been several small (less than 300 pages) biographies written about Espín in Spanish. Carolina Ayerra Aguilar's *Por siempre Vilma* (2008) and Ligia Trujillo Aldama's *Vilma Espín: La flor más universal de la Revolución Cubana* (2010), are both accounts of Espín's life written by women who knew her personally. Another biography written in 2013 entitled *Vilma: una vida extraordinaria* edited by Juan Carlos Rodríguez was written as more of a popular documentary style of biography, with many pictures and quotations, rather than as a solid academic source.

¹² Also helpful for understanding the viewpoints of women in Cuba is José Bell Lara's *Cuba: Las mujeres en la insurrección 1952-1961*, which is a collection of recent interviews with former female guerrillas.

to women's roles in society. Her book is a valuable resource to gain an understanding of the challenges facing women living in Cuba after the revolution, and also to understand women's perspectives about Espín and the work of the FMC. Randall's book, which contains interviews with leading figures in the Cuban women's movement, is largely interview-based, which means that it does not contain extensive analysis by Randall of women's changing role in Cuba. Randall's interviews convey the sense that she is biased toward a more western form of feminism, but it is generally a useful book for gaining an understanding of what life was like for women in Cuba during the early 1970s.

Primary resources including FMC productions such as *Work Plan*, *What is the FMC?*, and the FMC Congress compilations,¹³ which were written in part by Espín, are interesting resources because they show the official government stance on gender policy. The FMC works, although they are not unbiased, provide useful information and statistics about the accomplishments of the FMC, and the successes of their projects. Many of these works were published in pamphlet form, and were often translated into English, which suggests that they were not merely intended for Cuban audiences who would have known about the FMC (especially in the case of a document such as *What is the FMC?*), but rather were also meant for an English audience to learn about the merits of the Federation.

¹³ The Congress compilations cited in this thesis were from the 1962 Congress (*Informes centrales de los congresos de la FMC*) and the 1974 Congress (*Memories: Second Congress, Cuban Women's Federation*). Although the FMC held other Congress meetings, these took place after 1975. The Congress compilations were essentially minutes from the meeting, including speeches by Fidel Castro and Vilma Espín, as well as a variety of other FMC speakers. The Congress compilations also contained information about accomplishments, current works, and future plans for the FMC.

Work Plan, as the title suggests, is fairly self-explanatory. It describes the proposed methods and projects of the FMC as a means of receiving feedback from the grassroots organizations about the proposed tasks. *What is the FMC?* gives an explanation of the FMC and its goals, which seems very much like a work of propaganda. The pamphlet contains coloured photographs of women smiling and working, and shows how the FMC was working for the benefit of women. In spite of its clear agenda, *What is the FMC?* is interesting because it shows how the FMC presents itself to the international communities. Although the FMC publications should not necessarily be treated as entirely accurate because of their partisan agendas, they are still important resources for the interpretation of the FMC's goals.

Much of what is known about the FMC and the paradigm shift associated with the changing role of women in revolutionary Cuba is from writings by Espín as well as from the official publications released by the FMC. Espín's writings give insight into her own thoughts and intentions, while the FMC documents show the official stance and intentions of the FMC's projects. In Espín's own writings she is much more candid about her faults and weaknesses than in the biographies written about her. Espín's speeches and writings have been included in collections such as *Cuban Women Confront the Future* (ed. Deborah Shnookal), *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, and *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution* (introduced and translated by Mary-Alice Waters). They give a glimpse into Espín's thoughts and opinions. All three of these works explain Espín's viewpoints, showing her perspective on the FMC projects that she had initiated.

Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution (written by Espín as well as Asela de los Santos and Yolanda Ferrer, edited and translated by Mary-Alice Waters) is an account of women's involvement in the revolutionary struggle against Batista, containing interviews and stories from many women who were a part of both the revolutionary struggle and the FMC. The value of this book lies in its detailed exploration of the role of women in the revolution, as explained by some of the FMC's leading female figures such as Asela de los Santos, Yolanda Ferrer and Vilma Espín. Focusing primarily on Espín's account of the revolutionary period and the early days of the FMC, *Women in Cuba* explains how the FMC was formed and the obstacles that they faced in changing stereotypes about a woman's role in society.

Women and the Cuban Revolution contains an introduction by Elizabeth Stone which gives insight into the ways that the FMC changed women's roles in Cuba. Substantial background material is provided about the prerevolutionary era, which complements Espín's writings that describe the early work of the FMC. Espín's *Cuban Women Confront the Future: Three Decades after the Revolution* is a later publication, which highlights the FMC's real accomplishments, as well as giving Espín's opinions on their progress. Through the writings by Espín it is possible to see her personality and her influence over the FMC and its programs for the improvement of women's lives. Espín's

own writings, although they are biased and reflect her own (revolutionary) ideology, do give insight into her life and work that is crucial to the discussion of the FMC.¹⁴

A significant trend in English language scholarship pertaining to Espín and the FMC are books that compile and translate works written by Cuban figures (including Espín, Fidel Castro, Teté Puebla and Armando Hart). Mary-Alice Waters, Deborah Shnookal, and Elizabeth Stone were all responsible for translating and introducing many of the most important works that were published about the women's movement in Cuba, including *Marianas in Combat: Teté Puebla and the Mariana Grajales Women's Platoon in Cuba's Revolutionary War 1956-58* by Teté Puebla, *Women and Revolution: The Living Example of the Cuban Revolution (Mujeres y Revolución: El ejemplo vivo de la revolución Cubana)* by Asela de los Santos et al., and *Aldabonazo: Inside the Cuban Revolutionary Underground 1952-1958* by Armando Hart (as well as Espín's writings which were discussed above). Like Randall's works, these compilations offer little in the way of analysis, preferring to allow the authors to speak for themselves.

The books by Teté Puebla, Asela de los Santos and Armando Hart listed above are important historical resources because all of them are eye-witness accounts of the Cuban revolution and its legacy. Puebla's account of her experiences as a part of the Mariana Grajales women's platoon gives unprecedented insight into the lives of female guerrillas in combat, showing the struggle that women faced against *machista* sentiments. Hart's book similarly gives a glimpse into an aspect of the Cuban revolution

¹⁴Espín's influence over the FMC's projects and programmes is evident in her writings, which detail the plans for addressing the needs of women in Cuba. Also useful is Espín's work *The Struggle for the Full Exercise of Women's Equality* (1986?).

about which little is known. Although there were many revolutionaries like Hart who were forced to live clandestinely, many did not live to tell their stories. Hart gives an in-depth account of his experiences and the dangers of the revolutionary underground, which is helpful for understanding Espín's experiences underground during the revolutionary war.

Women and Revolution: The Living Example of the Cuban Revolution by Asela de los Santos, Mary-Alice Waters, Arelys Santana and Leira Sánchez, is an interesting work because it is a companion piece to Espín's *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution*, which was discussed above. *Women and Revolution* contains a number of speeches by the authors, later published as *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution*. The speeches by los Santos, Waters, Santana and Sánchez provide further analysis of the FMC and the women's revolutionary movement, as well as showing the importance of *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution*. All of these texts are useful, helping us understand what the women's struggle was like at this time in Cuba.

It is important in a discussion of a socialist government, which maintains strict control over publications, to analyze the validity of any personal narratives, statistics and opinions pertaining to the government and its programs. Throughout this thesis reference is made to surveys, personal narratives, speeches and interviews that were published in Cuba, with an intention of showing women's opinions of the work of the FMC. It is worth keeping in mind, given the state of Cuban authoritarianism, that these

accounts could not have been published containing any criticism of the regime, and so caution should be exercised before trusting any of these writings as fact. In spite of this, approval of the works of the FMC (at least up until 1975), was not only evident within the Cuban state, which indicates that at least many Cuban women's accounts of the FMC were at least fairly accurate. One way of measuring the actual approval rate of the FMC is by considering the accounts of Cuban expatriates who fled Cuba after the revolution and the almost inexistence of criticisms about Espín's programs. So although the problems with censorship are present, this thesis notes women's opinions and statistics about the FMC as written, with the assumption that the reader will bear in mind the problems that may exist with this type of source — writing such a thesis without the testimonies of Cuban women would, of course, be impossible.

The current trend in the scholarship that studies the FMC and the women's movement in Cuba continues to depend upon collections of interviews, translations and compilations, rather than structured analysis of the role of the FMC. There are, however, a few exceptions. Larissa A. Grunig's *The Cuban Women's Federation: Organization of a Feminist Revolution* discusses how the evolution of women's roles in Cuba under the Federation was an example for other developing countries that could reform their gender relations along similar lines. Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula's *Sex in Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (1996) offers an insightful analysis of women's lives in socialist Cuba. Although the book does not focus specifically on the impact of the FMC and Espín in changing the roles of women, it analyzes well the revolutionary government's stance on gender roles and its various attempts to address the situation

of basic gender inequality that existed at the time. Smith and Padula's book is important because it discusses women's development from the pre-revolutionary period until 1994, and provides a wide perspective on this period of transition for women. Due to the fact that their book covers over 40 years of Cuban women's history, there is not, however, substantial analysis of the events that took place, yet Smith and Padula's work is important particularly in providing an overview of the revolutionary government's policies regarding gender.

The major historical works pertaining to the Cuban Revolution, such as Louis A. Pérez Jr.'s *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* or Hugh Thomas's *The Cuban Revolution*, give essential information about the historical significance of the revolution and the changes to Cuban society, but neither deals extensively with women's involvement in the revolution, nor with the influence of Espín and the Federation. In spite of the relative scarcity of discussion about the changing role of women and the FMC, these books are useful for their substantial background information and contextual analysis of the Cuban revolutionary process, and both provide a well-researched and comprehensive exploration of this time.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the discussion of the situation of women in pre-revolutionary times, that of women in rural communities, and the changes that they underwent after the revolution, is supported by Susan Schroeder's *Cuba: A Handbook of Historical Statistics* and Lowry Nelson's *Rural Cuba*, which provide useful statistical information about the differences between life in different areas and time periods in

Cuba. Schroeder's collection of statistical data is a vast collection of information pertaining to all areas of Cuban life, ranging from the price of black market food to the most common diseases for each year. Although it is often difficult to use Schroeder's statistics because of incomplete data (such as information missing for some years, or a very specific sample), her information gives a good idea of the ways that Cuba has changed since the revolution. Lowry Nelson's book contains not only statistical information, but also an in-depth analysis of the way that rural Cubans lived in the pre-revolutionary period, based on his extended field research between 1945 and 1946.¹⁵ Nelson's book was published before the revolution and therefore contains no discussion of the revolutionary period. As a result, his portrayal of Cuban life in the 1950s is not tainted by any agenda to demonize or glorify it, and indeed focuses on the reality of pre-revolutionary Cuba.

The only biographies of Vilma Espín available are written in Spanish and were published in Cuba, which means that it was difficult to find a balanced opinion of her life — given her popularity and almost mystical status there. Ligia Trujillo Aldama's *Vilma Espín: La flor más universal de la Revolución Cubana* and *Por siempre Vilma* by Carolina Aguilar Ayerra and Lázaro Noris are valuable for their information about Espín's early life, her childhood and education, as well as her time as a guerrilla fighter. However,

¹⁵ Also useful for understanding the social and political situation in pre-revolutionary Cuba are: Jorge Ibarra's *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba 1898-1959*, which gives an account of the political upheavals that led to the revolution; Carlos Franqui's *Diary of the Cuban Revolution* which is his account of the revolutionary war; Carrie Hamilton's article "Intervention: Public Women and Public History: Revolution, Prostitution, and Testimony in Cuba" which analyzes the role of prostitution in modern Cuban history; as well as Sheryl Lutjen's article "Women, Education, and the State in Cuba" which discusses the changes in women's education since the revolution.

because both biographies were written by friends and colleagues of Espín's, they avoid giving any kind of critiques of Espín's personality or leadership in the FMC. Juan Carlos Rodríguez's recent biography of Espín, *Vilma: una vida extraordinaria*, contains many quotations and documents about Espín and her contribution to Cuba, but provides very little solid information, and no criticism of Espín whatsoever. These works, which are all important because they give a record of Espín's life, including personal details not found elsewhere, and suffer from a clear bias, which ultimately makes them weak as critical historical resources.¹⁶

The use of biographies as resources presents a similar problem to that of personal narratives because biographies tend to present a very one-sided opinion about an individual's life and accomplishments. In the Cuban case, the biographies that I have cited, *Vilma Espín: La flor más universal de la revolución cubana* by Ligia Trujillo Aldama and Carolina Aguilar Ayerra's *Por siempre Vilma* were to some extent limited in what they could report about Espín's life due to the pressure on publishers to maintain a positive view of government figures. The result of this is two biographies that err on the side of worshipping Espín rather than discussing her character and works in a balanced way. It was necessary therefore to compare the hagiographical information about Espín with the accounts of Western scholars such as Shayne and Randall to come to a more balanced perspective about Espín's life and work.

¹⁶ Due to Espín's close personal connection with Fidel Castro (since she was married to his brother) and her own status in Cuban society, as well as the tight restrictions on Cuban publications, it is not surprising that these biographies of Espín's life highlight only her positive achievements.

The chapters that follow will attempt to use the resources discussed above to provide a more thorough analysis of the significance of Vilma Espín and her work with the Federation. Although all of the materials discussed are pertinent to the subject, many of them fall short of a thorough critical analysis of Espín's life and work, leaving much to be said about the successes and failures of her time as president of the FMC. Tracing Espín's personal development alongside a comparison of the shift in women's roles between the pre-revolutionary period and the introduction of the FMC will show why Espín deserves to be remembered not only in Cuban historical literature, but also in English language materials. Despite the evidence that Espín became a less effective leader in later years this thesis examines how, during the period between 1960 and 1975, Espín and the FMC implemented significant changes in the lives of women that still affect women in Cuba today.

Chapter 2: Formative Experiences of Vilma Espín

The Federation of Cuban Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas; hereafter FMC or Federation), was founded in August 1960 after the Batista government was overthrown in 1959 following the successful revolution led by Fidel Castro. When Fidel Castro took over the leadership of Cuba, he created the FMC and asked his sister-in-law, Vilma Espín to take charge of the mass organization. Vilma Espín, a native of Santiago de Cuba, was the president of the FMC for over forty years until her death in 2007, during which time her guidance shaped the development of this important mass organization. In order to fully understand Espín's historical significance it is necessary to understand not only the evolution of her political thought, but also how her family, education, and life experiences affected her leadership of the FMC and influenced its policies. This chapter will provide some biographical background about Vilma Espín focusing primarily on her life before the FMC including her university education and time in the revolutionary movement, as a means of showing her political maturation and her lasting significance as a major figure in Cuban society.

Youth: Family and Education

Vilma Lucila Espín Guillois was born on April 7th 1930 into an upper middle class family in Santiago de Cuba in Oriente, Eastern Cuba.¹⁷ Her father José Espín Vivar was the chief accountant and executive assistant to the CEO of the Bacardí rum company.¹⁸

¹⁷ Carolina Aguilar Ayerra and Lázaro Noris. *Por siempre Vilma* (La Habana: Editorial de la Mujer, 2008), 17.

¹⁸ Vilma Espín, Asela de los Santos and Yolanda Ferrer. *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution Within a Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2012), 11.

Her mother, Margarita Guillois Gachassin-Lafite was of French origin,¹⁹ and was a housewife and dedicated mother. Vilma Espín and her siblings Liliana, Nilsa,²⁰ Iván, Sonia, and José Alejandro were raised by their parents with the “influence of their own examples of austerity, of human feeling and understanding, without any social, racial, or religious barriers.”²¹ When Espín was a young teenager her older sister Liliana fell ill and required almost constant care from her mother, often needing to spend time at the seaside or to visit doctors abroad. As a result of her mother’s frequent absences, Vilma Espín, the second oldest child in their family, took charge of much of the care of her younger siblings while their father was at work. Despite Liliana’s health problems, Espín’s family seems to have been close, and her childhood fairly happy and privileged.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the majority of girls in Cuba did not have the opportunity to attend school for more than a few years, if at all. Indeed, a peasant woman from Ceiba named Edita explained in an interview with Margaret Randall how during her childhood there was a school in the village that she grew up in, but she only “got as far as first or second grade... after that the teacher just up and left and we didn’t have a school anymore.”²² Edita’s experience of having little education was not uncommon for women at this time, which shows how unusual it was that Espín achieved a very high level of education. Louis A. Pérez, in his book *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* states that one in three women in Cuba at the time were

¹⁹ Margaret Randall. *Cuban Women Now*, 292.

²⁰ Nilsa was also a part of the revolutionary struggle, but was much more radical than Vilma Espín. Nilsa would later commit suicide (mysteriously rumoured to have taken place in the office of Espín’s husband Raúl Castro).

²¹ Ayerra, *Por siempre Vilma*, 17.

²² Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 176.

illiterate,²³ and Fidel Castro estimates that in pre-revolutionary Cuba there were 500,000 children with no access to schooling of any type.²⁴

Espín was, therefore, fortunate not only to attend primary school at the Academia Pérez Peña, and secondary school at the Sagrado Corazón, (both of which were bourgeois Catholic schools), but also to go on to the University of Oriente in 1948.²⁵ Despite the fact that Espín attended Catholic schools in her childhood, religion does not seem to have had a very lasting significance in her life. It is unclear from Espín's statements to what extent religion was important in her upbringing, but whatever role it played in her young life, she distanced herself from religion in her later years. In an interview with Margaret Randall in the 1970s, Espín recalls that although she "spent two years in a parochial school," when she was young, she goes on to explain that "*of course*" she had "never held religious beliefs."²⁶ Espín's statement shows that her Catholic schooling had little bearing on her later life and her work with the FMC.

University of Oriente: The Learning Curve

Espín's years at the University of Oriente were productive in many ways. Not only did she graduate with a degree in chemical engineering (the second woman in Cuba to do so)²⁷, but these were also the years in which she became politically and socially active. Ligia Trujillo Aldama explains that Espín's "entrance into University marked the

²³ Louis A. Pérez. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 306.

²⁴ Fidel Castro. *Mujeres y Revolución* (La Habana: Editorial de la Mujer, 2008), 68.

²⁵ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 11.

²⁶ Randall, *Cuban Women*, 292 [Italics mine]

²⁷ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 12. At this time it was extremely unusual for a woman to graduate from university with a professional degree, much less one in engineering.

beginning of a period of consolidation and development of her political ideas.”²⁸ Espín’s extracurricular activities during her degree were also important because it was there that she began to hone her skills as both a leader and an organizer, experiences which would be useful not only for the combative stage of the revolution, but also for her work in the Federation.

Besides being an exemplary student (spending so much time in the lab that her classmates teasingly called her Madame Curie),²⁹ Espín also played volleyball and tennis, and was a soprano in the University choir.³⁰ The hobby that she was perhaps most passionate about (which is also the most surprising for a later guerrilla warrior) was ballet. Espín was an accomplished ballet dancer, performing in many recitals during her youth.³¹ Indeed, Espín also joined the University of Oriente’s Federation of University Students, a student organization that was active in organizing student protests and lobbying the government to officially recognize the University of Oriente.³² Without official recognition as a state institution the University of Oriente was barely able to pay a salary to its professors. After over 80,000 signatures were gathered by students like Espín to petition the government, the delegates from the Federation of University Students met with Cuba’s President, Carlos Prío Socarrás who finally agreed to fund

²⁸ Ligia Trujillo Aldama. *Vilma Espín: La Flor Más Universal de la Revolución* (Mexico: Ocean Sur, 2010), 24. [Translation mine]

²⁹ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26

³¹ José Miguel Rodríguez Ortiz Ed. *Vilma: Una Vida Extraordinaria* (La Habana: Editorial de Capitan San Luis, 2013), np.

³² Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 24-25

their school.³³ It was within the Federation of University Students that “the fibers of her political leadership, her powers of communication, her ability to listen, and her strong persuasive force” began to develop.³⁴ The experience of lobbying the government on behalf of her university taught Espín the value of political activism and the importance of mass organizing.

Espín’s steadily increasing interest in activism that began with her membership in the Federation of University Students was launched to a new level of political consciousness when Fulgencio Batista staged a coup to seize power on March 10th 1952. Espín later said of the coup that she made “a firm decision that day to put an end to what was happening in Cuba.” Espín said that she “saw the coup as a violation of the legality of ‘representative democracy,’ and ... took it almost as a personal offense.”³⁵ She believed that Batista’s actions “may well have been what decisively crystallized a spirit of rebellion in me.”³⁶ The coup, by which Batista seized power to become president of Cuba, was protested openly by the students of the University of Oriente, including Espín. Angry at the actions of the government, Espín went with a group of students to the University of Oriente campus, where they proceeded to argue with and heckle the guards who had appeared on campus to silence anti-Batista protests. Espín later said she was so enraged and inspired to action that she “wanted to grab a rifle and

³³ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 25

³⁴ Ayerra, *Por Siempre Vilma*, 24 [Translation mine]

³⁵ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 125.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 125

go fight right then.”³⁷ Espín’s early displays of activism and political action would only increase in scale and scope during her final years of University.

Armando Hart, a revolutionary from Havana and later Minister of Culture, recalls in his book about the underground movement in the Cuban Revolution how Cuban universities became important centres of political action, stating that the “first expressions of the anti-Batista struggle came from the University.”³⁸ Hart, who attended the University of Havana, explains that when Batista overthrew the government in 1952 the University of Havana was “the most important revolutionary center in the struggle against the Batista tyranny.”³⁹ According to Hugh Thomas, “students provided [Batista’s] main source of worry” because of their persistence in protesting his leadership.⁴⁰ On one occasion student leaders from the University of Havana organized a demonstration “at which a copy of the 1940 Constitution would be symbolically buried.”⁴¹ Batista had the student protesters arrested, but when they were released they held the protest anyway. The next month another massive demonstration was organized.⁴² The persistent protests show how the university community objected to Batista’s leadership, and explains in some part why Cuba became such fertile ground for revolution. The

³⁷ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 125.

³⁸ Armando Hart, *Aldabonazo: Inside the Cuban Revolutionary Underground, 1952-58: A Participant’s Account* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004), 59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁰ Thomas, *Cuban Revolution*, 7. During the time leading up to the revolution, universities became centres of political activism. At the University of Havana, for instance, a student revolutionary group called the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil which was in many ways aligned with the M-26-7 assaulted the presidential palace in 1957 in an attempt to assassinate Batista. Most of the students involved were killed in action, and many of those who remained joined the M-26-7 in later years (Sweig, *Cuba*, 22).

⁴¹ Thomas, *Cuban Revolution*, 7

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

University of Oriente contributed to the atmosphere of rebellion, continually organizing different types of protest in Santiago to undermine Batista's regime.

Much of the work that Espín undertook for the anti-Batista movement at the University of Oriente concentrated on the writing, printing, and distributing of pamphlets that spoke out against Batista.⁴³ When a university student named Rubén Batista (no relation) from Havana was killed in an anti-government demonstration, the students from the University of Santiago held a massive symbolic funeral for him. The students took refuge in the cafeteria when the police began to violently suppress the demonstration.⁴⁴ The University of Oriente, like the University of Havana became a centre for opposition to the Batista movement, spawning such organizations as the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) which would become central to the actions of the Cuban revolution.⁴⁵

In 1953, Espín became involved in a University-based group called the Oriente Revolutionary Action (ARO), a group led by a student named Frank País. The ARO was very active in their protests against the Batista government, often joined by members of the National Revolutionary Movement. The ARO subsequently became the National Liberation Action (ALN) when it merged with groups from the province of Camagüey, and was responsible for orchestrating the famous assault on the Moncada barracks in

⁴³ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30. The MNR, which was led by Dr. Rafael García Barcena, was based on principles of action rather than ideology. In 1953 the MNR (a group largely made up of students and lecturers) took up arms against the government, attempting to persuade the military to turn against Batista. The MNR was largely dissolved after this action, because the majority of its members were arrested. Many of its members would later become a part of the revolutionary movement (Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution*, 15).

1953.⁴⁶ Espín, who had not been directly involved with the attack on the Moncada, “felt, like all Santiagueros, a deep admiration for that group of brave people [who attacked the Moncada], and wanted to help.”⁴⁷ In a show of solidarity, Vilma Espín and her friend Asela de los Santos visited the Moncada barracks, asking the guards if they could see the wounded, to which the guard replied “what wounded?” According to popular legend, Espín became angry and said to the guard “We came to see the brave heroes! We came to see the revolutionaries.” Unsurprisingly, Espín’s open display of support for the anti-Batista movement caused outrage, so she and Asela hurried away and boarded a bus before they could be detained.⁴⁸

Santiago de Cuba was essentially run after 1952 by a former Cuban senator named Rolando Masferrer who quickly became a “pillar of the regime” when he decided to support Batista in his coup.⁴⁹ Masferrer ruled over the city of Santiago de Cuba by means of a “private army of thugs” that Masferrer called *los Tigres* who were “trained (though inadequately) to carry out his merest whim.”⁵⁰ Not only was Santiago de Cuba under the charge of a quasi-warlord, but the city’s police also had a well-known streak

⁴⁶ On July 26th 1953 a group of 111 revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada barracks (and a few other institutions such as Palace of Justice and the civic hospital), attempting to take over these strong points, and incite a nation-wide strike. Although the capture of both the Palace of Justice and civic hospital (led by Raúl Castro and Abel Santamaría, respectively) was successful, the Moncada attack was a disaster (Thomas, *Cuban Revolution*, 50-51). Louis A. Pérez Jr. argues that the Moncada assault, although a failure militarily, served to solidify Fidel Castro’s place at the heart of the anti-Batista movement (Pérez, *Cuba*, 290).

⁴⁷ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 31. Many of the revolutionaries involved in the Moncada attack were either killed or captured by the government forces. Hugh Thomas estimates that nearly 80 of the original rebels were captured within a few days of July 26th, 32 of whom survived to stand trial. A total of 68 revolutionaries were killed, the majority were tortured severely, and some of them, like Abel Santamaría, died under questioning (Thomas, *Cuban Revolution*, 52).

⁴⁸ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 31-32. [Translation mine]

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Cuban Revolution*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

of brutality and corruption.⁵¹ One instance of the Santiago de Cuba police force's extrajudicial violence was the severe torture and murder of 4 adolescent boys (one of whom was William Soler who will be discussed below) on the suspicion that they were planning revolutionary actions. It was this culture of extortion and violence that characterized the governance of Santiago de Cuba, and which Espín became aware of during her time in university. The combination of institutionalized abuse of human rights and rampant lawlessness would spur her to revolutionary action.

It was around this same time that Espín first heard of the young lawyer named Fidel Castro who was the leader of the Moncada attack, and who would become profoundly influential in her life.⁵² Espín recalls first reading Castro's statement from prison called *La historia me absolverá* (*History Will Absolve Me*), stating that:

"I remember I was in the laboratory when I got a copy and read it right there in one sitting. We were all fascinated, it spoke a new language which clarified a program around which we could all come together to fight. It was an advanced and attractive program for young people. Fidel was still in the Isla de Pinos,⁵³ but we identified completely with him and his goals."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Thomas, *Cuban Revolution*, 126, 172-173. Rolando Masferrer was a senator under Batista's regime who employed a private paramilitary that he called his Tigers. The Tigers worked with the revolutionary army, and were characterized by a particular brutality functioning, as Teté Puebla puts it, as "death squads, torturing and murdering hundreds, if not thousands, of the regimes opponents" (Puebla, *Marianas*, 107).

⁵² José Bell Lara and Tania Caram León. *Cuba: Las Mujeres en la Insurrección 1952-1961*. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales 2012), 19.

⁵³ The Isla de Pinos was at the time used as a prison. Fidel Castro wrote "La historia" during his time in prison following the Moncada attack.

⁵⁴ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np. [translation mine]

Castro's ideological statement had a profound impact on Espín, who confessed that at that time she had no firm preconceptions about political ideologies. Although Espín was very politically and socially conscious, she was from a young age wary of ascribing to any specific political stance. When her sister Nilsa joined the Young Socialists group, Vilma Espín declined to do so because she felt wary of committing to a political group.⁵⁵ Later in her life, when Espín was asked in an interview by Tad Szulc if she had read Marx, Engels or Lenin in University, Espín explained that she "was very interested in science, engineering, mathematics, physics, chemistry ... never very interested in humanities ... I never really got close to those ideas, they didn't occur to me."⁵⁶ Espín's early refusal to adhere to a specific party line, and the degree in chemical engineering that she received from the University of Oriente in 1954 would be important factors when she became President of the Federation of Cuban Women. Espín did not allow ideological stances to influence the running of the FMC, preferring to rely on her sense of scientific practicality.

Revolution

On the night of the attack on the Moncada barracks in July 1953, Espín was at home in bed when she and her family were awoken by gunfire. Espín, who immediately suspected what must have happened, informed her family that the Moncada had been attacked. Espín's father believed that the only reason Espín could know about the

⁵⁵ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 23.

⁵⁶ Tad Szulc. Interview with Vilma Espín, March 15 1985. Accessed May 24, 2013 (University of Miami Digital Collection, <http://merrick.library.miami.edu/cdm/ref/collection/chc0189/id/518>), 5 [Translation mine]

Moncada was because she was involved in dangerous revolutionary activities.⁵⁷ Fearing for Espín's safety, José Espín encouraged her to take advantage of an opportunity to go to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston in order to do some post-graduate work. Espín left in the summer of 1954 and stayed in Boston for a year, describing her state of mind at this time as "restless" because of her desire to return to Cuba and aid the revolution.⁵⁸ These months in the United States were perhaps not the most productive for Espín in her desire to actively help the revolution, but she was able at least to hone her skills at speaking and understanding English, which she would use to help the new revolutionary government in the future when they needed to communicate with delegates and journalists from the United States of America and Canada.

When, in July 1955, Espín finished her schooling at MIT she contacted the directorate of the Cuban revolutionary movement to volunteer to return to Cuba via Mexico in order to carry information from the Castro brothers (who were in Mexico to plan the next stage of the revolution), to the members of the Movement back in Cuba.⁵⁹ Espín waited at the airport in New York City for four days before securing a flight that went through Kansas to Mexico City, where she was met at the airport by Fidel and Raúl Castro.⁶⁰ This was Espín's first time meeting with both Fidel and Raúl Castro, who she would later marry. Espín stayed for two days in Mexico, during which time she was given information that was to be transmitted to the revolutionaries in Cuba in

⁵⁷ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 33.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

preparation for Castro's imminent clandestine return to take up arms against Batista. Espín explains how "Fidel had prepared a large number of letters, and explained to me what I was to do, and the things I had to say to Frank [País] ... Frank wanted a series of data and maps overviewing the landing. Fidel told me many things that they were doing, and took me to the house where they had hidden the weapons."⁶¹ Espín's meeting with Fidel and Raúl Castro seems to have solidified her commitment to the revolution, because from that point on she remained a central part of the movement.

It was, ironically, perhaps because Espín was in the USA, and returning to Cuba at a convenient time for carrying messages, that she became such an important organizer for the revolution. Espín carried Fidel Castro's plans back to Cuba, and met with Frank País to relay information that would be crucial for the organization of the return of Castro and dozens of revolutionaries. The revolutionary movement, now called the *Movimiento 26 de Julio* (M-26-7) in honour of the Moncada attack in July 1953, was poised to strike against Batista's government.

Between her return to Cuba in the summer of 1955 and the uprising that occurred on November 30th, 1956, Espín spent her time working, under the *nom de guerre* Déborah, to organize first aid brigades to tend to the revolutionaries who would later be wounded during the fighting.⁶² Espín participated in the uprising in Santiago de Cuba, which was an armed rebellion planned to coincide with the landing of the *Granma*

⁶¹ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np.

⁶² Bonnie G. Smith "Vilma Espín" *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 192.

yacht that was scheduled to arrive that day, bringing Fidel Castro to Cuba from Mexico.⁶³

Espín was given the task of delivering a recording to the man who was in charge of the national radio, who had agreed to air a message calling the people of Cuba to rise and fight because Fidel had returned to the country to liberate them. The risk that Espín took in delivering this recording to the station turned out to be unnecessary, because the man who was supposed to put the recording on air became afraid and burnt the recording in fear of retribution.⁶⁴ After Espín had delivered the recording she returned to the M-26-7 headquarters where she would wait with the other organizers, Frank País, Haydée Santamaría, Armando Hart and Asela de los Santos, for word of Castro's arrival.⁶⁵ Unfortunately the *Granma* was delayed for several days at sea, which led to much confusion and fear among the revolutionaries in Santiago de Cuba.

In an attempt to destabilize the uprising, the government spread false information about the fate of Fidel Castro and the *Granma* expedition. Espín said that the days after the scheduled landing of the *Granma* were “distressing and unsettling [because of] news circulating about the deaths of the expedition members, including the leader of the revolution.”⁶⁶ Armando Hart recalls that most of the organizers of the

⁶³ Ayerra, *Por Siempre Vilma*, 29.

⁶⁴ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁶ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np [Translation mine]

uprising in Santiago were at Espín's house, and that she was playing the piano for them when País arrived with the news that Castro had been proclaimed dead.⁶⁷

It was not until December 2nd 1956 that the *Granma* landed in Las Coloradas beach in Oriente.⁶⁸ On December 5th the revolutionaries who arrived on the *Granma* were caught in a disastrous battle with the military, which resulted in the deaths of most of the 82 revolutionaries that had travelled with Castro from Mexico. Only 15 revolutionaries including Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos were able to escape to the Sierra Maestra mountains, where they finally made contact with the revolutionaries in the cities.⁶⁹ On December 24th the revolutionaries in Santiago de Cuba finally received the code message "María, come eat meringue," which informed them that Castro was alive.⁷⁰

Espín became increasingly active in the struggle against Batista in January 1957, when a 14-year old boy named William Soler was found dead in a building in Santiago de Cuba, after he had been tortured and murdered by the military because they believed he was involved in revolutionary activities. Soler's death sparked massive outrage in Santiago de Cuba, where a group of women marched through the streets in protest of the government's brutality. Disobeying orders from Frank País to stay out of

⁶⁷ Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 152. The *Granma* left Mexico with 82 men on board at night on November 24-25, with plans to arrive back in Cuba in time for a planned insurrection on November 30th. Due to miscalculations in direction, as well as sea-sickness, the *Granma* did not arrive in Oriente until December 2nd 1956 (Thomas, *Cuba*, 108).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 346-347.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

the public eye, Espín joined the protesting women, daringly wearing a red blouse.⁷¹ País reprimanded Espín for her lack of caution, and recommended that she go underground for a time, to ensure her personal safety. In February of the same year Espín went to the Sierra Maestra mountains in Oriente where the organizers of the revolution were reunited with Fidel and Raúl Castro and met with a *New York Times* journalist named Herbert Matthews.⁷² Espín, who acted as an interpreter between Castro and Matthews, helped to communicate the information that Matthews would later publish in an article, which above all conveyed to the rest of the world that the rumours were false and that Castro was very much alive.⁷³ This interview, printed on the newspaper's front page, is widely accepted as being a major public relations victory for the revolutionaries.

After returning from the Sierra Maestra mountains at the end of February 1957, Espín helped País, Haydée Santamaria and Armando Hart organize the Civic Resistance in Santiago de Cuba. Espín worked primarily as a driver at this time, both driving País around (they believed the military would pay less attention to a passenger) and transporting recruits to the training facilities.⁷⁴ Espín's close friend and comrade Asela de los Santos recalls the importance of transporting recruits to the Sierra Maestra for training, and that this "transfer of men was, almost entirely, done by Vilma driving from

⁷¹ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 38. This was a daring decision because the colour red was commonly associated with the socialist movement.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 36. The interview with Matthews was important because it conveyed the importance of the revolutionary movement to the international community, and gave Castro the opportunity to give his opinion of the Batista government.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

Santiago to Manzanillo.”⁷⁵ Asela describes how they exploited the existing gender stereotypes about women in order to get past military checkpoints, recounting how “on one occasion we made three trips in one day, and one of the [guards] posted at the military checkpoint that day, looking at the serene and elegant woman [Vilma] who was at the wheel of the car, said to the other ‘Don’t search her, let it go. That’s the blonde daughter of the farmer.’”⁷⁶

In late March of 1957 for her safety, Espín went completely underground, continuing her work for the M-26-7.⁷⁷ The Movement had two contacts working undercover in the telephone company in Santiago de Cuba who were able to tap the phone lines of the military commanders and leaders in Santiago de Cuba. Espín’s main task while she was living underground was to listen in on the communications of their enemy, and to transmit the information to various members of the directorate.⁷⁸ This was important work because it helped to keep the M-26-7 informed of the movements of the Batista forces, and as will be discussed below, helped to save the life of Armando Hart.

Espín recalls that during her time underground she was very concerned with making sure that if she was caught and tortured that she would not give up any information about the Movement.⁷⁹ Espín knew that she was in great danger because

⁷⁵ Ayerra, *Por siempre Vilma*, 140.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 141

⁷⁷ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 39.

⁷⁸ Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 291.

⁷⁹ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np. The 26th of July Movement created the “Revolutionary Proclamation of Santiago de Cuba and the Sierra Maestra” in November 1956, which is a statement of the goals of the revolution, which was to be released simultaneously with the *Granma* landing. The proclamation explains

she was blacklisted as a revolutionary, and as a result had to remain well hidden to protect herself and others because of her intimate knowledge about the M-26-7.⁸⁰ On one occasion, the military discovered the safe house Espín was staying in, and forced their way in. Espín only barely escaped capture by climbing onto the roof and fleeing over the rooftops of adjoining houses until she was out of harm's reach. According to popular legend, when Espín appeared on the rooftops an elderly lady believed that the figure that she was seeing was a vision of the Virgin Mary.⁸¹

Asela de los Santos explains how Espín was “famous in the underground struggle. She became a kind of folk hero, since Batista's forces had tried to hunt her down many times and she kept escaping. Someone who popped up here, disappeared, then popped up somewhere else. Vilma became a legendary figure in the underground, just as Frank did.”⁸² For many, it was not only the mere fact of Espín's survival that made her such an attractive leader since, according to los Santos she was also “very direct and straight forward, well mannered, and ... refined – not artificially so, but naturally.”⁸³ Asela de los Santos's statement shows how Espín became a kind of role model revolutionary to other women, which was likely an aspect of her popular success with the FMC.

the anti-imperialist principles of the M-26-7, and explains, for example, their goal to redistribute land, increase literacy and education levels, institute law and order, and stabilize employment (Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 300-304).

⁸⁰ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 38.

⁸¹ Ayerra, *Por Siempre Vilma*, 141.

⁸² Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 109.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

There were large numbers of women who participated in the revolution in support roles such as medical aid, sewing uniforms, cooking, and generally caring for the troops, but there were also a few women like Espín who were “fully and militarily integrated into the guerrilla army.”⁸⁴ Teté Puebla, the highest ranking woman in the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces described how in the beginning of the revolution, women “had already proved that [they] could do just about everything... [women] withstood the bombings, delivered weapons, and were in the places where fighting was taking place. But ... were still not allowed to fight.”⁸⁵

On September 4th 1958, the Mariana Grajales Women’s Platoon was established, with Isabel Rielo as its leader and Teté Puebla second in command.⁸⁶ The Mariana Grajales platoon, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 3, was important because women were fully integrated into the revolutionary army, and were able to reverse many of the prejudices against them by proving their abilities as combatants. Castro said of the Mariana Grajales platoon that they were “excellent soldiers, as good as our best male soldiers.”⁸⁷ The Mariana Grajales platoon was important for demonstrating women’s abilities and strength, which would make them symbolically important in the women’s movement.

⁸⁴ Randall, *Cuban Women*, 10.

⁸⁵ Teté Puebla, *Marianas in Combat: Teté Puebla and the Mariana Grajales Platoon in Cuba’s Revolutionary War 1956-1958* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2003), 50.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

On July 23rd 1957 Espín was appointed by Frank País as the provincial coordinator of the M-26-7 in Oriente.⁸⁸ On July 30th 1957, País and Raúl Pujol were killed by military forces, the news of which incited spontaneous strikes across the country.⁸⁹ País' death had a profound impact on Espín, since she had greatly admired him, stating that

it was Frank's attitude toward women that made it possible for us to work as complete equals with men in the July 26 Movement. Even though he had a little bit of a tendency to protect women from danger, he made no distinction between men and women in terms of assignments except for those that were demanding physically.⁹⁰

País' death was important for Espín not only because she had lost a close friend and mentor, but because it meant yet a higher level of responsibility for her within the July 26 Movement.

Despite Espín's new leadership role in the revolution, she remained in hiding and continued to listen in on the telephone communications of the Batista forces. Armando Hart recalls that in January 1958, when he was in prison, Espín overheard a conversation on a tapped phone that detailed plans to kill him and make it look like an accident. By the simple expedient of raising the alarm and directing public attention

⁸⁸ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 92.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁰ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 160.

towards Hart, she saved his life. Espín assumed that the military would not want the public to have another figure like País to rally around, and she was correct.

In March 1958 the M-26-7 established a Second Front that they called the '*Segundo Frente Oriental Frank País*', which was commanded by Raúl Castro. Not only did Raúl Castro fight alongside his brother at the Moncada and participate in the fighting after the *Granma* landing, but he was also a central advisor to Fidel Castro.⁹¹ Despite the fact that Fidel Castro was the acknowledged leader of the revolution, Raúl Castro played a very important role in the revolution as the leader of the Second Front. Armando Hart describes how Raúl Castro effectively "consolidated his forces ... and they were carrying out important cultural, social, and ideological work in one of the poorest territories in the country."⁹² Furthermore, Raúl Castro was also responsible for circulating a call to Cuban youth to join the fight against the Batista dictatorship in June 1958. This was influential among young Cubans, but Hart also described it as being a "moral and political reaffirmation of the convictions held by many of the revolutionary prisoners" who had begun to lose heart.⁹³

⁹¹ Sweig, *Cuba*, 21.

⁹² Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 285. Although Raúl Castro's role in the revolutionary movement is less well known than Fidel Castro's, his work on the Second Front had great significance in the success of the revolution. Not only did Raúl Castro's forces carry out important cultural and social work in Eastern Cuba, but Raúl Castro also wrote a statement entitled "To Cuban Youth, to All Latin American Youth, to the Youth of the World" which was a social and anti-imperialist statement, and which was considered an inspiration to many already involved in the revolutionary movement (especially those who were held prisoner at Príncipe Castle) (Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 285).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 285.

In June 1958, suspecting that Batista's forces were closing in on Espín, Castro decided to transfer her to the Second Front in order to protect her.⁹⁴ When Espín left Santiago de Cuba to go to the Second Front she changed her name from Déborah to Mariela.⁹⁵ The months that Espín spent on the Second Front were important for her not only because she began to practice her skills working for social welfare by starting schemes of education and health for the peasants in the area as well as the combatants,⁹⁶ but it was also here in the Second Front that Espín got to know, and became romantically involved with, Raúl Castro. Although Espín explains that she had no idea when she first met Raúl Castro how important he would become to her,⁹⁷ it would only take a few short months for them to get engaged.

Revolutionary Victory

On the 26 of January 1959, just a few weeks after the fall of the Batista⁹⁸ government and the triumph of the revolution, Raúl Castro and Vilma Espín were married. Raúl Castro later said that it was the “best and most beautiful thing I did in my whole life.”⁹⁹ Their marriage would be a long and productive one. Not only did they have four children together, but they were also both crucially important to developing the new socialist state that they had helped fight to create. Together they would aid and

⁹⁴ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 92.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁷ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np.

⁹⁸ When Batista fled the country, Fidel Castro began by appointing the members of cabinet, and rather than taking the position of president himself, he appointed a former judge named Manuel Urrutia as president (though this did not last long due to conflicts with Fidel Castro). Fidel Castro preferred to exercise his power from the position of commander in chief of the rebel army. Most of the rest of the cabinet was composed of M-26-7 insurgents (Sweig, *Cuba*, 41).

⁹⁹ Ortiz, *Vilma: Una Vida*, np.

advise Fidel in building a new, socialist Cuba.¹⁰⁰ Raúl was appointed the head of the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) in 1959,¹⁰¹ and Espín was tasked with the job of helping women to organize and continue to be a part of the revolutionary process. The result of the plans hatched by Espín and her now brother-in-law Fidel Castro would be the beginning of the Federation of Cuban Women to which Espín devoted much of her life.

In the period directly following the revolution, women in Cuba were afraid that they would be expected to simply return to their pre-revolutionary roles as mothers and housewives. Mary-Alice Waters explains that “what became the Federation of Cuban Women grew out of women’s determination to participate in the revolution – not the other way around ... women insisted on organizing themselves, and being organized into the most pressing tasks of the revolution. In the process they created an organization that would enable them to do just that.”¹⁰² Waters’ statement shows how women, having been exposed to political and social activism, wanted to remain organized after the revolution in order to continue to “transform the lives of those who had been exploited and discriminated against and create a better society for all.”¹⁰³ The FMC would thus allow women to remain publicly active, and to begin to push for more rights.

¹⁰⁰ Espín and Raúl Castro would later separate, the reason for which is unknown (though it was rumoured that Raúl Castro had met a younger woman).

¹⁰¹ Pérez, *Cuba*, 324. In October 1959 Raúl Castro was appointed Minister for the Armed Forces (Thomas, *Cuba*, 465), which was an important position because the army was one of the main bodies in control of the country after 1959. Not only were the Armed Forces responsible for the protection of Cuba, but they also helped out in agricultural tasks such as sugar harvesting (Thomas, *Cuba*, 682).

¹⁰² Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 28.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 23.

Espín explains that at first she had no idea that she would spend her life running a women's organization, stating that "When the idea of creating a women's organization was suggested to me, it came as a surprise ... But soon after it was created I realized that yes, it was indispensable ... It was an enormous revolutionary force."¹⁰⁴ In March 1959, Espín was instructed by Fidel Castro to begin making plans to create a women's organization to incorporate them into the economic, political, and social systems of the country.¹⁰⁵ As a part of her initiative to involve women in society, Espín presided over the first Latin American Congress for the Rights of Women and Children in September 1959 in Santiago de Cuba that raised awareness about the women's movement.¹⁰⁶ After months of gathering information about what the women in Cuba wanted from such an organization, as well as undertaking preparations for the logistics of running a mass organization, on August 23rd 1960, the FMC was officially established.¹⁰⁷ By 1961, the FMC had 17,000 members, which had increased to 2.6 million by 1985.¹⁰⁸ According to a statement made by the FMC, in 2003 there were 4 million women who were members of the organization, which constituted approximately 85% of all women in Cuba over the age of 14.¹⁰⁹

Although women were such an important part of the revolutionary process, and despite the high volume of FMC members, prejudice continued to be a problem for

¹⁰⁴ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 92.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Ayerra, *Por siempre Vilma*, 35.

¹⁰⁸ Pérez, *Cuba*, 369.

¹⁰⁹ US Women and Cuba Collaboration "FMC Information about Cuban Women" Accessed Oct 2013, www.womenandcuba.org/Documents/FMCinfo.pdf.

women after the revolution. A part of the FMC's challenge was to make it possible for women to obtain education without making their home lives difficult. Asela de los Santos explains that the FMC "set itself the goal of defending women, without bringing on a confrontation with men."¹¹⁰ In a Latin country that is rife with machismo, this was no easy task. Besides the problems that the FMC faced trying to help women step outside their homes in order to assume a greater role in society, the FMC also had to find a way for domestic servants and mothers with young children to be educated as well. Espín describes the challenge presented by the attempt to "find ways for our women to study, in the afternoons, at night, whenever they could; and mothers took care of each other's children."¹¹¹ As well as helping women become literate, the Federation also helped to educate women in health and hygiene practices. Espín recalls how before the FMC "some families knew little about how to prepare foods, or what foods were more nutritious ... The [F]ederation put great emphasis on issues of cleanliness and hygiene in the home and in food preparation."¹¹² The FMC organized polio vaccinations, helped prostitutes to get off the streets, organized schools for servants and peasants to learn to read and sew, produced pamphlets on sexual education, and created childhood centres, as well as encouraging women to seek employment.

The works of the FMC will be discussed in greater length in Chapters 3 and 4, but what is worth noting at this stage, is how Espín's scientific mind and training as an

¹¹⁰ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 111.

¹¹¹ Randall, *Cuban Women*, 301.

¹¹² Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 233.

engineer and revolutionary allowed her to focus on the practical needs of women in Cuba. Espín explains that

“at the time we didn’t talk about women’s liberation, we didn’t talk about women’s emancipation, of the struggle for equality. We didn’t use those terms then. What we did talk about was participation. Women wanted to participate... and women wanted to be part of [the revolution], to *do* something. The more the revolutionary laws strengthened this conviction, the more women demanded a chance to contribute – and the more they saw how necessary their contribution was.”¹¹³

In order to ensure that women were able to contribute to their fullest capacity, Espín insisted that rather than attempting to institute radically feminist ideals, which could have alienated many of the women in Cuba, the FMC would focus on a simple, practical program of improving living conditions, and specifically in healthcare, education, and employment.

Although the focus of this thesis project is only the first 15 years of the FMC’s work, the organization continues today to be an important organization. Espín’s work in the early years of the FMC will be examined at length in Chapters 3 and 4, but a brief account of some of her major achievements that came after 1975 is pertinent here. In 1978, Espín founded the Regional Centre of the International Democratic Federation of Women for the Americas and Caribbean. This organization was important because it

¹¹³ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 29.

helped organize and train women's groups throughout the Americas.¹¹⁴ In 1979, Espín organized committees to examine the civil rights of sexual minority groups,¹¹⁵ work which her daughter Mariela continues today as director of the National Centre for Sexual Education (CENESEX). In 1975 Espín represented the Cubans at the UN Conference about Women in Mexico City, then in Nairobi in 1985, and in Beijing in 1995.¹¹⁶ In 2001 she received the award as Heroine of the Cuban Republic, as well as the Order of Ana Betancourt (1974), the Order of Mariana Grajales (1985), and the Order of Frank País García (1997).¹¹⁷ Espín continued to be a representative of the women of Cuba, and remained President of the FMC until her death in 2007.¹¹⁸

Espín's life and education are important because they show how great her influence on the FMC was. Espín recognized that for Cuban women what was needed was not an organization that preached what were at that time somewhat impractical goals of female emancipation and equality, but rather a group intent on securing for women a higher quality of life by means of better education, health care (including sexual health), access to professions and childcare. An analysis of the details of Espín's life and education illustrate how her own experiences shaped the course of the FMC. Espín's refusal to allow feminist ideals to totally control the work of the FMC, her own training in the sciences, and the many practical experiences during her time as a

¹¹⁴ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 94.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95. At that time in Cuba there was little support for sexual minority groups, so the CENESEX organization was groundbreaking in its attempt to help protect the rights of all sexual orientations.

¹¹⁶ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 79.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹¹⁸ After Espín's death, as a tribute to her irreplaceable contribution to the FMC, the post of President of the FMC has not been filled. The highest FMC rank now is Secretary General.

revolutionary, were all important factors that influenced her leadership of an organization that changed the course of revolutionary Cuba's development by engaging and organizing the energies of Cuban women into a productive and powerful force.

Chapter 3: Women before the Revolution, Women in the Revolution

In order to understand the significance of Espín's work and the work of the FMC, it is important to provide some background about women's lives before and during the revolutionary period. Most women living in Cuba before 1959 did not have the kind of privileges that Espín enjoyed (and in particular wealth and education), and so the changes associated with the revolution would have represented a much greater paradigm shift for them. For many women, joining the M-26-7 offered an unprecedented level of freedom and self-determination which they were loath to give up when Batista's government was overthrown. The first part of this chapter will examine the pre-revolutionary roles of women in Cuba, focusing on those aspects of women's lives that would be significantly altered by the work of the FMC, while the second will analyze women's involvement in the M-26-7. By discussing the roles of women before the revolution and the social conditions which prevailed, it will help to show the significance of the work done by Espín and the FMC. An analysis of women's roles in the revolutionary movement will then highlight the path that women took to becoming more socially and politically conscious, and indicate how that process directly resulted in the creation of the FMC.

Women's Roles in Pre-Revolutionary Cuba

The low educational level of women in pre-revolutionary Cuba was a significant issue with which the FMC had to contend. A survey of education undertaken in 1956 showed that 45% of peasants in rural areas of Cuba had never been to any kind of

school, and that 90% of those who went to school had left after the third grade.¹¹⁹ In many ways the case of Haydée Méndez, a peasant woman from a small village called Buey Arriba was typical for Cuban women of that time. She explained that she and her 9 brothers and sisters had never gone to school, but that her father had helped her learn to read when she was 13.¹²⁰ Margaret Randall explains that in rural areas the educational level of women tended to be even lower than the average achieved by men (third grade). She explains that the reason why women did not receive an adequate education was that “it was considered unnecessary since their futures were confined in any case to home and children.”¹²¹ Not only would the low educational level of women in pre-revolutionary Cuba affect their abilities to function in the modern world, but it also had negative ramifications in their personal lives.

Primary education levels in rural areas were particularly low due to the scarcity of schools and teachers in much of the countryside. Lowry Nelson describes in his book *Rural Cuba*, how one “sees teachers in the countryside with no place to hold school, unless a farmer has an extra building or an extra room in his home which can be used for school purposes” but just as often, “there may be a perfectly good schoolhouse with no teacher available.”¹²² Nelson’s observations about the lack of adequate educational services are mirrored in Susan Schroeder’s statistical analysis of the contrast between urban and rural schooling. Schroeder notes that in 1953-54, urban areas of Cuba had

¹¹⁹ Thomas. *Cuban Revolution*, 353.

¹²⁰ Randall, Margaret. *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981), 50.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

¹²² Lowry Nelson, *Rural Cuba* (New York: Octagon Books, 1950), 251.

11,734 teachers, and a student enrollment of 417,949, whereas in the countryside there were only 5,409 teachers and 216,853 students.¹²³

In urban areas not only were there more teachers, but they were also more accessible to students who lived closer to schools. Rural students, on the other hand, did “not have ready access even to such schools as [did] exist, and no transportation [was] provided at public expense.”¹²⁴ The barriers to achieving a primary education in rural areas meant that there was a high level of illiteracy, and many students who did receive schooling were enrolled only long enough to receive a base level of education.¹²⁵ Jorge Ibarra explains that in 1953 of the illiterate population in Cuba (23.9%¹²⁶), 11.6% of these resided in large cities, whereas 47.1% in the countryside.¹²⁷ The drastic difference in literacy levels shows the contrast of educational standards between the cities and countryside.

The failure of the educational system in pre-revolutionary Cuba is especially evident in the statistics regarding enrollment in secondary education (above grade 7), which in 1956-57 saw only 26,389¹²⁸ students enroll in middle and high schools.¹²⁹ The

¹²³ Susan Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook of Historical Statistics* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 127. This was significant because it illustrates the difference in the educational services provided in urban and rural areas, which explains in part the extremely low level of literacy in rural zones.

¹²⁴ Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 251.

¹²⁵ In a survey of the heads of agricultural families undertaken in 1957, 43% were completely illiterate. 44% attended no school at all, 4.9% reached the first grade, 9% the second, 19% the third, 11% the fourth, 5.9% the fifth, 3% the sixth and only 1.1% the seventh (Schroeder, 227). Because pre-revolutionary Cuba is a patriarchal society, we can assume that the above statistics refer to education levels among men.

¹²⁶ Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 24.

¹²⁷ Jorge Ibarra. *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1989-1958*. Trans. Marjorie Moor. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 162.

¹²⁸ This statistic refers only to the public school system.

¹²⁹ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 130. By 1964-1965, the number of students in secondary school had grown to 160,000 under the revolutionary government (Schroeder 130).

shortage of facilities, teachers, and the fact that few students graduated from primary school, meant that Cuba, especially in the rural areas, had a population that was largely poorly educated. The difference between rural and urban education was such that in the academic year of 1958-1959, there were over twice as many students enrolled in school in urban areas than there were in rural schools.¹³⁰ Yet this was in a country where the majority of the population lived in the country. For a largely rural and agricultural nation, the lack of basic educational skills (i.e. reading, writing, arithmetic, problem-solving) would present a significant barrier to the country's economic and social development. For a farmer to be unable to calculate and record the expenses and yields of his crops would mean that he was unable to compete in the increasingly global market of the 1950s. Lack of education would present a problem not only farmers and agricultural workers, but also for professions and trades across Cuban society.

A very small number of women, like Vilma Espín herself, achieved a college or University education. In 1952 only 17,500 women in Cuba graduated with a college education, which was less than half of the number of men (35,900) with a degree.¹³¹ The majority of women in Cuba in the period between 1953 and 1959 were not even able to access primary level education, let alone university level. After the revolution it was not long before women began to take advantage of the opportunity to get a higher education, indeed, "soon after the triumph of 1959, Cuban universities were graduating

¹³⁰ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 127. In fact, in 1959 there were 500, 567 students enrolled in school in the cities, and only 218, 850 enrolled in school in rural zones. The disparity in enrollment rates between rural and urban areas directly corresponds to the number of teachers available: 12,019 in urban areas, 5, 336 in rural. The revolutionary government would double this number by 1960 (Schroeder).

¹³¹ Pérez, *Cuba*, 306.

women as more than half of their new doctors, over a third of their new engineers, and forty percent of their new architects.”¹³² Most women, who did not have the opportunity to achieve a high level of education, took up positions in what can be considered traditionally female roles as housewives, peasants, and domestic servants.

One of the problems that resulted from the inadequate educational system in pre-revolutionary Cuba was the correspondingly low literacy rate especially among women, rural and peasant populations. The total illiteracy rate of Cuba under Batista’s regime was 23.9 percent, almost a quarter of the population,¹³³ and according to a census in 1952, one of every three women was illiterate (33%).¹³⁴ By extrapolating from the comparison between the two preceding statistics it is evident that the national average of illiteracy levels was decreased by the number of men who were able to read. After the Batista government was overthrown, one of the first projects undertaken by the revolutionary government, in cooperation with the FMC, was the massive literacy campaign in which 100,000 young Cubans went into the countryside to teach peasants to read and write.¹³⁵ The literacy campaign, which will be discussed below, was an extraordinary initiative to wipe out illiteracy in Cuba altogether, working to erase the legacy of the pre-revolutionary period’s poor education system. It also represented a significant opportunity for both the teachers and students to learn about their country.

¹³² Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 24.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Pérez, *Cuba*, 306.

¹³⁵ Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 55.

Before the revolutionary government reformed education, not only were women deprived of formal education, they were also left ignorant about sexual health, a situation which negatively affected their personal and family lives. Espín recalls that the FMC “confronted serious problems arising from women’s lack of knowledge about their own bodies, their reproductive system, [and] their sexual health” which meant that they had no idea about “the possibility of planning both the number of children [they had] and the time between births.”¹³⁶ The FMC placed special emphasis on helping women become educated about sexual health, which would help liberate women from their often overwhelming domestic duties. A statement issued at the congress of the Communist Part of Cuba in 1975 summarized the work undertaken thus far and emphasized the need for all children to be given “an adequate sexual education at each stage of a child’s life, so that marriage and the family are established on solid foundations.”¹³⁷ The failure to educate women about sexuality meant that many young women were unprepared for their roles as mothers and wives, and were also not able to make informed decisions about the use of birth control, a situation which resulted in large and sometimes unmanageable families.¹³⁸

One of the major tasks of the FMC after 1960 was to try to raise the level of public health and hygiene among the poorer populations. At this time in the countryside the vast majority of families lived in tiny palm wood shacks with palm frond roofs called

¹³⁶ Espín. *Women in Cuba*, 235.

¹³⁷ Espín. *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 103.

¹³⁸ Women were also unable to adequately prepare their children with knowledge about sexual health, which perpetuated the problem.

bohíos.¹³⁹ Not only did these huts tend to have dirt floors, but they also generally lacked electricity and running water, which made women's household chores a formidable task.¹⁴⁰ One result of the low standards of hygiene in these homes was the spread of preventable diseases, which was one of the main issues that the revolutionary government hoped to put an end to.¹⁴¹ A schoolteacher named Aída Pelayo recalls how in 1948 she taught at a school for poor children in Havana where the children were "so poor that most of them had only rags to wear and had never owned a pair of shoes... we had to teach them not to spit on the classroom floor and the proper use of the bathroom facilities."¹⁴² Women's lack of education about hygiene practices, as well as the difficulty in accessing healthcare, clearly made it very difficult to raise healthy families.

In 1953, families mostly lived in houses with two rooms, both in urban and rural settings.¹⁴³ On average, however, the city houses were much better equipped and hygienic than those in the countryside. In the city 42% of houses had a private indoor toilet, and 64.9% had an area in their homes allocated to a bath or shower. In contrast, only 3.1% of rural houses had an indoor toilet, and only 9.5% had a bath or shower.¹⁴⁴ Because of the general absence of running water and the fact that only 9.1% of rural homes had electricity, and also that 96.5% had no kind of refrigeration (compared with

¹³⁹ Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 59.

¹⁴⁰ Judy Maloof, *Voices of Resistance: Testimonies of Cuban and Chilean Women* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 25.

¹⁴¹ James D. Rudolph, *Cuba: A Country Study* (Washington: Federal Research Division, 2002), 92.

¹⁴² Maloof, *Voices of Resistance*, 57.

¹⁴³ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 200.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

87% with electricity and 37.5% with refrigeration in the cities), there was a general lack of hygiene and diseases related with contamination and bacteria were rampant in pre-revolutionary Cuba.¹⁴⁵ Although the situation was often much better in the cities, the poorer populations even in the urban areas were subject to the same deprivations as those in the countryside.

In 1958, the most common causes of death for children between the ages of 1 and 4 were influenza (1,943), diarrhaeic conditions including enteritis and gastritis (2,784), and malignant tumors (5,327).¹⁴⁶ These diseases were principally the consequence of bad sanitary and hygiene practices, as well as polluted water sources, that caused the infections to worsen and spread amongst the population. Furthermore, as Lowry Nelson observes, the “very high incidence of intestinal parasites in the Cuban population is a direct consequence of [the] neglect [of sanitary practices].”¹⁴⁷ Nelson explains that “in rural Cuba parasitism is practically universal.”¹⁴⁸ Nelson blamed the inadequate housing and water supply for the proliferation of curable diseases among rural populations, explaining that one quarter of families obtain their water from rivers and streams.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, the difficulty in obtaining water from this source meant that people did not bathe and wash their linens regularly.¹⁵⁰ Nelson finished his analysis of

¹⁴⁵ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 200.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 75. It is unclear what the reason was for the high incidence of malignant tumours among young children in 1958, but by 1968 the number of deaths had fallen to 92; and 82 in 1974 (Schroeder, 75). This suggests that the tumours, like the influenza and diarrheic diseases were also the result of their home environment (better hygiene practices being one of the primary targets of the FMC).

¹⁴⁷ Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 249.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 250. Water collection was one of the most difficult daily tasks for women, because they often had to carry the water a substantial distance.

housing conditions by condemning the housing of the rural Cuban population, stating that “the simple bohío [house], with its dirt floors and cheap construction, cannot be called a fit habitation for a family.”¹⁵¹ The lack of education about hygienic practices, as well as the absence of running water, electricity, and refrigeration, all meant that diseases which were both preventable and curable were significant threats to the health of families in pre-revolutionary Cuba.

One complaint, as described by Lowry Nelson, of the inhabitants of rural communities in the pre-revolutionary period was the isolation from social contact that the poor infrastructure engendered. One housewife whose home Nelson described as “attractive” complained of the social “isolation imposed by terrible roads” which made life in the country especially hard.¹⁵² Nelson describes the problem of isolation as the “heaviest burden that weighs upon many rural Cuban people. They may be well fed and fairly well housed —better than the average *campesinos*, or farmers, of Cuba; but their hunger is for social contact.”¹⁵³ Nelson’s assertion that isolation represented the “heaviest burden” among rural Cubans seems to represent only one side of the issue. Although isolation presented a burden to some rural families, for many of the peasant farmers, much worse were the burdens of hunger and disease. While isolation may have been the biggest problem for prosperous families living in the country, it was certainly not the worst problem faced by the majority of people living in rural areas, many of whom were not even ‘fed’ or ‘fairly well housed.’

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

Many of the above statistics deal with the issues faced by rural people because in Cuba the rural population was significantly poorer than those living in the cities. As Nelson explains, “the rural family is most often a lower-class family ... the upper-class people all, or practically all, live in the cities.”¹⁵⁴ That is not to say, however, that there were not urban poor who lived in similarly distressing conditions to the rural peasants. Indeed, many of those who made up the ranks of the urban poor were people who left the countryside to find work in the cities to support themselves and their families. In Fidel Castro’s 1953 speech entitled “*La historia me absolverá*” or *History Will Absolve Me*, Castro explains that in the cities before the revolution poor families were “packed into barrack-like structures, tenements and slums lacking the most elementary conditions for hygiene and health ... [paying] rents that take up between one-fifth and one-third of the family incomes.”¹⁵⁵ Castro’s statement shows that although there were more people living in squalid conditions in rural areas, there were also urban poor in similar situations. In poor families from both rural and urban areas all family members had to contribute to the family’s economic prosperity, even if that meant that the women in the family had to do some kind of work.

Prior to 1959, when a concerted effort was made to encourage women to join the professional work force, there were very few women who worked outside of the home. According to Randall, in 1953 the workforce in Cuba was only 9.8% female, the

¹⁵⁴ Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 182.

¹⁵⁵ Federation of Cuban Women, Ed. Isel Rousseau. *Children in Cuba: Twenty Years of Revolution* (Ciudad de la Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1979), 3-4.

majority of whom were domestic servants.¹⁵⁶ Not included in this number are the women who were engaged in less easily quantifiable work such as childcare for relatives, laundry, or farming. Espín explains that before the revolution many women were not officially employed, yet still “helped with the planting, the harvesting, and tending the animals” in the rural areas that they lived in.¹⁵⁷ A peasant woman named Argelia explains that in the area where she lived, women helped their husbands with all kinds of work including “cutting wood [and] making charcoal... [because] there was no other kind of work available.”¹⁵⁸ Women’s general absence from the workforce meant that many women were economically dependent on their spouses, leaving them very few options for survival without male support. In 1953, 20% of the women over the age of fourteen¹⁵⁹ were either working (often unofficially), or actively pursuing positions. 21,000 of these were unemployed, and 77,500 of them worked in the home of a relative without pay.¹⁶⁰ Most women who, for whatever reason, were forced to be financially independent became either domestic servants or, in the worst cases, prostitutes.

The position of a domestic servant in Cuba was not a desirable one. Elizabeth Stone describes how the maids in middle class houses were “literally slaves to their employers, working long hours, and living in the same house so they could be at their

¹⁵⁶ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 9.

¹⁵⁷ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 36.

¹⁵⁸ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 174.

¹⁵⁹ This statistic includes not only women who were employed in the professional workforce, but also women who worked unofficially in the homes of relatives, and women who were unemployed but actively seeking positions. The 9.8% of working women cited above refers only to women officially employed for wages.

¹⁶⁰ Pérez, *Cuba*, 305.

beck and call.”¹⁶¹ Elena Gil, who worked in one of the schools set up after the revolution that were designed to educate servants, explains that the maids “weren’t much more than slaves” and that the families were “accustomed to having these women at their beck and call twenty-four hours a day with the exception of a single day off.”¹⁶² Stone explains that many of the maids were “young women from rural areas, driven by the poverty of the countryside to come to the city to find work.”¹⁶³ Of the small number of working women in Cuba, over 70% of these were servants in private houses.¹⁶⁴ Despite the long hours and hard work associated with being in service, the position at least afforded a certain amount of respectability.

Women who did manage to secure jobs in male-dominated fields such as factories or shops were a minority. In 1953 there were only 18,486 women working in retail, compared to 195,373 men.¹⁶⁵ A similar pattern was true for most industries in pre-revolutionary Cuba, where women were frequently underrepresented. In 1953, there were 1.9 million men over the age of 14, of whom 1.7 million were working for pay, compared to a population of 1.8 million women over 14, only 353,000 of which were working for pay.¹⁶⁶ Jorge Ibarra explains that women were beginning to be “admitted into the labor sectors traditionally occupied by men because of the desire of employers to depress wages ... Women between fourteen and twenty-four years old

¹⁶¹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 36.

¹⁶² Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 207.

¹⁶³ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 169.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

were particularly exploited on the basis of their lack of work experience.”¹⁶⁷ Ibarra goes on to explain that “the industries that opened their doors to women for the purpose of reducing wages thus preferred young women ignorant of their labor rights.”¹⁶⁸ Ibarra’s statement shows how the few ‘lucky’ women who managed to find employment outside of domestic servitude were not being given equal opportunities, but rather were being used as cheap labour.

The traditional ideal which remained prevalent in pre-revolutionary Cuba that women were better suited to domestic roles than to physical or intellectual labour made it difficult for them to find respectable work. Espín explains how the “misery produced by lack of work threw thousands of women from the countryside and the city onto the torturous and denigrating road of prostitution.”¹⁶⁹ Espín describes how the high rate of unemployment among men in the early 1950s (nearly one million) left women with very few options for earning wages.¹⁷⁰ Before the revolution there were, by some estimates as many as 150,000 prostitutes in Cuba¹⁷¹ who catered not only to Cuban clients, but also to US tourists, businessmen and army personnel.¹⁷² Pérez explains that in the 1950s Havana became a haven of vice, with nearly 270 brothels in

¹⁶⁷ Ibarra. *Prologue*, 130.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

¹⁶⁹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 37.

¹⁷⁰ Espín, *Cuban Women Confront the Future: Three Decades After the Revolution*. Edited by Deborah Shnookal (New York: Talman Co., 1991), 4.

¹⁷¹ Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 10.

Rovner goes on to cite Louis A. Pérez Jr.’s *Essays*, which explain that these numbers of prostitutes may not be wholly reliable because of the revolutionary government’s conscious attempts to discredit the Batista era. Rovner explains that these “official” figures cite the number of prostitutes in the early 1950s as being somewhere between 100,000 to 150,000 in 20,000 brothels (Rovner 10).

¹⁷² Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 6.

operation by the end of the decade.¹⁷³ In 1958, just one year before Castro took over the leadership of the country there were approximately 11,500 women in Havana who earned their wages by prostituting themselves.¹⁷⁴ One of the major programs of the FMC which will be discussed below was the campaign to help prostitutes leave the streets and find professions, or at least respectable positions. The FMC set up schools and training facilities to provide former prostitutes the skills to find jobs and set up new, respectable lives.

The ideal for women of the era before the revolution was that they would assume their traditional responsibilities, make respectable marriages and bear children. The relationship between men and women has often been boiled down into terms of *machismo* and *marianismo* which correspond to the traditional expectations of how men and women should act and think.¹⁷⁵ Both *machismo* and *marianismo* are somewhat ambiguous terms, which fail to address the nuances in personal relationships, but are useful in describing the way of thinking that characterized the way that women and men thought about gender roles in the pre-revolutionary period, and indeed in Latin America as a whole. Elizabeth Stone explains that before the revolution “women were discouraged from taking part in public life and in many families women were not even

¹⁷³ Pérez, *Cuba*, 305.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Nelson offers a useful description of the traditional expectations for women in the wake of Spanish (Catholic) colonialism, that are often summed up in the word “*marianismo*”, stating that the “wife-mother’s position was subordinate, but at the same time she was expected to be a model of virtue and modest behavior, characteristics which in turn inspired reverence and respect on the part of the man...” (Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 175). “*Machismo*” on the other hand is often used to describe a man who is self-determining, strong-willed, virile and quick-tempered. Despite the fact that it is necessary to mention the terms in connection with this topic, I do not find them to be an adequate way to define either feminine or masculine identities.

allowed to venture out of the house without a chaperone. All the social attitudes generally summed up in the term “machismo” were in full force.”¹⁷⁶

A useful image that is used to describe the differences between men and women in the pre-revolutionary period is the contrast between the home, which was associated with safety and femininity, and the street, which was rough and dangerous, and considered to be the domain of men.¹⁷⁷ In a speech in 1966, Fidel Castro explained that a woman’s traditional connection to the home was based on her biological reproductive role, but went on to explain how this had to change in a revolutionary society. Castro noted that “naturally, reproduction is one of the most important of women’s functions in human society, in any kind of human society. But it is precisely this function, relegated by nature to women, which has enslaved them to a series of chores within the home.”¹⁷⁸ Castro’s statement is significant because it points to the idea that a woman’s capacity for useful employment was much greater than her biological role. While child-rearing and housekeeping are certainly worthwhile pursuits, they are not the only things that women are capable of.

It was very difficult for married women at this time to avoid becoming housewives because of the lack of availability for contraceptives, which meant that women were unable to plan or postpone their pregnancies. Abortion was illegal, and

¹⁷⁶ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 7.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

contraceptives were seen as a threat to manhood.¹⁷⁹ This meant that women had little choice but to remain at home and care for the children. It was not until after the revolution that women were educated about abortion and contraceptives (both of which became more widely available), and steps were taken to encourage women to work, as well as having a planned family.¹⁸⁰ A young female doctor named Olga recalls how, before the revolution made abortion available to women, they took great risks to get rid of unwanted pregnancies. She explains that women would attempt abortions themselves, and often “arrived at the hospital in pretty bad shape.” Olga goes on to comment that “if that patient had been able to get an abortion, [these accidental injuries that come from home abortions] never would have happened. That’s why we came to the conclusion here that not only should abortions be legal and accessible, but contraceptives as well.”¹⁸¹ These changes made it possible for women to take charge of their lives, deciding how many children to have and when to have them.

Margaret Randall explains that in Cuba in the 1970s, there was a significant shift in the way that young women thought about their future. Randall states that, in contrast to pre-revolutionary Cuba, in 1970 there were few young women who “[saw] their futures as dependent on marriage or a future husband’s career. Their central goal in life is their own development and their potential contribution to society.”¹⁸² Randall’s statement shows how although women were traditionally tied to the home and family

¹⁷⁹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 6. Not only were contraceptives largely unavailable, but there were prejudices against their use, some men (and women) believing that this was unnatural and emasculating.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸¹ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 48.

¹⁸² Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 40.

before the revolution, young women growing up after the revolution did not feel that they needed to marry in order to achieve economic stability; rather, they could take more time in their decisions.

The vast majority of babies born in Cuba before the revolution lived in the *bohío* huts, and those unsanitary conditions were a factor in the infant mortality rate of 43.6 per 1000 live births that remained until 1962.¹⁸³ By 1984, with the introduction of maternity homes and an increased number of doctors and gynecologists as well as a developed education programme, the infant mortality rate had dropped to 16, which was “among the lowest in the Western Hemisphere”¹⁸⁴ at that time. The numbers of women who died in labour also dropped dramatically in the same time period, from 11.8 per 10,000 births to 3.2.¹⁸⁵ The dramatic drop in the numbers of pregnancy-related deaths reflects the shift in mindset that occurred after the revolution, where women were able to choose how many children to have, and when to have them, thereby allowing the children a much higher chance of survival because they were born in clinics or hospitals. Public health became one of the major plans of reform in revolutionary Cuba, and for the first time in Cuban history public healthcare became available to all. The FMC played an extremely important role in educating women about reproduction, and helping to remove the stigma from abortions and contraceptive use.¹⁸⁶ Espín also stressed the necessity to help poor families to do away with poor hygienic practices and

¹⁸³ Rudolph, *Cuba: A Country Study*, 91.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ See Chapter 3 for details about the FMC’s sexual education initiative.

halt the spread of disease by improving their living conditions.¹⁸⁷ The role of the FMC in terms of shouldering such ambitious social programmes was gradually taking shape.

For many women, cooking and food preparation represent one of the greatest burdens of running a household. Naty Revuelta, a participant in the Martí Women's Civic Front and later director of international relations at the Ministry of Culture, recalls how her first husband believed that the "ideal wife" was one who "was concerned only about the daily menu and the running of the home."¹⁸⁸ Indeed, many women regarded the institution of marriage to be inextricably linked to grocery shopping and preparing meals.¹⁸⁹ Finding time to cook and shop was a problem encountered especially by women who had to work during the day. Even after the revolution, women struggled to place nutritious meals on the table for their families, a process which led to many FMC and government initiatives to attempt to ease the burden of food preparation. These plans included not only the Family Code which insisted that men hold equal responsibility for domestic duties, but also the shopping-bag plan, which "allowed women to leave their shopping bags with lists of items wanted, at the grocery store on the way to work and pick up the filled bags on the way home."¹⁹⁰ Such initiatives served to lighten the burden of many working women. However, for women like Josefina, a

¹⁸⁷ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 228.

¹⁸⁸ Maloof, *Voices of Resistance*, 44.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹⁰ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 17.

peasant woman with 8 children, despite the Family Code, little changed: she still woke at 5 and went to bed at 11 in order to finish all of the household chores.¹⁹¹

The first legal manifestation of a woman's political voice in Cuba was in 1934 when women were allowed full suffrage.¹⁹² The election in January 1936 of Miguel M. Gómez was the first in which women were allowed to vote.¹⁹³ Aída Pelayo, who was a part of the women's movement to gain suffrage recalls that by 1939, when Cuba was drafting a new Constitution, radical women had gone far beyond simply wanting the rights to vote and inherit property since they also wanted full legal equality with men.¹⁹⁴ Pelayo states that "our struggle was... a revolutionary, political struggle for the full participation of women and the underprivileged in all levels of society, including politics."¹⁹⁵ The radicalization of the women's political struggle in the early 1940s was in many ways a precursor to many of the battles fought by the FMC in the 1960s.

Before the reforms instituted by the revolutionary government, women had very limited opportunities for political and legal roles. Indeed, at this time they were legally subordinate to men, and were excluded from both public administration and political life.¹⁹⁶ It was not until the constitution of 1940 that the legal status of women would change drastically, establishing women's right to equal pay for equal work as well as declaring sex discrimination illegal. Full civil rights and maternity protection were

¹⁹¹ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 44.

¹⁹² Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 38.

¹⁹³ Rudolph, *Cuba: A Country Study*, 32.

¹⁹⁴ Maloof, *Voices of Resistance*, 56.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* Pelayo's statement shows the strength and initiative of the women's movement prior to the revolution. Later many of the same women would join the FMC.

¹⁹⁶ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 37.

granted as well, but only to married women.¹⁹⁷ As Elizabeth Stone explains, however, these laws did little to change the actual situation for women in Cuba. Stone argues that “the constitution of 1940 did not change women’s position of inferiority... women received inferior wages to those of men and were denied access to better-paying and more responsible jobs. The laws on maternity, retirement, vacations, etc., were not complied with.”¹⁹⁸ As will be discussed below, the FMC believed that far more important than changing the legal status of women was changing the attitudes towards women’s rights. As can be seen by the reaction to the constitution of 1940, simply changing the legal code was not an adequate response to the problems that women faced before the revolution.

The political and social situation for women of Afro-Cuban descent was significantly worse, because of the profoundly-rooted tradition of racial discrimination before the revolution. Not only was segregation of public areas an ever-present reminder of a black woman’s status in society, but it also barred them from the more sought-after traditional female professions such as nursing.¹⁹⁹ Margaret Randall explains that some of the racist views stemmed from the idea that lighter-coloured skin came to “exemplify a social distance from slavery.”²⁰⁰ For Afro-Cuban women, their burden was not only one of discrimination against their sex, but also against their skin colour. Black women who needed to work were often forced to resort to jobs that had low pay and

¹⁹⁷ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 38.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰⁰ Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 53.

were a health risk, such as positions in the tobacco industry.²⁰¹ Espín explains that, despite the fact that racial discrimination was also made illegal in the 1940 constitution, as was the case with many of the other reforms it was largely unchecked until after the revolution.²⁰²

Women and Revolution 1956-1959

Although it is nearly impossible to give an estimate of how many women participated at one time or another in the revolutionary movement between 1956 and 1959, women's involvement in the revolution was crucial to the overthrow of Batista's government. Julie D. Shayne explains that there was "no way to really know how many women (or men for that matter) actually participated in the anti-Batista movement" because they often operated anonymously.²⁰³ Shayne goes on to explain that, "despite the seemingly low presence of women in the resistance movement, the roles that they played were in and of themselves fundamental to the advancement and success of the revolutionary movement."²⁰⁴ For many women in Cuba the revolution was the first glimpse of a life outside of the realm of home and domesticity. Indeed, it is often thought that the women's movement would have been much slower to begin without

²⁰¹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 37.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 38. Lowry Nelson, whose examination of rural Cuba is largely based on data from a census taken in 1943, shows the difference between black and white citizens in many aspects of life (work, education, social class), despite the change in the legal status of black Cubans in the 1940 constitution. In 1943, the black population represented only 15.3% of the professional and semiprofessional workforce, and only 8.7% of the farm administration (Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, 154). The low incidence of black workers in higher paid and skilled work shows how the black population of Cuba continued to be discriminated against despite the laws that were meant to protect them.

²⁰³ Julie D. Shayne. *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 121-122.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

the revolution to help women realize their value in society. This section will examine women's roles within the revolutionary movement itself as a means of showing how women first organized and mobilized, beginning a trend which the FMC would carry on.

At the beginning of the revolution, most women (with notable exceptions such as Vilma Espín and Celia Sánchez) volunteered in the revolutionary struggle in traditional support roles. Teté Puebla, who would later become second in command of an all-women's platoon, recalls how in 1957 the women who went to the Sierra Maestra mountains "were not organized as combatants ... we helped with cooking, sewing, and tending for the wounded. We also helped teach the *compañeros* to read and write."²⁰⁵ Puebla explains that, despite the important work women were doing already, they wanted the chance to contribute in the same way as men – through active combat.²⁰⁶ Women were barred from combat, however, because many prejudices still existed among men about the capabilities of women in war. Until women were able to fight (1958), they continued to aid the revolution in other ways, often working, like Espín did, to transport goods throughout the country.

The leadership of the M-26-7 realized early on that women were assets when it came to transporting weapons, troops and messages. By playing on the same gender stereotypes that had oppressed women for centuries, the M-26-7 had women transport their goods under the noses of the government soldiers by using their femininity as a

²⁰⁵ Puebla. *Marianas in Combat*, 36.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

disguise. Women were not as readily suspected as men, and were able to effectively navigate the streets in urban areas without detection. Puebla describes how

“women used to wear a very wide skirt held out with crinolines ... under it we’d wear a kind of girdle, into which we’d put the items that needed to be transported. Under that skirt we’d carry bullets, dynamite, or whatever else we were going to transport. Sometimes too we’d pretend to be pregnant. Nobody would touch the belly of a pregnant woman. But what we were carrying were bullets, messages, dynamite, medicine, and money.”²⁰⁷

Women could also escort male revolutionaries through the streets “using their feminine roles as wives to diminish the chances of unnecessary attention from the police, which allowed male guerrillas to move about more freely than they could if they were to travel alone or with one another.”²⁰⁸ This conscious subversion of traditional femininity shows women’s awareness of gender stereotypes, and indicates irreverence towards those roles. No longer were women inextricably linked to that traditional femininity; rather, they were exploiting their femininity to disguise a more liberated identity.

The use of gender here as a tool for subverting Batista’s forces is important because it shows that the revolutionaries at least were beginning to consider the question of gender and its place in the modern world. No longer were women simply expected to comply with a certain set of traditional expectations, they were actually conscious of the way that women were seen in society, and set out to use that to their

²⁰⁷ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 32.

²⁰⁸ Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 128.

advantage. Although the ruse was largely successful, which indicates that the majority of Batista's forces did not consider the possibility that these women could be involved in revolutionary activities, the soon-to-be ruling party of Cuba including both men and women, were considering the consequences of antiquated gender stereotypes, and after the revolution would make it one of their platforms to fix this problem. Julie Shayne's *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (2004) contains a thorough discussion of this type of women's involvement in the revolution, and how this gender commentary manifested itself in a women's movement.

There were, of course, women who immediately took on more authoritative roles within the M-26-7. Espín, whose actions during the revolution were examined above, was not the only woman in leadership. There were also women such as Celia Sánchez, who became a mixture of administrator/confidante for Fidel Castro, helping him to put his plans into action.²⁰⁹ Puebla describes how in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Sánchez "was in charge of just about everything, not only the hospitals and schools, but the general command post."²¹⁰ Women like Celia Sánchez, Vilma Espín and Isabel Rielo who was the commander of the Mariana Grajales Women's Platoon have,

²⁰⁹ In 1920 Celia Sánchez Manduley was born to a doctor and his wife in a small neighbourhood near Manzanillo. She was educated at the Manzanillo Institute, and became politically active at a young age (Pedro Alvarez Tabío, *Celia: Ensayo para una Biografía* (La Habana: Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, 2004), 33). In 1947 she helped found the Orthodox Party in Manzanillo, and was a leading member of the amnesty campaign for political prisoners under the Batista regime (Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 391-392). In 1955 she helped found the M-26-7 movement, and she soon became an essential part of the revolutionary struggle (Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 391). Among her many accomplishments in the revolutionary army, Sánchez helped organize the Granma landing, as well as being responsible for the rebel territory during the war, collecting funds and supplies. Sánchez was also the first woman in the Sierra Maestra mountains to wield a rifle (Tabío, *Celia*, 29). When Sánchez died in January 1980, she was a Communist Party Central Committee member, as well as being the secretary for both the Council of State and the Council of Ministers (Hart, *Aldabonazo*, 392).

²¹⁰ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 37.

until recently, been largely left out of the historiography about the Cuban revolution, but now scholars are beginning to realize the significance of these women who contributed to the revolutionary war.

The lives of women in pre-revolutionary Cuba being somewhat cloistered, it is not surprising that the uprising presented to women a dramatic shift in their societal and political potential. Elizabeth Stone argues that “For most of these women [mobilized into revolutionary work] such activities were the first step out of the home into any kind of social or political life. Their participation opened up a new world for them.”²¹¹ Stone goes on to state that it was women’s involvement that changed “the way they looked at themselves ... deeply rooted anti-women prejudices and customs began to be called into question” as a result of women’s altered views of their own capabilities.²¹² Because there was no widespread women’s movement before the revolution, it can be reasonably argued that the women’s movement was made possible by the revolution (or at the very least laid the foundations for it),²¹³ because it encouraged women to step outside of their traditional roles. The women’s movement, that would later become the FMC, began because women did not want to give up the level of social and political consciousness and freedom that they had gained during the revolutionary period.

Despite the important work that women like Espín were doing for the M-26-7 in the early days of the revolution, there were still prejudices against women among the

²¹¹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 5.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

ranks of the revolutionaries. Eventually much of the discrimination against women would disappear, but not until women had proved themselves worthy of the revolutionary work. Yolanda Ferrer, who would become Secretary General of the FMC after Espín's death, wrote that "women learned they were capable of the most diverse kinds of activities. As they demonstrated what they could do, they increasingly won social respect. Prejudices began to lose ground."²¹⁴ Among the counterrevolutionary forces, however, women's revolutionary actions were seen as disgraceful, and women were often targets of sexual violence by the police forces.

When women collaborating with the M-26-7 were caught by Batista's forces, they were not only tortured and 'disappeared' like the male revolutionaries, but they were also often sexually abused and raped by their captors.²¹⁵ One woman named Hidelisa describes how she and two female comrades were captured and raped by the government forces, describing her feelings of terror and anger at the "violence" committed against them.²¹⁶ The use of sexual violence against female revolutionaries was employed as a reaction by the Batista forces to a woman leaving her 'proper' role in society. Female guerrilleras were thus not only subjected to what we may call the 'usual' violence that revolutionaries were subjected to by the government forces, but there was also a sense that rape was a way of shaming and violating the women who dared to step outside of their traditional domestic roles.

²¹⁴ Espín, *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution*, 203.

²¹⁵ Lara, *Cuba: Las Mujeres*, 11.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

Mariana Grajales

One unusual aspect of women's participation in the anti-Batista struggle was the introduction of the Mariana Grajales Women's Platoon. Formed on September 4th 1958,²¹⁷ the platoon was named after Mariana Grajales, who believed so fiercely in Cuba's liberation from Spanish colonialism that when the first war for independence began in 1868, she encouraged all five of her sons to enlist. In the war she lost her husband, all of her sons, and several other family members.²¹⁸ Teté Puebla explains how Grajales' sacrifice and unwavering belief in the cause came to "symbolize the spirit of resistance and unbreakable courage of [the] oppressed fighting for their liberation the world over."²¹⁹ Puebla recalls that in May 1958 there was a sharp increase in the violence committed by the government forces against peasants living in the Sierra Maestra mountains, and women were increasingly anxious to help combat the destruction of villages by government forces.²²⁰ Yet, until Castro announced at a general meeting in the Sierra Maestra mountains in 1958 that there would be a women's platoon, women were largely excluded from active duty. Castro recalls that, when he announced the creation of the Mariana Grajales Platoon, "some of the rebel fighters

²¹⁷ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 50.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101. Thirteen women made up the Mariana Grajales Platoon, taking part in active combat roles alongside male revolutionaries.

²¹⁹ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 21.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49. Puebla explains that the military, in an attempt to show that progress was being made in the war against the rebel army, would assassinate whole villages of peasants and claim that they were rebel soldiers. Puebla describes how "wherever the army went, women were raped, children were killed, entire villages were bombed and burned down" (Puebla 49). Puebla explains how this violence against innocent people made the women of the M-26-7 increasingly eager to fight, stating that "All these crimes filled us with courage and determination... we felt frustrated that we could not fight arms in hand" (Puebla, 50). This attempt of the military to destabilize support for the rebel army proved ineffective, actually increasing the number of volunteers to the guerrilla army.

were furious because they didn't like the idea of a platoon made up of women."²²¹

Despite the fact that the M-26-7 was made up of young idealists, it was still difficult for many to change their attitudes about women's roles.

Resistance towards female combatants was, at the beginning, quite fierce. Many of the revolutionaries believed that women were "too soft and delicate" or would "faint at the sight of blood."²²² Puebla, who was second-in-command to Isabel Rielo in the Marianas, recalls how when they first formed the women's battalion the men would mock them, saying that "if they enemy soldiers toss a lizard at them, the women are going to dump their rifles and run."²²³ In order to show his faith in the Mariana Grajales platoon, Castro appointed the Marianas as his personal security detail, which helped to "demonstrate his confidence in women" as soldiers.²²⁴ María Antonia Carrillo describes how, when she joined the Mariana Grajales Platoon, she was unsure if she would succeed in learning to use her weapon, but that the "sense of revolutionary fervor that enveloped us was so strong that fighting back seemed like the only thing to do."²²⁵ In spite of the adversities faced by the women combatants both from outside and within their own ranks, the Marianas became renowned country-wide for their strength and courage, despite the fact that the Platoon was made up of only thirteen combatants.²²⁶

Besides acting as Fidel Castro's personal security detail, the Marianas were often

²²¹ Maloof, *Voices of Resistance*, 26-27.

²²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²²³ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 52-53.

²²⁴ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 50.

²²⁵ Maloof, *Voices of Resistance*, 64.

²²⁶ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 52.

involved in other missions and battles alongside male troops including the battles at Holguín, Cerro Pelado, and Los Güiros.²²⁷

In a report from the Sierra on September 18th 1958, Castro notified the revolutionary forces that the “Mariana Grajales Squad of rebel women went into action for the first time in this battle [in El Cerro] and firmly held its ground under shelling from Sherman tanks.”²²⁸ The Mariana Grajales Platoon, which Espín called an “extraordinary movement in the history of women’s participation in the revolution”, gained respect among the revolutionary forces because of their grit and determination.²²⁹ Fidel Castro explained that “As a general rule, when a platoon leader was wounded the men had a habit of retreating – which is not correct but it had become practically a habit.” Castro continues “The women’s platoon had attacked a truck loaded with soldiers. When the platoon leader was wounded, they weren’t discouraged. They went on fighting, wiped out the truckload and captured all the weapons.”²³⁰ Puebla explains how as the battles were fought, “the men were able to see how we fought alongside them... there was no difference... so Cuban women earned our renown as combatants.”²³¹

The Mariana Grajales Platoon was significant in that it was an obvious example of women stepping into traditionally male roles and not only excelling, but also succeeding in changing the gender stereotypes against women. Castro said that the Mariana Grajales Platoon set an example of women fighting to defend their country,

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 53-56.

²²⁸ Carlos Franqui, *Diary of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 404.

²²⁹ Espín, *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution*, 34.

²³⁰ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 8.

²³¹ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 60.

and thus became role models for all young women.²³² Many of the women from the Mariana Grajales Platoon, including Teté Puebla, went on to do work for the FMC after the revolution. Although there were still clear prejudices existing in society about the “proper” role of women, the Mariana Grajales Platoon was important because it showed women (and men) what they were capable of doing outside of the domestic realm.

Conclusion

In the period preceding the revolution, women were oppressed by the expectation that a woman’s destiny in life was to marry, raise children, and care for the home. Cuban women’s exclusion from a formal education meant that they were often illiterate, and had a distinct lack of knowledge about their own bodies and reproductive systems which meant that the poorest families were also often the largest ones. Women from the countryside who did not marry, or were forced to work, were excluded from the best jobs, being forced by their circumstances into domestic service or prostitution to support themselves and their families. Caring for a household without the proper facilities (running water, electricity), and the preparation of food all presented a huge burden to the Cuban woman, especially those who had to work to contribute to their family’s income. All of these factors meant that half of the Cuban population at the time of the revolution was severely disadvantaged, and had no political voice to address their issues.

²³² *ibid.*

For these women the revolution brought an unprecedented level of freedom of action which meant that women could escape the duties of a domestic life, and assume a significant social and political role. The revolution became a place for women to actively challenge the gender stereotypes about women, and to exercise their abilities to organize, work, and fight alongside men. Despite the prejudices that remained amongst the ranks of the revolutionary forces, many women were aware of their untapped potential and began to move towards women's liberation in an open and active way.

After the overthrow of Batista, many women had no desire to simply return to their homes and continue with their lives as they had been before; instead they wanted to organize, to help liberate and educate other women. This gradually took shape in the work of the incipient umbrella group for such activities, the Federation of Cuban Women. As Margaret Randall succinctly explains in her book *Cuban Women Now*, "the organization established to root out old prejudices and educate women was, and continues to be, the Federation of Cuban Women."²³³ Vilma Espín became the figure around which women rallied to continue their fight to remain mobilized, and her efforts were promoted, and supported, by the revolutionary government, keen to mobilize women for many initiatives in the national economy. Asela de los Santos describes how "by the time the revolution triumphed, Vilma was recognized among women as a

²³³ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, Pref.

heroine... she was recognized as a person who could lead, who could bring people together, around whom people could unite.”²³⁴

The FMC would become a crucial element of the new socialist society, which would help not only to change the roles, but also the views about women in Cuban society. Fidel Castro said about the women’s movement that “if they were to ask what the most revolutionary aspect of this Revolution is, we’d tell them that the most revolutionary aspect is precisely this: that is, the revolution that is taking place among the women in our country.”²³⁵ Castro’s statement is significant because it shows that the leadership of the revolution, soon to form the government of Cuba, understood and supported the monumental task that women faced in their struggle to gain rights, freedoms and better living standards for themselves and their families. The struggles they faced, however, were many, since *machismo* was so profoundly rooted in the national psyche. Nevertheless, important initiatives were undertaken by the FMC, who were eager to take advantage of the new revolutionary climate in Cuba. Indeed greater, far-reaching, reforms were soon to change radically the situation of women in Cuba.

²³⁴ Espín, *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution*, 109.

²³⁵ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 24.

Chapter 4: Foundation and Education: Espín and the Beginnings of the FMC

When Fidel Castro took over the leadership of Cuba in 1959, his revolutionary government was faced with the task of rebuilding a country that had been in an open state of war for nearly three years. The women of Cuba, who had gained a greater level of freedom and political and social involvement during the armed struggle (including some in leadership roles in the guerrilla forces) than they had ever had before, were eager to continue to work and contribute to the success of the revolution. Vilma Espín, who had already proved her qualities as a leader during her time as the coordinator for the M-26-7 in Oriente, was then asked to lead the FMC by Fidel Castro. Espín's qualities as a leader were instrumental in shaping this organization, and the next two chapters will show how Espín's personal values were reflected in the teachings and tasks of the FMC.

The Federation was established in order to accomplish two major goals that would benefit both Cuban women and the revolution. The first task that the FMC would perform was that of educating women, in order to improve their living standards, a process which would also enable women to contribute to society. The second task, following on from this broad goal, was that of mobilizing women into the workforce, thereby strengthening the economic stability of the revolution. Indeed to this day the majority of the works done by the FMC are either designed to aid the revolution by engaging women socially, culturally and economically, or are educational tasks aimed at improving the lives of Cuban women. This chapter will deal with the beginnings of

educational reform and the FMC's programs for the (re)education of women, while the next chapter will examine the projects introduced by the revolutionary government that actively mobilized women to work with the revolution.

When Espín was first asked by Fidel Castro to lead the FMC, she was hesitant about her role in the organization. Not only did she originally have reservations about the usefulness of a national women's organization, as was discussed in Chapter 1, but she was also worried that she could contribute little to the running of such an organization. Espín once said that she "was very skeptical" about any future role in revolutionary Cuba noting that "I didn't think I could do much more than make some kind of contribution, through my profession, to the country's development in technology."²³⁶ Espín's statement shows that she believed her greatest and most useful skill to be her formal training in engineering. It is also clear that in her work with the FMC she applied her scientific approach and training as an engineer to the challenges at hand, and addressed the issues of women in Cuba through the system of observation and practical action that was taught to her both in university and in the M-26-7.

Carolina Aguilar Ayerra has analyzed Espín's contribution to the FMC, stating that she "was the first to introduce to our country, both in the academic and political fields, the way of approaching gender as theoretical and methodological, and its practical articulation, [which is] essential for diagnosis of reality and projections for the future."²³⁷ Aguilar's statement shows that what Espín brought to the FMC was a new

²³⁶ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 125.

²³⁷ Ayerra, *Por siempre Vilma*, 73. [Translation mine]

scientific approach in dealing with the social, cultural and political problems that women faced. Ligia Trujillo Aldama explains that in portrayals of Espín, her “scientific and technological mind” is often overlooked,²³⁸ but this was in fact one of the most important things about her leadership skills. Indeed, what made her so valuable to the FMC was the way in which she applied the scientific method to assessing the needs of women in Cuba.²³⁹ Despite the socialist goals of the revolutionary government for which the FMC worked, it is worth emphasizing that ideological education took a distinct second place to the types of practical education that Espín considered to be most important (improving literacy, health, hygiene, etc.), and she made it her life’s work to ensure that women were given the opportunity to access the types of education that would make possible their social improvement.

To Espín, the purpose of the FMC was simply to “unite [all women in Cuba] in order to contribute to their cultural, technological, political and ideological advancement, to achieve their full participation in the revolutionary process, in society.”²⁴⁰ This meant that the FMC had to find ways to incorporate all women from different social classes, races and geographic regions into the Federation so that they could benefit from the organization’s work. Espín describes the Federation as a “catalyst” acting on behalf of the revolution, “orienting women’s efforts towards

²³⁸ Aldama, *Vilma Espín*, 66.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 63. Espín’s use of a scientific method is evident, for example, in the establishment of childcare centres, which served not only as a place to educate and care for children, but also for studying early childhood education and its impact on development.

²⁴⁰ Federation of Cuban Women, *Work Plan* (La Habana: Editorial Orbe, Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1975), 5.

specific and necessary work.”²⁴¹ Whether these women were members of the Federation participating in volunteer brigades, or the peasant women attending school for the first time, the Federation made it a priority to reach out to all women in Cuba and address those issues which most concerned them.

In order to ensure that the FMC would be able to provide services even to women living in the most remote areas of the country, the Federation was organized into a hierarchy of regional groups that had representation in even the smallest and most remote villages in the Sierra Maestra mountains. A standard process of organization resulted. The grassroots level, composed of between 15 and 60 women, was called the Delegation, and this is the level at which all women are able to participate.²⁴² The Delegations formed Blocs, the Blocs made up Districts, Municipal Committees, Regional Committees, and Provincial Committees, which reported to the National Committee in Havana, of which Espín was a part.²⁴³ Membership in the FMC was open to all women over the age of 14, who paid a small quarterly due of approximately \$0.75 USD as a contribution to the organization’s costs.²⁴⁴ The FMC Delegations met once every two months to “evaluate and program its work, and to study interesting cultural, political, and social topics.”²⁴⁵ The meetings encouraged

²⁴¹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 46.

²⁴² FMC, *Work Plan*, 14.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. In special cases the quarterly dues could be reduced to \$0.30, or waived altogether. The fee was not meant to be a burden that would discourage women from joining, but rather an incentive to participate in the various activities and meetings.

²⁴⁵ Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, *What is the FMC?* (Cuba: n/p, 1987?), 3.

women to engage actively in the revolutionary movement, as well as giving women a place to share their ideas about social improvement.

The grassroots organizations were an important function of the FMC, giving women (often for the first time) direct involvement in political life. With their introduction women were able to participate in the creation of policies that directly influenced their lives, and gave them a means of communicating their concerns to a political body that could resolve their concerns. Espín's early involvement in political activism would have given her intimate knowledge about the effectiveness and strength of grassroots organization, which may have influenced her desire to have women participate in the Federation on such a personal level. The revolution itself showed how the participation and support of the people was important for the successful governing of the country, and so the Federation was clearly structured to encourage women to be involved in the decision-making processes.

The FMC was preceded by several other women's groups which had operated in the period before the creation of the Federation in 1960. The 'Club Feminino', founded in 1917 in Havana, was one of the first women's organizations to operate in Cuba. They were mainly involved in charitable outreach programmes, and attempted to provide cultural and social welfare support among women. In 1923 the Club Feminino held the first National Women's Congress in Cuba, where they met to discuss the rights of illegitimate children, single mothers, the issues of adultery and prostitution, as well as

lobbying for equal pay for equal work, and women's suffrage.²⁴⁶ Many of these issues would still be important issues when the FMC was founded almost forty years later. The Club Feminino, as well as many other women's organizations of that time period, eventually disappeared from view because, as Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula explain, "the women's movement, which had developed such energy in the 1920s and 1930s ran out of steam in the 1950s... the energies of a new generation of politically conscious young women turned to challenging the new dictatorship."²⁴⁷ Women like Espín who might have lobbied for women's liberation in the early 1950s thus turned their attention to the revolutionary cause, which led to the decline of such groups as the Club Feminino whose importance took second place to challenging Batista's regime.

Despite the change in emphasis, there continued to be some women's groups operating within Cuba during the 1950s. In 1952, the Women's Martí Civic Front led by Carmen Castro Porta became one of the largest and most vocal women's groups that were "dedicated to the overthrow of the dictatorship."²⁴⁸ Fidel Castro, upon hearing of the Women's Martí Civic Front, asked them to become the women's branch of the M-26-7, at which point they were amalgamated into the revolutionary army.²⁴⁹ Due to its

²⁴⁶ Smith and Padula. *Sex and Revolution*, 15.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26. Although the Women's Martí Civic Front was a fairly prominent group, incorporating women from many of the cities in Cuba, its energy was directed at deposing Batista and instating free elections. Changing the conditions of women in Cuba was never one of the Front's goals.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

incorporation into the M-26-7, the Front did not exist as a separate entity after January 1959, and its importance as a female organization was unfortunately diminished.²⁵⁰

The Revolutionary Women's Union (Unión Feminina Revolucionaria or UFR) was an immediate precursor to the FMC, and emerged in March 1959, the most notable of several smaller women's organizations that were founded in this period. The UFR was "dedicated to peace, democratic liberties and economic improvement," as well as making it their personal goal to convince women to actively support the revolution.²⁵¹

The UFR, along with all other women's groups that existed at the time, were disbanded when the FMC was created and their members were invited to join the FMC.²⁵²

Although this transition, which "united" all women's groups, is hailed as a positive development, it raises the question of whether the existing organizations resented being incorporated into the Federation. It is indeed possible that for some of these independent women's organizations, joining the FMC represented a greater opportunity for a change in conditions for women. However, it is also possible (though there is little evidence to support the theory), that they resisted being incorporated into a government organization, which would ultimately limit their freedom to determine for themselves the path they took towards women's rights.

²⁵⁰ It was not, presumably, Castro's intention to disband the Women's Martí Civic Front, especially since he would create the FMC shortly thereafter. Many former members of the Women's Martí Civic Front joined the FMC, although Carmen Castro Porta was not among them.

²⁵¹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 34.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 32. Due to the nature of the revolutionary government and the FMC, there was no documentary evidence that existing women's groups objected to being absorbed into the FMC, but there is little doubt that in some cases there were tensions that arose out of this enforced change in ideology.

When the Federation was first established it had only 17,000 members, but it grew rapidly and by 1970 there were over 1.3 million women who paid dues to belong to the organization.²⁵³ The almost absolute absence of criticisms about Espín and the FMC from the Cuban population in the early years does not suggest that the FMC necessarily had universal approval or popularity among women, but rather that these opinions were not voiced (or not voiced very loudly). However, the sheer number of women who did join the FMC during the 1960s and 1970s, and the testimonies of the women involved were overwhelmingly positive. One peasant woman named Amparo who became involved in the FMC in the 1960s recalls how “in the beginning when Vilma Espín talked about the FMC, I took it into my head, right away I joined everything cause I liked it. I felt it and I feel it.”²⁵⁴ Amparo’s statement shows not only how women approved of the FMC, but also how Espín constituted a large part of the FMC’s appeal. This was due in large part to the fact that Espín became a kind of symbol for the new revolutionary woman, managing to find a balance between her profession and her home life – not to mention her enormous contribution to women’s rights. The huge incorporation of women into the FMC in the first 15 years of its existence indicates that, although there were certainly women who opposed the organization and were unable to speak out, the vast majority of women were enthusiastic about the opportunities that it brought.

²⁵³ Fidel Castro and Vilma Espín. *Discursos de Fidel Castro y Vilma Espín en el X Aniversario de la FMC, 23 de agosto de 1970*. Edited by La Comision de Orientacion Revolucionaria del Comite Central del Partido. (La Habana: Unidad Productora 11, 1970), 5.

²⁵⁴ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 183.

Feminism and the FMC

Feminist thought, much as it is interpreted in North America and which had received a certain level of acceptance in Cuban society prior to the revolution, began to fall out of favour in the revolutionary period. Feminism was now generally considered within Cuba to be a “bourgeois indulgence” and even an “imperialist tool to divert women from the more important class struggle by tricking them into rejecting men.”²⁵⁵ This stance on feminism, which was promulgated by Espín, had a positive effect on Cuban women, because it meant that the FMC was not expected to follow any ideological plan. As a result they could develop any pertinent models to address the needs of women in their own fashion. Asela de los Santos explains that in the beginning “we didn’t speak in terms of women’s equality... We talked about women being housewives, confined to work in the home, overlooked and discriminated against. We talked about the need to integrate women into society and the workplace.”²⁵⁶ Asela de los Santos’ statement shows that, although the Federation had many points where their ideas converged with feminism, members of the FMC were able to pick and choose elements which they considered relevant for their reality, and prioritize based on the actual needs of Cuban women.

Espín, who publicly distanced herself and the FMC from distinctly traditional feminist goals, referred to the FMC as a ‘feminine’ not ‘feminist’ organization and had, since her early activist days, avoided accepting any narrow labels. In a speech about the

²⁵⁵ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 4.

²⁵⁶ Espín, *The Making of a Revolution*, 110.

early years of the women's movement, she explained that women in the 1930s demanded suffrage and equality "starting from the vantage point of feminism."²⁵⁷ Espín went on to explain that although the early women's movements undertook important work, "feminists raised the problem from the false angle of women against men, and they did not focus on it as a fight of women together with men against the socioeconomic oppressor."²⁵⁸ In other words, Espín's main criticism of feminism was that it created a conflict between women and men, when instead they should be working together to change society's ideas about women's roles, and indeed to improve society as a whole.

The fact that many of the women in the FMC were housewives with husbands meant that a position of antagonism between men and women was not practical – particularly if all were supposed to be constructing a new socialist society. Asela de los Santos explained that the "[F]ederation set itself the goal of defending women, without bringing on a confrontation with men."²⁵⁹ In other words the goal of the FMC sought to cooperate with men, working towards a common benefit, rather than attacking men and dividing society. Espín explained that it was not feminism in theory that she objected to, stating that she "believe[s] in those feminist groups who tie the solution to the oppression of women, of the liberation of women, to the liberation of all the

²⁵⁷ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 37.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* To call the Federation anti-feminist is not exactly correct; they simply developed a form of Cuban feminism which instead of creating a situation where women were fighting men, they used the rhetoric of fighting imperialism to advance the goals of all Cuban society, women included. Where there were prejudices against women, they treated it as an opportunity to educate men about women's potential, rather than creating divisions within society.

²⁵⁹ Espín, *The Making of a Revolution*, 111.

exploited, the oppressed... which also means taking into consideration social, political, and ideological as well as economic problems from the perspective of a class, sex and race analysis.”²⁶⁰ By this Espín clearly means that she agreed with the goals of feminist groups that worked towards the liberation of all people, and not just that of women.

Espín also explains that the Federation “concur[s] with feminists in the idea that women confront a specific situation in society as a result of the secondary role they have been assigned by capitalism and all preceding class societies.”²⁶¹ However, Espín disagrees with the one-sidedness of the feminist struggle, stating that she

is convinced that the problems women face cannot be seen in isolation from other social problems, and that they cannot be analyzed outside of their economic context. Nor should they be considered as side issues within a particular social, historical situation. Thus there are no solutions to women’s problems unrelated to their context.²⁶²

Espín’s statements show that although there are merits to feminist thought, it is clear that she disagrees that the FMC’s work should be separate from the rest of the revolutionary movement. The FMC should work in cooperation with the government and other organizations to achieve their goals, which had been specifically designed to meet the needs of Cuban women.

²⁶⁰ Espín, *Cuban Women Confront the Future*, 55.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 55.

Espín's refusal to be influenced by feminist ideology, as well as her insistence on creating practical goals that were in accordance with the specific needs of Cuban women, meant that the Federation's approach to women's issues was a unique response to their situation at that time. They did not force ideas of equality upon their members; rather, the Federation let them take shape gradually as Cuban society evolved. Espín explained that "it has always been our party's policy to outline women's concerns in a realistic way, taking into account the successes and difficulties still to be overcome in the process of making equality a reality."²⁶³ The FMC, with Espín as president, was a different kind of women's organization from what had come before, because of Espín's realism and community-oriented approach.

Educational Works of the FMC

At a time when most Cubans (especially women) received little to no education, Espín not only achieved a university education, but also undertook some post-graduate work in the United States at M.I.T., an experience which impressed upon her the importance of a thorough, balanced education. Espín made access to education by the female population in Cuba a priority, which is why the educational projects she espoused (running the gamut from literacy to sexual education), were some of the Federation's most successful and popular endeavours. Perhaps the most far-reaching and challenging task was the National Literacy Campaign, which was intended to wipe out illiteracy in Cuba altogether (in the end it reduced illiteracy from 23.6 to 3.9%). Although this was not specifically an FMC project, the FMC was involved on a large scale

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22.

in the execution of the literacy campaign, performing a wide variety of tasks that led to the success of the campaign.

In 1961, when the literacy campaign began, over 100,000 young men and women between the ages of 10 and 18 went to the countryside to teach peasants to read and write. Over half of these literacy '*brigadistas*' were women.²⁶⁴ One former *brigadista* said that the literacy campaign "was the first time in my life, and I believe the first time in our history as well, that women were given an equal role with men in bringing about monumental change."²⁶⁵ The FMC was instrumental in mobilizing women into the literacy brigades not only working as teachers, but also performing organizational tasks such as carrying mail and organizing lodgings for *brigadistas* in villages.²⁶⁶ The slogan for the literacy campaign volunteers was, not without reason, "You will learn more than you teach"²⁶⁷ because the literacy campaign not only taught thousands of men and women to read and write, but also helped the *brigadistas* to learn about their own country — and about their own capabilities.

For many of the young women involved in the literacy brigade this was the first time they had left their homes, experiencing independence and learning about the reality of life in rural Cuba. Margaret Randall remarked that the fact that the government was "able to convince the parents of 100,000 urban young boys *and girls* to allow their youngsters to go out and live in peasant homes for eight, nine, or ten

²⁶⁴ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 9.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶⁶ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 258.

²⁶⁷ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 10.

months was an incredible feat.”²⁶⁸ It was especially so since the counterrevolutionaries who remained in the country²⁶⁹ often targeted literacy brigade volunteers in an attempt to halt the success of the task, sometimes resulting in the deaths of both students and teachers. Despite this, it is claimed that “not a single parent demanded the return of a son or daughter”,²⁷⁰ which showed widespread approval of the program. The literacy campaign eventually amassed nearly a quarter of a million volunteers, one of whom was the current Secretary General of the FMC, Yolanda Ferrer, who at the age of 15 taught seven fishermen how to read and write.²⁷¹ The literacy campaign proved important not only because it brought education to people in rural areas, but also because of what it taught the young women who were involved in the campaign about their potential as active citizens, something which had never been done in such dramatic fashion before.

The emphasis placed on women’s education by the Federation meant that women actually benefitted the most from the literacy campaign, with women amounting to 55% of those who learned to read and write.²⁷² Espín explains that “during the literacy campaign, the [F]ederation focused on women who, up until the triumph of the revolution, had had no access to learning, who could neither read nor write, and

²⁶⁸ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 55.

²⁶⁹ After Batista was overthrown by Castro a huge number of his supporters, and much of the upper and middle class fled the country.

²⁷⁰ Randall, *Women in Cuba*, 55.

²⁷¹ Espín, *The Making of a Revolution*, 19.

²⁷² Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 10. This was also due to the fact that there were greater numbers of illiterate women to begin with. Louis A. Pérez Jr. notes that actually more than 56% women learned to read and write (Pérez, *Cuba*, 370).

who needed our help to begin realizing their potential.”²⁷³ By the time the literacy campaign came to an end, approximately one year after it began, over 700,000 people from all different walks of life all over Cuba had achieved, at the minimum, a third-grade level of literacy.²⁷⁴ At the end of the literacy campaign, the Federation organized over 2,000 family reading circles that encouraged families to preserve the skills that they had learned during the campaign.²⁷⁵

The literacy campaign was important to the progress of the women’s movement in Cuba because it would pave the way for women to become more involved in all walks of life in Cuba. The literacy skills that women learned during the campaign would also allow women to pursue higher levels of education, and eventually to become a part of the workforce. At the very least, women would be able to benefit from reading the works of the FMC²⁷⁶ that were widely distributed with the aim of instructing and inspiring women, as well as passing on such information and skills to their children. Espín and FMC were heavily involved in both preparing for and participating in the literacy campaign because it was a starting point for many of the tasks that the FMC would undertake in the years to come.

²⁷³ Espín, *The Making of a Revolution*, 259. It was upon this educational foundation that the FMC’s later initiatives to incorporate women into the workforce would be built. By ensuring that women (and all Cubans) had basic literacy skills they made it possible for women to begin to contribute to society.

²⁷⁴ Center for Democracy in the Americas. *Women’s Work: Gender Equality in Cuba and the Role of Women Building Cuba’s Future* (Washington: Center for Democracy in the Americas, 2013), 30.

²⁷⁵ Sheryl L. Lutjens. “Women, Education, and the State in Cuba.” In *Education in Latin America: Comparative Perspectives*. Ed. Carlos Alberto Torres and Adriana Puiggros. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 299. These family reading circles were significant because they encouraged peasants to continue to increase their educational levels even after the literacy campaign had come to an end.

²⁷⁶ One example is the *Mujeres* magazine, discussed below.

The Federation also organized sanitary brigades of women who performed a variety of tasks aimed at raising the level of health and hygiene among the poorer population in Cuba. The purpose of these brigades was to teach women, who were generally in charge of the household, to be aware of the importance of cleanliness and order in the home, and the possible repercussions of unsanitary conditions. The majority of the work that these sanitary brigade volunteers did was in the homes of peasants and the urban poor, helping them to understand the importance of hygienic practices for the prevention of diseases, and for the general health and happiness of their families.²⁷⁷

The sanitary brigade volunteers attended a 31-hour course held by the Cuban Red Cross that trained them in basic hygiene, administering vaccinations, the proper means of childrearing and other practices that would help them to eliminate many of the curable diseases discussed in Chapter 2 which were often the result of ignorance about proper sanitation.²⁷⁸ The sanitary brigades even organized home beautification projects to encourage maintenance of hygiene.²⁷⁹ By the time of the First Congress of the FMC in 1962, the FMC had 1,300 trained instructors, and 11,000 first aid course graduates who made up the sanitary brigades.²⁸⁰ The sanitary brigades were responsible for vaccination and immunization campaigns, which helped to decrease the incidence of

²⁷⁷ FMC, *Work Plan*, 42. For example, they would hold classes about such topics as the proper way to prepare food (cooking temperature and exposure time) or the best methods and locations for digging latrines.

²⁷⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 61.

²⁷⁹ FMC, *Work Plan*, 44.

²⁸⁰ Ministerio de Salud Pública. *La mujer cubana y la salud pública*. (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1985), np.

such diseases as polio and influenza. The brigade volunteers were also responsible for making gynecological exams for the early detection of cervical cancer available in rural areas.²⁸¹ The duties of the sanitary brigade volunteers were vast and varied, depending on the needs of the families they visited, ranging from explanations about bacteria to performing the Papanicolaou (Pap) test on women in rural areas.

One of the most important functions that the sanitary brigades served was in helping pregnant and postnatal women to ensure the health and safety of both child and mother, especially in areas with little access to medical care. An important step that the sanitary brigades made in helping women with their pregnancies was by establishing maternity homes so that women from rural areas, particularly those with high-risk conditions, could be cared for in a place closer to the hospital towards the end of their pregnancies.²⁸² During their time at the maternity homes women were educated in the appropriate techniques for bringing up babies and children. The *brigadistas* held classes that “advised pregnant women on proper food and clothing, encouraged them to participate in natural childbirth classes, and reminded them of the virtues of breastfeeding.”²⁸³ Furthermore, the sanitary brigade volunteers helped to keep track of women’s obstetric records at clinics.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ FMC, *What is the FMC?*, 7.

²⁸² FMC, *Work Plan*, 43.

²⁸³ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 61.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

The sanitary *brigadistas* thus helped to fill the gap left by the doctors who fled the country when the government was overthrown in 1959²⁸⁵, ensuring that women received appropriate medical care and advice during their pregnancies. In fact, for many women in rural areas where formal medical services were scarce, they had traditionally “relied on folk healers: herbalists, midwives, and priests” as their primary source of medical attention.”²⁸⁶ The sanitary brigades thus brought formal medical care to many areas that had never received it before, or where it had been sorely lacking. For the volunteers themselves the sanitary brigades were also important, because they “gave many women the opportunity to participate in an activity in which they had an interest but no formal training” and indeed, many of the former *brigadistas* went on to obtain professional medical degrees.²⁸⁷

The other major health initiative of the FMC at this time was the attempt to educate girls and women about questions of sexuality, and the role of their bodies. Espín, who was appalled at the lack of knowledge about sexual health among women, condemned the “silly shameful and ridiculous whispering” that constituted talk about sexual issues in the 1950s. Espín’s response was to institute a vast and comprehensive program of sexual education that covered everything from puberty to menopause in the hope that it would help women to make informed choices about sexuality. The FMC did a survey of women’s knowledge about reproduction and

²⁸⁵ When Batista was overthrown, a large proportion (nearly 500,000) of the professionals in Cuba fled the country, including half of Cuba’s physicians and dentists, and almost the entire senior medical faculty at the University of Havana. This left the revolutionary government with a major shortage of doctors, which severely disrupted the island’s medical care system (Pérez, *Cuba*, 362-363).

²⁸⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 59.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

sexuality, and concluded that the majority of mothers were “too ignorant on sexual matters or hesitant to provide accurate information to their children.”²⁸⁸ An FMC pamphlet entitled “What is the FMC?” explained that the FMC began to provide

Cuban families with [the] written materials required to educate and raise their children. It gave special attention to the need of introducing sexual education which is indispensable to the comprehensive development of the individual and which had been inadequately dealt with due to traditional prejudice and backwardness. The FMC’s concern over the enormous sexual ignorance then prevailing caused it to organize the first Sexual Education courses in the 60s through health debates among the members of the Federation.²⁸⁹

At first the FMC gave information mainly about pregnancy, but soon after they began to broaden the scope of information to include all things related to women’s sexual health.

One aspect of the plan to educate women about sexuality was through encouraging methods of family planning to ensure that there were fewer unwanted pregnancies, especially among young women. The FMC made contraceptives free and available to anyone who wanted them, and made abortions legal and accessible.²⁹⁰ An FMC pamphlet entitled “*La Mujer Cubana y la Salud Pública*” (“The Cuban Woman and

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁸⁹ FMC, *What is the FMC?*, np. Health debates were published in the *Mujeres* magazine and will be discussed below.

²⁹⁰ Despite the FMC’s attempts to popularize contraceptives, Smith and Padula argue that it was a largely ineffective campaign due to the unavailability of most types of contraceptives, including both condoms and the birth control pill. The opinion of Smith and Padula seems to be somewhat contradicted, however, by their discussion of IUD (Intrauterine devices) which were widely available in Cuba, and became the most popular form of birth control (Smith and Padula, *Sex in Revolution*, 71).

Public Health”) explained that “systematic work was undertaken to inform the population about the availability of contraceptives and to instill in them an awareness of using them so that parenthood would become a responsible and consciously chosen state.”²⁹¹ This aspect of the FMC’s educational plan emphasizes the necessity of strong and functional families where, ideally, all children were wanted, cared for and loved.

Unfortunately, rather than taking advantage of the availability of contraceptives, many women chose to have regular abortions as a means of birth control, a process which was not only a surgery that was costly to the state, but could also be harmful to the woman. This was why, as Espín explains, it was necessary to educate the population about the merits of contraceptives.²⁹² Espín, who had a happy childhood, explains the danger of “non-desired children” which, “besides being a burden for their parents and families will surely be victims of traumas caused by the situation in which they were born, and therefore, their personality could be marked.”²⁹³ The Federation’s attempts to educate women about the use of contraceptives were aimed not only at women’s happiness and prosperity, but also at that of the children born.

In order to lower the high infant mortality rate of the 1950s (a situation that was the result of bad birthing practices and inadequate medical care), the FMC sought not only to limit pregnancies among young, unprepared women by encouraging family

²⁹¹ Ministerio de Salud Pública, “La mujer cubana”, np. The rate of abortions rose drastically after the revolutionary government made them available to the public. For 15 years the abortion rate remained the same as that of 1989, where there were 160,000 abortions performed (compared to a live birth rate of 200,000). The situation was eventually viewed as something of a national crisis, resulting in a campaign against the dangers and psychological risks of abortion (Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 74-75).

²⁹² Espín, *Cuban Women Confront*, 16.

²⁹³ Espín, *The Struggle*, 50.

planning practices, but also to raise the level of care provided for pregnant women. The revolutionary government increased the number of hospitals and, as noted, the FMC health brigades were also responsible for creating maternity homes, which ensured that pregnant women were given specialist attention during the last few weeks of their pregnancies.²⁹⁴ In 1966 there were only 3 of these maternity homes, but by 1974 there were 61 in operation.²⁹⁵ Even with the relative shortage of doctors at the time, the infant mortality rate in Cuba dropped significantly with the introduction of maternity homes, from almost 30 per 1000 in 1953, to 15.3 in 1978.²⁹⁶ Besides attempting to lower the risk involved with pregnancies, the maternity homes also helped to prepare women for the actual challenge of raising a child.

One aspect of the health programs instituted by the FMC that was particularly important to Espín was the attempt to engage women in physical activities to promote cultural education as well as encouraging healthy lifestyles. Espín herself was involved in both sports and dance, and emphasized the need for women to become involved in such activities. At the first Congress of the FMC in 1962, Espín explained how the “effort to overcome women’s problems would not be complete if we excluded from our tasks that of improving their physical health through the practice of gymnastics and sports.”²⁹⁷ Furthermore, Espín explains that the “ideal of the new woman, a woman in

²⁹⁴ Ministerio, “La Mujer Cubana”, np.

²⁹⁵ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 93.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁹⁷ Vilma Espín. *Informes centrales de los congresos de la FMC* (La Habana: Imprenta Central de las FAR, 1990), 22. [Translation mine]

the socialist world, is that of a healthy woman.”²⁹⁸ Espín felt that one aspect of promoting healthy lifestyles was to make it socially acceptable for women to wear comfortable clothing that allowed physical activity.²⁹⁹ Espín’s own love for sports, dance, and other physical activities was here translated directly into FMC initiatives, showing how Espín’s own values were important for the formation of the Federation’s policies.

The hygiene, health, and sexual health programs instituted by the FMC in the 1960s were especially important initiatives for women because they helped women to live healthier and more well-balanced lives. In addition the provision of sexual education by the FMC helped women to have a greater role in determining the size of their family through family planning. For perhaps the first time, women were able to put off having a family until they were ready, which meant that they were able to engage in social, political and cultural activities — not to mention the fact that many women who were then able to join the workforce. Although it may seem counterintuitive, most of the FMC’s health initiatives were not run by doctors or nurses, but rather by educators who worked to prevent illnesses from occurring in the first place. Smith and Padula called the sexual education program “one of the most far-reaching and influential projects promoted by the FMC” because of its role in helping to prevent diseases as well as giving women knowledge about their bodies and better control over their family lives.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22. [Translation mine]

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁰⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 180.

Significantly, much of this information was made widely available through a clearly-written, popular magazine distributed for free throughout the country by the FMC.

Mujeres Magazine

Mujeres magazine, which was created and published by the FMC, was one of the Federation's most important tools for reaching out to women. The magazine, which ran articles specifically geared toward them, included subjects which ranged from recipes and food preparation to sexual health issues. *Mujeres* was intended by the Federation as a means of instructing and inspiring the women of Cuba to become more healthy, self-sufficient and socially involved. The FMC described the magazine as a "general interest magazine, including, aside from the Organization's work, many other varied articles and sections of interest to the housewife."³⁰¹ The magazine became an important part of the Federation's plans for helping women improve their lives, and eventually had over 250,000 readers per month.³⁰²

An important function that *Mujeres* served was as a means of spreading information to women about hygiene, health, and sexuality. Espín explains that the importance of *Mujeres* lies in its ability to "raise issues of health for women" whereby they "started having discussions about health, with themes of sexual education, in order

³⁰¹ FMC, *Work Plan*, 64. For an idea of the typical type of articles, the September 1st 1965 edition of *Mujeres* contained 5 sections: Reports (including articles such as "Federation Tractor Drivers" and "You Can Move Up"), General Interest (containing articles about children, opinion pieces, cinema and eyeglasses), Style and Beauty ("Dress for your Figure"), Children, and Home (including recipes). This variety of topics, designed to appeal to women from different backgrounds, was typical of most issues of *Mujeres*.

³⁰² Larissa A. Grunig *The Cuban Women's Federation: Organization of a Feminist Revolution* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993), 10.

to prevent STDs and so that women could learn to avoid having children by using contraceptives.”³⁰³ One of the most popular initiatives for educating women about healthy practices were the debates on the subject held by the FMC. In almost every issue of *Mujeres* the Federation would publish topics and themes related to health that women would debate and discuss with their friends, neighbours, and their FMC delegations.³⁰⁴ These health debates could be on practically any topic including the proper way to build a latrine, food preparation, menstruation, puberty, personal hygiene, breastfeeding, menopause, and ovulation, to name a few.³⁰⁵ These debates proved to be immensely popular, and by 1975 there were over half a million women who followed the debates.³⁰⁶ These debates were a very important pedagogical tool because they engaged women, encouraging them to think about health and hygiene and how it affected them personally, as well as instructing women about preventive measures that would promote healthy lifestyles.

Mujeres also published articles that gave detailed information about reproduction and the body. One such article, entitled “Su mente y su cuerpo” (“Your Mind and Your Body”), was published in a 1965 edition of *Mujeres*. This article, complete with a diagram of the female reproductive system, explores scientific details about women’s bodies, ranging from such topics as the causes of blushing, to weight gain, to menopause and pregnancy. The article details how the physical changes in a woman’s body can affect her state of mind, and gives remedies and strategies for living

³⁰³ *Vilma: Una Vida Extraordinaria*, np. [Translation mine]

³⁰⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 62.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

a happier, healthier life.³⁰⁷ The article explains that “there are certain times in the life of a woman in which several internal changes exert profound effects, physically and mentally, which is closely related.”³⁰⁸ The above statement is an example of how *Mujeres* magazine endeavours to explain to women the natural mental and physical changes that occur with age, and how important it is for women to understand their bodies in order to take care of them.

The straightforward and scientific manner in which *Mujeres* deals with matters of sexuality indicates Espín’s influence over the magazine both because of her disapproval of the way that female sexuality was largely ignored in the pre-revolutionary period and because of her belief in scientific accuracy. Rather than attempting to make the information palatable in the attempt to spare women the embarrassment of discussing issues about sexuality and childbearing, *Mujeres* made the information very direct so that Cuban women could gain the knowledge necessary to be able to make informed decisions about how to take care of themselves and their children.

Mujeres also sought to provide role models for women by publishing articles about exemplary Cuban women. One such article, from a *Mujeres* magazine edition published in August 1962, contains an article written by Onelia Aguilar entitled “Vilma Espín: Firme combatiente y madre amorosa” (“Vilma Espín: Strong Fighter and Loving

³⁰⁷ In fact, “Su mente y su cuerpo” not only provides basic information about sexuality, but it also goes into detail explaining about hormones and how they affect the mind and body so that women will understand the fundamental principles involved with their body’s altering phases.

³⁰⁸ Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, “Su mente y su cuerpo” *Mujeres* September 1st 1965, 10.

Mother”). Aguilar’s article describes Espín’s life, emphasizing her role as a combatant and leader in the revolution, as well as her dedication to family life. Aguilar stresses the importance of having a balance in life, like Espín did, between family and work.³⁰⁹ As explained by Ligia Trujillo Aldama, the purpose of these articles was to present “a positive, constructive and creative image of the function of women in socialist society.”³¹⁰ The article was meant to show young women that they, as was the case of Espín, could achieve a balance between private and public life. Such articles encouraged young women to emulate women like Espín, who – it emphasizes - received an education and then went on to do valuable work for the revolution as well as having a family.

Mujeres was an important aspect of the FMC’s educational plan because it was not only responsible for teaching women about health and sexuality, but also because it communicated Espín’s ideal of the qualities needed by a revolutionary woman to women all over Cuba. *Mujeres* was just one aspect of Espín’ and the FMC’s goal to create a “new generation free from prejudices, of children and youths who will continue the work of the revolution.”³¹¹ *Mujeres* also served to create a sense of community among women, bringing them together to debate and discuss issues of womanhood, and to become involved in community life. Although some of the articles seem outdated by today’s standards, the magazine was important then because it was, in the words of

³⁰⁹ Aguilar, “Vilma Espín: Firme combatiente y madre amorosa”, *Mujeres* August 15, 1962, 10. This aspect of *Mujeres* also shows how it was not only an educational tool, but could also be used as a way of disseminating political propaganda about the FMC and the revolution.

³¹⁰ Aldama, *Vilma Espín: La flor*, 63. [Translation mine]

³¹¹ Ayerra, *Por siempre Vilma*, 41.

the FMC, “an important tool [which] contributes to the achievement of our organization’s goals basically through the education and entertainment of women”.³¹² This made it an essential tool for the success of their educational tasks, as well as a means of official government propaganda, encouraging women to participate more fully in the Cuban revolutionary process.

Formal Education

In combination with their projects of sexual education, the FMC helped to give women formal education and training that would eventually help them to find (better) employment. The revolutionary government viewed the 70,000 domestic servants working in Cuba at the time of the revolution as a hold-over of pre-revolutionary lifestyles, and tasked the FMC with discovering a way to help these women find different professions. This presented a formidable task, because it meant not only developing the means to retrain and reeducate these women, but also represented a logistical problem to find when these women, who worked from dawn until dusk, could study. They solved this problem by beginning to establish night schools, where maids could study in the evenings to learn such skills as accounting, typing and shorthand in preparation for other employment.³¹³ Elena Gil, a revolutionary who was deeply involved in the program to retrain maids, explained that some women had difficulty

³¹² Federation of Cuban Women *Boletín FMC 1980* (Havana, n/p, 1980),16.

³¹³ Espín, *Cuban Women Confront*, 23.

getting permission to study at night, and so the FMC would visit the houses and try to convince (and, if necessary, coerce) the employers to allow their maids to study.³¹⁴

Despite the resistance of many employers who were reluctant to allow their servants to leave their duties in the evenings, by 1961 there were 17 night schools, and only a few years later this number had grown to 100 such schools all over Cuba with 30,000 maids enrolled.³¹⁵ Besides teaching office skills, the schools focused on bringing women with little or no education up to a sixth grade level of education, a process which would ensure that they had the basic skills necessary to undertake professional work.³¹⁶ The night schools for domestic servants organized and developed by the FMC were an important step in the education of women because these were women already mobilized into the work force, who were now able to fill professional positions and act as role models for other women who were considering entry into the work force. The night schools gave women who took service jobs out of necessity a chance to do work that they enjoyed; moreover, the minority of women who remained in service could then demand better terms from their employers because they were then both educated and in high demand. Although the night schools were only available for domestic servants, the Federation subsequently opened schools so that women in all different walks of life could receive an education.

Ana Betancourt, the daughter of a peasant farmer from Camagüey, had fought in the 1868 war of independence and called for women's independence stating that "the

³¹⁴ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 208.

³¹⁵ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 40.

³¹⁶ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 208.

Cuban woman, from the dark and tranquil corner of her home, has waited patiently and with resignation for this sublime hour in which a just revolution will break her yoke, untie her wings.”³¹⁷ Unfortunately Betancourt did not live to see women’s full independence, but as a tribute to her vision the FMC opened a school in her name, an institution which sought to give independence to peasant women through education. The Ana Betancourt School, established in 1961, brought peasant women from all over Cuba to Havana with the intent of teaching them a trade or skill that they could use to better themselves. Although initially many peasant families were wary of allowing their daughters to go to Havana fearing that they were actually being forced into prostitution,³¹⁸ the first group of peasant women to take advantage of the opportunity was 14,000 strong.³¹⁹

During four months of intensive study, the students would learn reading, writing, and history. They were also informed about the revolutionary goals, and would learn basic sewing techniques.³²⁰ Espín explained that the Ana Betancourt School was successful because “women all over the country were interested in taking these classes. Most families were poor, and there was little financial leeway to buy clothes of any quality in a store. Even before the victory of the revolution, Cuban women wanted to learn how to sew... it was something they were excited about and could learn

³¹⁷ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 11.

³¹⁸ Grunig, *The Cuban Women’s Federation*, 6.

³¹⁹ FMC, *Work Plan*, 21. There is some discrepancy in the number of women who attended in the first year, lower estimates citing 12,000 women graduating in 1961.

³²⁰ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 10.

quickly.”³²¹ Furthermore, the first women who graduated from Ana Betancourt were given a sewing machine to take home, and were tasked then with teaching ten other women from their village how to sew.³²² In total over 7,400 portable sewing machines were given to women who graduated a process which in theory this would mean that 74,000 women who had never attended the Ana Betancourt School would have benefitted from the program.³²³

The Ana Betancourt School, which was a project largely overseen by the FMC, provided a type of education that was not only accessible, but also valuable to the peasant women who attended the school. It is estimated that 51,730 from poor rural backgrounds women had learned to sew at Ana Betancourt by 1970, an accomplishment that is important because, as Espín explains, “their interest in learning how to cut and sew in many cases prompted them to take their first steps outside the home.”³²⁴ The Ana Betancourt school was thus important not only as an institution, but also because it gave peasant women a taste of independence. By providing peasant women the means of economic autonomy through their new skills as seamstresses, the FMC enabled women to avoid dependence on men for financial protection, and helped to restructure the power dynamic in peasant families. In addition peasant women now had a means of supporting themselves, which also meant that there was less pressure for women to marry young.

³²¹ Espín, *The Making of a Revolution*, 238.

³²² *Ibid.*, 241.

³²³ Espín, *Informes centrales*, 13.

³²⁴ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 42.

Fidel Castro, who took a personal interest in the Ana Betancourt School, would occasionally visit classes there, where the young women were “encouraged to embrace him and call him ‘Papá.’”³²⁵ This behaviour indicates that, although the FMC was attempting to empower women, there were still fairly strong vestiges of patriarchy that were being encouraged not only by the government, but also by the Federation. By referring to Castro as “Papá” it indicates that these women, rather than being subservient to and depending on their own fathers, were encouraged to view Castro as being their father figure.

Prostitution was another vestige of the pre-revolutionary government that the Federation addressed by creating a network of schools aimed at rehabilitating former prostitutes into society. According to Espín, during the first three years of the FMC (1960-1963), she gave “high priority” to the task of reeducating prostitutes.³²⁶ The FMC took an interest in everything related to the eradication of prostitution, including closing brothels, sending pimps to jail, and ensuring that former prostitutes were given medical attention, were educated, and provided with jobs which were preferably far away from where they had worked as prostitutes.³²⁷ The FMC also ensured that the children of former prostitutes were given special education and care to ensure that they were able to deal with the trauma of their lives on the streets.³²⁸

³²⁵ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 39.

³²⁶ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 265.

³²⁷ Grunig, *The Cuban Women’s Federation*, 6.

³²⁸ *Ibid.* Smith and Padula estimate that at the time of the revolution there were 30 or 40 thousand prostitutes working in Cuba. Theoretically all of these prostitutes would have been affected (reeducated or imprisoned) by the revolutionary government’s stance on prostitution.

For the majority of these women, the FMC's prostitution campaign was a success, giving them a fresh start and a new beginning, but there were those who were less pleased with the initiative. Among those who hailed the program as a success was Alicia, a former prostitute interviewed by Margaret Randall, who said of the prostitution campaign that "it's been a radical change and I've got to thank the Revolution, because it if hadn't been for that I don't know what would have become of me."³²⁹ Another former prostitute said that she would thank Vilma for the rest of her life, because the prostitution campaign gave her a fresh start, since now she "made good money, clean and dignified, through the skills that [she] learned."³³⁰ Other women resisted the campaign to the extent that the program, which was initially voluntary, soon became compulsory. Women who refused to give up the profession were imprisoned, others fled the country.³³¹ Although it may seem counterintuitive that a woman should want to remain a prostitute, the profession actually meant independence to some women.

The prostitute reeducation program was one of the first initiatives led by the FMC, and although there were problems,³³² it was largely successful. For the revolutionary government, their success in eradicating prostitution meant that the "figure of the prostitute came to symbolize the break from the pre-revolutionary past and the revolutionary regime's commitment to women."³³³ This program thus symbolized the importance of the Federation and their educational support in helping

³²⁹ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 249.

³³⁰ *Vilma: una vida extraordinaria*, np.

³³¹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 41.

³³² For instance the objections that some women raised at being forced to change professions.

³³³ Carrie Hamilton "Intervention: Public Women and Public History: Revolution, Prostitution and Testimony in Cuba" in *Rethinking History* (Vol 15 Iss. 2 175-187, June 2011), 177.

women to change their lives. In 1961, Law 993 was implemented, outlawing prostitution of any kind.³³⁴ For a small minority of women this was problematic, but for the majority it was an assurance that their organization, the FMC, was politically strong and active, working on behalf of women.

Concluding Thoughts

One major failing of the FMC educational programs, which has been the subject of much criticism, is the FMC's failure to address the problem of domestic violence. Although no statistics were kept about the incidence of domestic violence, the suicide rates of women in 1970 were twice those of men, which suggests that there were continued problems for women at home, problems from which they felt unable to escape.³³⁵ The possibility of domestic violence occurring in homes was not only ignored by the FMC and the revolutionary government, but it was also completely denied. The FMC made no attempt to educate women and men about dealing with domestic violence, nor did they provide any kind of support or shelter for women who sought it.³³⁶ This seems a major problem in the FMC's dogged attempts to deal with all issues regarding women, and it is unclear why they failed to face up to this.³³⁷

³³⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 40. The prostitution reeducation program was certainly in many ways a success, because it gave many women the opportunity to find gainful employment and start families. However, the fact that the program was eventually compulsory exemplified the kind of top-down structure that would later become a common aspect of the FMC.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ For a discussion of the FMC and domestic violence, see Carrie Hamilton's book *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* (2012).

Despite the fact that there were some definite oversights on the behalf of the FMC, the educational programs instituted by the Federation were largely successful because they reached out to a vast number of women in all walks of life across Cuba. From peasant women learning to sew, and prostitutes being educated and introduced into the working world, to the women reading *Mujeres* and learning about their bodies, these programs fundamentally changed the way that women thought about themselves, and how society viewed them as well.

Although many of these works seem less than groundbreaking to western feminists, they were life-changing to women the Cuban women who lived in a patriarchal, often *machista* society. Espín devoted her skills as an engineer and an organizer to the task of educating women, using her own personal experiences as a guide for tackling the most controversial problems faced by women in Cuba. Although there were some problems with Espín's leadership (to be addressed in the next chapter), the education programs which were so important to Espín were some of the most important that the Federation took on. The education and training initiatives show clearly the significance that Espín's leadership had on the management of the Federation, to a large degree because of how closely all of the programs aligned with her personal experiences and beliefs. In his speech to the third Congress of the FMC, Fidel Castro complimented Espín and the FMC on the impact of their role, stating that "through these programs, hundreds of thousands of women have acquired skills which make it possible for them to do useful things, useful for themselves and useful for the

country”.³³⁸ Just as important, though, they helped women to realize their potential as active, socially conscious, citizens. The educational initiatives begun by Espín and the FMC would pave the way for their next great challenge: that of mobilizing women to do useful work for the revolution.

³³⁸ *Boletín FMC*, 31.

Chapter 5: Revolution-Building: Espín, the Family Code and the Introduction of Women into the Labour Force

In the wake of the FMC's nation-wide program of education and training, the next logical step for the Federation was to encourage women to use their new skills to contribute to the advancement of the revolution. Immediately following the success of their educational programs,³³⁹ the FMC began a series of programmes that might be classified as "revolution-building" in that they consciously sought to mobilize women as active participants in Cuba's economy and social structure. In order to help women leave their traditional domestic roles as housewives, and become more active in Cuban society the FMC adopted a two-pronged approach to encourage women to join the labour force. Using a combination of social programs and legal protection (including a discussion of the controversial Resolutions 47 and 48)³⁴⁰, the FMC convinced hundreds of thousands of women to join the work force between 1962 and 1975.

Under Espín's leadership the FMC canvassed, taught, encouraged, and gave incentives for women to join the workforce. Perhaps most significant of all, though, was the Family Code, created in 1975 which made into law the equal sharing of domestic duties between husband and important initiatives that Espín and the FMC accomplished, because it proved the FMC's power and importance by changing the

³³⁹ The FMC's educational projects (see Chapter 3), which began in 1961, reached hundreds of thousands of women, and presented a vast array of educational programs that included education for peasant women, universal literacy training and health and sexuality education.

³⁴⁰ Resolutions 47 and 48 were designed by the Cuban government as laws designed to reserve certain types of employment for females, whilst keeping them from doing work that was deemed unsuitable for women. For example, any jobs that were considered physically strenuous or dangerous (such as cutting sugar cane) were prohibited, whereas positions that were less physical were reserved solely for women.

country's legislation to reflect their work. This chapter will analyze the ways that the FMC and Cuban government attempted to incorporate women into the workforce, discussing the impact that this had on Cuban society and women's conceptions of gender.

The FMC encouraged volunteering, for instance in literacy and sanitary brigades, because that was considered a socially acceptable way for women to begin to move into the public sphere.³⁴¹ Many women participated in volunteering programmes that sought to educate the population, but the FMC also partnered with the National Association of Small Farmers (Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños, or ANAP) to create Mutual Aid Brigades to help farmers with the harvests, and were in fact responsible for harvesting over half of the sugar, coffee, tobacco, and fruit in 1974.³⁴² By 1974 there were over 101,000 women working in nearly 8,000 brigades across the country providing free labour to farmers who needed help bringing in their crops.³⁴³

Women from all over Cuba participated in such volunteering ventures, sometimes doing farm labour, but at other times being called upon to volunteer in disaster relief. When Hurricane Flora devastated Cuba in the fall of 1963, killing over 1,000 people and destroying 10,000 homes, the FMC's volunteers helped to evacuate disaster areas, as well as organize shelters and medical aid. The FMC approved of this type of work and encouraged women to join the volunteer brigades because it was a

³⁴¹ At the time it was assumed that if a married woman took up work it was because her husband was unable to financially support their family alone.

³⁴² Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 103.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

way for women to aid the nation in times of need, and it was also an opportunity for them to experience working outside of the home.

The shift in women's roles from the private to public sphere was significant because it represented a dramatic change from women's lives during the pre-revolutionary period.³⁴⁴ Before the FMC initiatives to educate women and incorporate them into the workforce, women were largely uneducated and were restricted from most types of legitimate employment (only 9.8% of the workforce was female in 1953).³⁴⁵ Due to the difficulty in securing positions as nurses and teachers, 70% of working women were employed as domestic servants,³⁴⁶ and in the worst cases many became prostitutes. The change in attitudes towards women's employment after the revolution meant that women could be fully independent, no longer relying on men to provide for them.

Espín recognized that the women's volunteering opportunities helped engage women in the revolutionary cause, and eventually helped them to become involved in paid work. Espín explained that these Mutual Aid Brigades and other volunteering operations were the first step in encouraging women to take up professions, stating that "voluntary labor was a school for the [F]ederation. It was a way to politically strengthen women – in fact, all our people."³⁴⁷ It was believed by the Federation that by encouraging women to volunteer, women would recognize their capabilities and begin

³⁴⁴ For discussion of women's roles in pre-revolutionary Cuba see Chapter 2.

³⁴⁵ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 9

³⁴⁶ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 6.

³⁴⁷ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 255.

to seek paid employment. Women's achievements in volunteering also helped to change stereotypes about women's abilities, and showed that their active involvement in the public sphere would positively benefit society. Women's volunteering would gradually begin to change the public opinion on working women by normalizing and encouraging such activities. Volunteerism not only helped women realize their capabilities for performing valuable services, but it also began to reverse the notion that women were suitable only for domestic types of duties as had traditionally been the case in Cuba.³⁴⁸

To Espín, making it possible for women to find employment was the most important task of the FMC, the project from which all of their other initiatives stemmed.³⁴⁹ She explained that the "Cuban woman wants to work now; that consciousness is a part of her reality. This has been developing rapidly over these years, and we feel that the Federation has provided the basis for this development."³⁵⁰ Espín's statement shows that the FMC projects of education and technical training helped to lay the basis for women's incorporation into the workforce. By helping women to enter the job market, the FMC would have begun to fulfill its purpose of broadening women's involvement in society. The FMC's programmes sought to ensure that women contributed their full potential to the benefit of the nation, and helped women to live better more fulfilled and independent lives. The problem that existed, however, was the logistics of how the FMC would make it possible for hundreds of thousands of women to

³⁴⁸ Most girls in pre-revolutionary Cuba were given little formal education, because it was the norm for girls to marry young and devote their lives to the care of home and children.

³⁴⁹ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 303.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

leave their homes to take up paid professions. What Espín was seeking to do was quite radical, since it involved changing the decades-old models of women's roles in society.

The first problem faced was that of convincing women (and as well as their husbands and fathers) that it was proper for them to be employed outside of the home. Espín participated personally in the project of visiting and talking with women, holding conferences and meetings throughout the country between 1967 and 1969 to provide information about the social and economic merits of women working.³⁵¹ FMC delegates went from door to door at over 600,000 homes speaking with men and women about women's involvement in society, trying to make possible their goal of helping 100,000 women join the work force per year.³⁵² Carolina Aguilar Ayerra, an FMC National Committee Member, recalls the struggle to spread the word, explaining that there were "many people... to convince – mothers, fathers, boyfriends, husbands, women, [and] young people."³⁵³ Aguilar's statement shows that it was not only a task of convincing men that women ought to have jobs, but also that women also needed encouragement to take that important step in joining the paid workforce. Despite the continued prejudice against working women, the FMC's initiatives began to normalize the idea of women's employment in professional and technical positions, and women began to be able to take jobs in what were considered traditionally male fields

³⁵¹ Octavio Cortázar, Delso Aquino Baños, and Regino Miguel Oliver. *With our Memory on the Future*. (Havana: Documentales Hurón Azul, Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba, 2006 [DVD]), np.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

In 1953, there were only 353,000 women working in formal paid professions,³⁵⁴ yet by 1974 there were 590,000.³⁵⁵ Although the increase during these years falls far short of their goal of 100,000 women joining the labour force per year, it was still a significant step. Not only did these women set an example for other women and gain financial independence by taking up jobs that previously had been held by men, but they were also employed in different kinds of work than women had been before. Women were no longer just employed in those types of jobs that were considered to be appropriate for women during the pre-revolutionary period such as teaching and domestic service; they now also held technical and professional positions that had, in the past, been the domain of men. Women were now largely educated, trained, and capable of performing such jobs well, and began to do so. Smith and Padula estimate that by the year 1975, 27% of women worked as technicians, constituting a total of 49% of all technicians.³⁵⁶

Before the revolution there were very few women able to take advantage of University education (in 1952 less than half as many women graduated from University as men). Under the influence of the FMC's plans to educate women and help them into professional positions, women began increasingly to attend university. By 1990, 57% of the university level students studying in Cuba were women.³⁵⁷ The increase in the

³⁵⁴ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 169. The FMC estimate for the number of working women in 1953 is 262,000 (FMC, *Boletín*, 34).

³⁵⁵ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 57.

³⁵⁶ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 209 n. 41. In Cuban statistics "technician" refers not only to technical fields of work, but also to many different employees that worked for health and education ministries (Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 210 n. 5).

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

number of women in post-secondary education is significant, not only because women were now able and eager to gain further education, but also because of the diversified fields that women were moving into. In 1962, for example, 500 of the 1,200 applicants to the University of Havana medical school were women.³⁵⁸ Women's increasing role in further education thus shows that women were eager to move into more active roles in society.

The government supported the FMC's initiative to encourage women to find work, because as Elizabeth Stone explains, they understood that "to be fully free, Cuban women not only had to be capable of financially supporting themselves, but also had to take full part in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the country".³⁵⁹ This of course meant aiding the revolution by contributing to its economic stability and the foundation of its social programmes. In other words, the government saw fundamental economic benefits for the nation in expanding the workforce by encouraging the participation of women. Smith and Padula explain that a part of the Marxist doctrine which the Cuban government accepted was that total gender equality could only be reached by women's entry into the labour force throughout the country. This was perhaps the motivation that led Fidel Castro and the government to actively support the FMC in this endeavour.³⁶⁰ Moreover, Castro noted that women's incorporation into the labour force was "an imperative necessity of the revolution" explaining that "at some

³⁵⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 90.

³⁵⁹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 13.

³⁶⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 139.

point the male workforce will not be enough, it simply will not be enough.”³⁶¹ Castro’s statement shows that, besides being a matter of morality, creating opportunities for women to find paid employment was also necessary for the economic survival of the fledgling socialist state.

The FMC and the revolutionary government attempted to popularize the idea of working women by glorifying both the image of professional women, and also showing the potential benefit to the country’s economy. For Espín, the promulgation of a new ideal for women was very important, and so in 1962 *Mujeres* magazine published an article that explained that “a woman can’t be beautiful without economic independence and culture.” Soon after the magazine began to publish articles that celebrated women who took up work in “traditionally male fields.”³⁶² Articles similar to the one discussed in Chapter 3 that illustrated Espín’s contribution to society showed women the benefits they stood to earn by joining the labour force, both in terms of their own independence and supporting the state. Furthermore, Fidel Castro explained that in economic terms, women were a “potential force ... superior to anything that the most optimistic of us had ever dreamed of”,³⁶³ by which he meant that they were a relatively untapped source of labour that could be beneficial to the Cuban economy, and ultimately the survival of the Cuban revolution. By showing their support for this new image of a strong and economically independent woman, Espín and Castro attempted not only to

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 98.

make this radically new role socially acceptable, but also to indicate that it was a patriotic duty for women to take up work.

For many women the prospect of employment was exciting and intriguing, and it was only the burden of home and the pressure of popular sentiment that stopped many from finding work. Social pressure, based on decades of *machismo*, was profoundly rooted, and many traditionalists were opposed to women breaking into those new roles. Olga, a young doctor interviewed by Margaret Randall, noted that women were interested in joining the labour force, and that “women’s mentality has developed more than men’s” but that “men hold them back a lot of the time.”³⁶⁴ Olga’s argument shows that women were much more receptive to the change in their situation than men, and that altering the negative attitudes about professional women was largely a matter of education. In Randall’s interviews with women who had begun to work at this time, they explained that, despite the prejudices and barriers that prevented women from seeking employment, they felt that it was worth it because, as filmmaker Idalia explained, it was a way to “realize myself intellectually and socially.”³⁶⁵ For most women, like Idalia, the benefits of working outside of the home outweighed the challenges that they faced from sectors of the male population.

The support from the FMC and the revolutionary government for working women was not without challenges. Indeed, for many men it was impossible to believe that a woman finding employment was necessarily a positive advancement. Many men

³⁶⁴ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 40.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

viewed this development as a threat to their own jobs, home lives, and their own masculinity. In an interview with Octavio Cortázar, one older man questioned the prospect of his wife going to work, asking “And who’s going to take care of my needs? Who’s going to wash, iron, and cook for me?”³⁶⁶ The problem of household care was not the only objection to women being employed, since many men felt emasculated by the new roles of their working wives, believing that they alone should be the providers for their families. There was also prejudice against the very intelligence and capability of women, with many men believing that women were not capable of making difficult decisions. One middle-aged man interviewed by Cortázar stated that “men have the brains”, going on to explain that “Men are the ones who have the real intelligence to lead things ... when women get involved in leading things ... It destroys a lot of things because it gives women a lot of freedom.”³⁶⁷ Objections such as these made it difficult for many women to justify their desire to find employment, both because of the disruption it could cause to their home lives, and because of the difficulty they would have in incorporating themselves into a male-dominated sphere. Overcoming the control of the cultural patriarchy was not going to be easy.

For some women the idea of going to work was not at all appealing. In fact, despite the encouragement of the government many women preferred to remain at home to raise their children and maintain their homes. One middle-aged woman with a young son who was interviewed by Cortázar said that she “likes to be at home”,

³⁶⁶ Cortázar, *With our Memory*, np.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

explaining “I like to cultivate the values of my home. I like to watch over what my son is learning, for my son’s moral values. I don’t need to work.”³⁶⁸ This statement shows how, although many women took advantage of the opportunity to be employed and saw it as a positive development, there were many who preferred to remain in their traditionally feminine role at home and even saw the movement as a threat to their way of life. Furthermore, as Smith and Padula explain, for many women the “revolution’s generous social policies made it possible for [many women] to stop working outside the home.”³⁶⁹ This statement shows that, when given the choice, many women were happy to leave work and that they had previously been employed only out of necessity. Although most women hailed their movement into the labour force as a triumph, there were also many men and women who objected to the idea of leaving their homes and children to seek paid employment, preferring to devote themselves to the task of raising children and keeping house.

Espín, whose parents encouraged her to follow the path to professional employment, did not endure the same pressures from her family to maintain such traditionally feminine roles. Despite the fact that Espín did not personally experience barriers to entering the labour force, she understood the complex reality they faced — both the desire of many women to work, and also the difficulties that prohibited women from seeking employment. Espín explains that women felt “they not only had a right to work, but a right to get out of the house. They had a right to participate in labor useful

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 99.

for the whole society ... Women felt it was a duty to contribute to the revolution through their own labor, as workers.”³⁷⁰ Espín’s statement shows how many women were eager to find employment not simply for the money, but also for the sense of accomplishment.

In spite of the determination that many women showed by joining the labour force, there were still many complications that made it difficult for women to succeed in their fields, with the result that in 1969 approximately 76% of the women who joined the work force that year left it by 1970.³⁷¹ This meant, in other words, that three-quarters of the women, who in 1969 took advantage of the opportunity to begin work, left their employment by 1970, largely due to the pressures of balancing home life and work. Objections raised by Cubans who believed that a woman’s place was in the home were not the only obstacles to women being employed. In fact, the greatest challenge that women faced was how to ensure that their children and homes were properly cared for if they went to work.

For many working women, household chores and child-rearing continued to be their primary responsibility, to be completed during their ‘free’ time. Due to the fact that many husbands refused to share the household chores, women were thus forced to choose between leaving their jobs and continuing to perform the “double shift” of both paid and household jobs.³⁷² In 1975 a survey of 251 employed women showed that during the week (Monday to Friday) women spent an average of 13.5 hours per day

³⁷⁰ Espín, *Making of a Revolution*, 268.

³⁷¹ Pérez, *Cuba*, 372

³⁷² Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 15.

working either at their paid jobs or on household chores, and on the weekends they spent approximately 11 hours per day catching up on the household duties that were neglected during the week.³⁷³ The long working hours, compounded by the lack of labour-saving appliances such as dish and clothes washers, meant professional women had little time left over to devote to leisure activities, a situation which proved a deterrent to women who may have wished to join the labour force. Thus a large part of the FMC's task was attempting to address these issues that women faced by encouraging husbands to share the household chores, as well as creating other time-saving initiatives that would make the balance between work and home manageable for women.

The FMC began to establish the first child care centres in 1962,³⁷⁴ and these were intended to make it easier for women to work during the day, confident that their children would be well cared for, fed, and educated. Despite Espín's understanding that the child care centres would be essential for helping women to find employment, she was anxious about the FMC's ability to equip and run such facilities. Espín recalls that "the work was not easy", explaining that they "lacked experience" about how to find premises and train employees for the children's centres.³⁷⁵ Nevertheless, by 1961 the FMC had established enough daycare centres to accommodate 3,485 children. By 1971 they had a capacity of 36,625 children,³⁷⁶ and by 1974 this number had grown to 56,700

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁷⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 132.

³⁷⁵ *Vilma: Una Vida Extraordinaria*, np [Translation mine]

³⁷⁶ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 99.

children.³⁷⁷ Espín herself admitted that without the help of nannies and maids she could not have balanced her own family life and her career, so she had an intimate understanding of the importance of the childcare centres.³⁷⁸ Espín used her skills as a scientific researcher in her approach to childcare, assessing the best methods for raising and educating children and applying them to the children's centres. Besides basic care, Espín felt that children benefitted from "activities such as outings, simple work experience, and artistic or cultural activity."³⁷⁹ These daycares, which were initially free for students,³⁸⁰ not only made it possible for women with young families to work, but also gave them the peace of mind that their children were being given the best possible care.

For Espín the childcare centres were of the utmost importance because of the dual role that they played. The childcare centres both made it possible for women to work outside of the home, and also provided a solid pre-school education for the children growing up during the revolutionary period. Espín explained that through the children's programmes they were able to "investigate everything relating to the child from birth to six years", studying education, health, nutrition, and dress to ensure that their needs were met.³⁸¹ Espín notes that through the circles they were able to undertake scientific research about pedagogy and psychology which allowed them to

³⁷⁷ FMC, *Boletín*, 23. The childcare centres were intended to care for children who were not yet of school age, primarily those between 3 months and 6 years of age. (Espín, *Cuban Women Confront*, 1).

³⁷⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 137.

³⁷⁹ Espín, *Cuban Women Confront*, 14.

³⁸⁰ By the mid-1970s the child care centres had reached such a volume that the Ministry of Education (which took them over from the FMC in 1971) began to charge a small fee of 40 pesos per month per child (Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 133).

³⁸¹ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 303.

better understand the needs of Cuban people.³⁸² The children's programmes were thus important not only because of their function as daytime child care, but also because of the educational and research opportunities that they presented. The childcare centres became an essential aspect of the FMC's goal to mobilize women, because they took over some of women's responsibilities and allowed them to go to work.

The childcare centres were intended not simply as a place where children would be cared for by adults, but also were seen as an adequate substitute for the care of a parent. Stone explains that they provided not only supervision of children, but teachers also bathed and clothed the children, as well as feeding them nutritious meals. Furthermore, the children's centres took responsibility for the child's health, providing regular medical examinations, dental care, and psychiatric care when needed.³⁸³ Stone notes that the purpose of the children's centres was not "simply that of baby-sitting while parents work, but to promote the full intellectual, physical, and social growth of the children."³⁸⁴ The childcare centres established by Espín and the FMC were an essential service which, besides giving women the freedom to take up paid employment, also ensured that children whose parents worked were given an excellent pre-school education, and care.

Through the childcare centres Espín and the FMC emphasized the importance of early childhood education for the healthy development of children. In an FMC pamphlet entitled *Work Plan*, Espín explains that the children's centres focused on education of

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 23.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

preschool age children with the understanding that this was an extremely “important age in a child’s development.”³⁸⁵ The task of the children’s centre was thus to “stimulate [the children] to learn more, to paint... to begin to know about color, form, space, proportion... as well as other cultural manifestations such as music and dance.”³⁸⁶ For Espín, early childhood education was especially important because she believed that it “lay[s] the foundations for the integral and harmonious development of the child’s personality” and that only a “scientifically developed plan of education, that integrates the physical, intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic formation of preschoolers” is adequate.³⁸⁷ Espín’s technical training is evident here in her emphasis on the necessity of a scientific approach to children’s education, believing it to be the best way to ensure that the children in Cuba were given the best possible upbringing.

Besides introducing the children’s centres and such initiatives as the shopping bag plan discussed in Chapter 2 (in which women could leave their bags to be filled while they were at work),³⁸⁸ the FMC also fought for other measures that would make it easier for women to manage the balance between home and their jobs. Shops and services were encouraged to stay open late so that women would not have to take time off work in order to do other types of errands and shopping.³⁸⁹ There was also a marked increase in the sales of such labour-saving appliances as refrigerators, stoves, clothes and dish washers, dryers, food processors and sewing machines, all of which would

³⁸⁵ FMC, *Work Plan*, 71.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁸⁷ Espín, *Cuban Women Confront*, 14.

³⁸⁸ This was also referred to as “Plan Jaba”.

³⁸⁹ Pérez, *Cuba*, 371.

make it easier for women to accomplish their household tasks outside of their work hours.³⁹⁰ The FMC thus made it a priority to ease the burdens on employed women, as well as making it easier for other women to join the labour force without having to suffer the double shift.

The FMC began a massive campaign to encourage men to share the task of raising children and keeping house so that their wives could go to school or find employment. Espín explains that a large part of this task involved creating “a new consciousness among all family members, parents and children, to get them to share housekeeping chores.”³⁹¹ The FMC attempted to normalize the idea that men should not merely ‘help out’ with domestic duties, but rather begin to view them as shared tasks which both partners were responsible for. Despite the FMC’s initiatives and the encouragement of Espín and the government, in the majority of households women continued to be solely responsible for the home. Although many men did begin to help women with the chores, this was usually done as a favour, an exception rather than a habitual expectation or shared duty.³⁹² Ana, a nurse working in Havana, explained that her husband might do some washing or start dinner before she got home from work, but said that “[w]hen I get home his responsibility ends.”³⁹³ Ana’s situation shows how although the FMC initiatives encouraged men to take on equal responsibility for

³⁹⁰ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 85.

³⁹¹ Espín, *Women in Cuba*, 269.

³⁹² Many men had great difficulty changing the way that they thought about household duties. For example, one government official whose wife worked said that “when I help her with the housework I feel like a saint. I should not feel this way. The tasks of the home should be our mutual problem” (Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 21).

³⁹³ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 45.

household care, it was still expected in most families that women, working or not, would bear the brunt of the domestic tasks and childcare.

As well as encouraging women to seek employment, the FMC also took up the task of protecting women's interests and ensuring sexual equality within the workplace. Although the FMC was originally in charge of women's welfare at work, the Cuban Trade Union Central (CTC) felt that by creating a female division (Feminine Front) within the trade union, it could take over from the FMC as the representative of women's rights in the workforce. The role of this new Feminine Front was to keep detailed records about women's employment and attendance, ensuring that they were coping well with both work and family life. The Front was also responsible for helping women to take advantage of the children's centres, boarding schools, and informing them about any job openings.³⁹⁴ The FMC was dismayed that the CTC had taken over this responsibility, because they felt that the "male-dominated trade unions would ignore women's concerns", and they were largely correct.³⁹⁵ In response the FMC proposed a compromise, establishing the Incorporation and Permanence Commission that was overseen by the FMC, the Party, and the Feminine Front of the trade union, so that they could "work jointly towards [the] goal of female job permanence."³⁹⁶ The Incorporation and Permanence Commission helped to ensure that women felt comfortable and well represented within the workplace.

³⁹⁴ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 101.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁹⁶ Federation of Cuban Women *Memories: Second Congress, Cuban Women's Federation*. (La Habana: Editorial Orbe, 1975), 116.

The FMC took measures to ensure that women who did want to find employment were neither discriminated against during the hiring process, nor treated unfairly by either their employers or coworkers because of their sex. Tamara, an engineer who found a job in a traditionally male workplace as an engineer in an oil field operation, explained that when she first arrived, there was resistance among her male colleagues to her being there, but that “after a while, they understand that you came to work, that you came to give it your all, and that you can face the challenges they give you.”³⁹⁷ For many women like Tamara, being accepted in a traditionally male profession took a great deal of time. Resolutions 47 and 48, discussed below, were the result of the attempt to make it easier for women like Tamara to find positions.

Resolutions 47 and 48

The government sought to protect women’s interests in joining the workforce, and so in 1968 they established Resolutions 47 and 48, which were originally drafted by the Ministry of Labour as a means of protecting women’s rights to work. In many ways, however, they really served as a means of entrenching the idea that there were certain jobs that were appropriate for women and others that were not.³⁹⁸ In the FMC’s pamphlet entitled *Work Plan*, they explained that the Resolutions would “[freeze] certain jobs for women only and at the same time [recommend] that certain jobs not be given to women in virtue of the fact that aspects of those jobs might be harmful to her

³⁹⁷ Cortázar, *With our Memory*, np.

³⁹⁸ FMC, *Work Plan*, 50.

in terms of reproductive process.”³⁹⁹ Although the Ministry of Labour intended these measures to protect women from workplace injuries and to reserve jobs for women that were less physically challenging, these Resolutions (especially Resolution 48 which excluded women from “inappropriate” positions) were soon resented by Espín and the FMC, who felt that they were little more than a means of oppressing women because of their reproductive systems and physical strength.

Resolution 47 contained a list of 437 types of positions which were considered appropriate for women, and it encouraged all men who were performing any of these “female” jobs to transfer to a job considered more appropriate for their sex.⁴⁰⁰ These 437 positions, which were not to include any jobs that required women to stand for prolonged periods of time, use physical strength, or be involved in any kind of dangerous work, were recommended for female employment only.⁴⁰¹ Espín and the FMC generally approved of Resolution 47, because overall it helped to ensure women would be able to find employment should they seek it.⁴⁰² The problem with Resolution 47 was, however, that there were not enough working women to fill the reserved positions, and in any case many men working in the “female appropriate” positions were reluctant to leave their jobs in favour of more “masculine” employment.⁴⁰³ This meant that Resolution 47 remained fairly ineffective, because both sexes were employed in the jobs specified by Resolution 47.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 122.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*,

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 123.

Resolution 48, which was designed to complement Resolution 47, contained a list of 498 positions that women were no longer allowed to be employed in because the jobs were deemed unsuitable for women.⁴⁰⁴ Whether because of difficulty or presumed danger, Resolution 48 banned women from working in many different fields as a measure intended to protect women from harm. Ironically, instead of supporting women's employment possibilities and protecting their health, the Resolution served primarily to entrench negative ideas about women's capabilities in the labour force. The main criticism of Resolution 48 from Espín and the FMC, was that many of the jobs that were deemed unsuitable for women were positions that many women already worked in. They were understandably frustrated to be forced out of positions that they performed well simply because the government deemed those professions to be unacceptable for women.

Harvesting sugar cane with a machete, a job that requires great strength and stamina, became a symbol of the type of work that women objected to being excluded from by Resolution 48. Despite the physical nature of cutting cane, women felt able to carry out this task, and indeed for years had performed the job well before the government had added it to the list of positions that were now deemed unsuitable for women. When asked about her work as a cane-cutter, Josefa Oliva from Camagüey explained that some of the household duties she was expected to perform were in fact "worse than cutting cane" in terms of physical demand.⁴⁰⁵ One of Oliva's fellow cane-

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 91.

cutters explained that although cutting cane was a tough job, “we don’t think it’s so hard”, noting that “We wouldn’t trade cutting cane for any other work. We feel better cutting; we’d feel worse if they gave us a bag and told us to fertilize.”⁴⁰⁶ The above statements show that Resolution 48, while intended to protect women, instead served to alienate women from the working world by forcing them to leave the jobs that they felt they were suited to carry out, in favour of positions that the revolutionary government felt were more appropriate for their sex.

Espín, who was herself a woman trained to work in the traditionally male field of engineering, was vehemently opposed to Resolution 48. She explained in a speech that she found Resolution 48 to be “discriminatory, since **every** person of the female sex **was prohibited** [from being] employed in certain jobs considered more [harmful] for woman than for [men].”⁴⁰⁷ Espín and the FMC showed their opposition to Resolution 48 by beginning to popularize the image of women working in such ‘male’ positions as auto repair, construction, and sugar cane-cutting as a way of indicating their discontent.⁴⁰⁸ At the Second Congress of the FMC in 1975 Espín demanded

that a study be made of Resolution 48... which “prohibits” women from occupying certain jobs, because we consider that the concept “prohibition” implies discrimination, both for men and for women; thus we propose in the case of such jobs that the conditions and risks entailed be explained to the

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁰⁷ Espín, *The Struggle*, 16. [Emphasis Espín’s]

⁴⁰⁸ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 125.

woman and that the decision be hers as to whether or not she will occupy the job.⁴⁰⁹

Eventually the FMC managed to pass Resolution 40 that reduced that number of female restricted jobs from nearly 500 to 300, but still the FMC opposed the Resolutions for their clearly sexist undertones.⁴¹⁰ Although Espín never had the opportunity to practice as an engineer, it is clear why Resolution 48 was so distasteful to Espín. Indeed, should she have sought a job as an engineer, Resolution 48 would have prohibited her from practicing in many different fields associated with her chosen profession.

The Family Code

At the Second Congress of the FMC in 1974, among the new initiatives proposed was a set of laws that dealt with family life that would replace the prerevolutionary model.⁴¹¹ The joint effort between the government and the FMC to address the needs of modern Cuban families resulted in the Family Code, which was controversial in its stance on women's new role in society. In order to gauge the popular reaction to the Family Code, the text of the Family Code was originally distributed in pamphlet form so that the people of Cuba could learn about and debate the upcoming changes to their

⁴⁰⁹ FMC, *Second Congress*, 37.

⁴¹⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 123. In fact, it was not until the 1992 constitution that sex-based restrictions on labour were disposed of (Smith and Padula, *Sex in Revolution*, 123-124).

⁴¹¹ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 17.

country's laws.⁴¹² Fidel Castro recalled in a speech how when the first draft of the Family Code was circulated people were "frightened" by the prospect of women's equality.⁴¹³

The Family Code was adopted on March 8th 1975⁴¹⁴, formally establishing women's rights within revolutionary Cuba, focusing on the right for women to expect their husbands to share in household duties so that they could study or find paid employment.⁴¹⁵ Louis A. Pérez explained that the Family Code "acknowledged [that] the expectation that women would both be fully integrated into the revolution as workers and fully responsible for households was unrealistic and unreasonable. The code... stipulated that both marriage partners possessed the right to pursue careers and improve their education."⁴¹⁶ The Family Code was thus a culmination and legal manifestation of the FMC's major tasks, making many of the policies that they had been working on for 15 years into laws.

The Family Code was created with the intention of addressing many of the problems that existed within families in Cuba, giving women the legal power to contest *machista* ideals about a woman's proper place. The Family Code established, amongst

⁴¹² Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 37-38.

⁴¹³ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 59. For many, this would represent a drastic (and sometimes unwelcome) change not only in the workplace, but also in the home. The household chores and the raising of children would become the responsibility of both husband and wife, a situation which many men (and some women) would object to.

⁴¹⁴ The date of March 8th was chosen for the introduction of the Family Code because it is also International Women's Day.

⁴¹⁵ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 17

⁴¹⁶ Pérez, *Cuba*, 372.

other things, a minimum age for marriage,⁴¹⁷ property rights for women, and explained women's rights to divorce and annulment. For women, perhaps the most important (and consequently most controversial) aspect of the Code was the section entitled "Relations between Husband and Wife", which explained the duties and rights of both partners in a marriage.⁴¹⁸ Articles 24 through 28 sought to ease the burden on women who were working or studying by creating a policy that would make it the equal responsibility of husband and wife to care for the home and children.

Article 26, which explains the Federation's stance on cooperative family life and the equal obligation of both husband and wife, states that:

Both partners must care for the family they have created and must cooperate with each other in the education, upbringing, and guidance of the children according to the principles of socialist morality. They must participate, to the extent of their capacity or possibilities, in the running of the home, and cooperate so that it will develop in the best possible way.⁴¹⁹

For Espín this stipulation was essential to ensure that women could work and study outside the home, because it gave women legal justification to expect that their husbands would share the task of raising their children. Although many men would not

⁴¹⁷ Section 1, Article 3 stated that a man must be 16 and a woman 14 in order to legally marry, but that special permission was necessary for anyone under the age of 18 (Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 142).

⁴¹⁸ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 146. The "Rights and Duties between Husband and Wife" included such stipulations as sharing finances, the rights to practice their chosen professions, joint property of goods, as well as noting the necessity for loyalty and respect (Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 146).

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

change their habits, nevertheless making it a husband's legal obligation to participate in the care of children meant that there was an awareness of what was now expected of husbands, a process that changed some relationships, and which would influence future generations.

In response to many of the prejudices about women working and studying, Article 28 explained that both men and women within a marriage had the right to be employed or educate themselves, and that it was the duty of both husband and wife to help their spouse to do so. Article 28 states that

Both partners have the right to practice their profession or skill and they have the duty of helping each other and cooperating in order to make this possible and to study or improve their knowledge. However, they must always see to it that home life is organized in such a way that these activities are coordinated with their fulfillment of the obligations posed by this code.⁴²⁰

The above article explains that both partners ought to be able to have paid employment and improve their educations, but that both were also jointly responsible for looking after the home and their children. In other words, husband and wife were now expected to work together so that they could both be employed, become educated, and care for their home and children. This article was particularly important for women because it explained that wives had the right to pursue an education and employment. It also

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

stipulated that performing household tasks was no longer an acceptable justification for prohibiting women from entering the public sphere.

Espín, who wrote a large part of the Family Code herself,⁴²¹ explained that Articles 24 to 28 of the Family Code were important because “sharing household chores is the only way that women are able to carry out all activities they must undertake as revolutionary people, and make use of free time to which they are entitled to and need in order to re-establish their energies and recreate themselves just like any other member of the family.”⁴²² Effectively, these articles were meant to eliminate the ‘double-shift’ and make it easier for women to contribute to society and still be confident that their homes and children would be cared for. It also made public the new ideas of what the reasonable expectations between men and women were in a marriage, so that the old stereotypes could begin to lose ground.

Despite the FMC’s good intentions for the Family Code, as a legal apparatus it was less than effective. Few women were willing to prosecute their husbands on the account of household chores, so the Code was not often enforced. Smith and Padula explain that, although the Code gave women the right to divorce their husbands if they did not share in the domestic responsibilities, “this was not a useful threat since divorce typically left women worse off, with total responsibility for home and children.”⁴²³

Although the Family Code gave women many new rights within the family and home, it

⁴²¹ Aguilar, *Por Siempre Vilma*, 79.

⁴²² Espín, *The Struggle*, 45.

⁴²³ Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, 105.

was still necessary to change the mentality regarding relations between men and women so that it was not merely a legal matter, but rather a question of morality.

Julie D. Shayne argues that in Cuba the “passage of laws does nothing toward structurally confronting the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of sexism”, indicating that what was necessary to effect real change for women was a fundamental change in mentality.⁴²⁴ Névida, a factory worker, explains that despite the Family Code women continued to be responsible for the home and children, complaining that because fathers did not feel responsible for children, mothers frequently had to miss work because of sick children. She noted that “until the Family Code is rigorously enforced, we will continue to have mothers absent” from work.⁴²⁵ The Family Code was indeed an important step in the FMC’s attempts to better the lives of Cuban women, but it was also heavily criticized because of the difficulty in administering its stipulations.

Due to the problem of enforcing certain sections of the Family Code (particularly Articles 24-28), these portions were viewed by much of the FMC as well as by the people, as an educational rather than a legal tool. Sections of the Code that dealt with such issues as divorce and property rights became regular laws, whereas the sections that pertained to shared household work and mutual obligations tended to be viewed as guidelines for good conduct within a marriage. Although this made them less effective legally, the inclusion of Articles 24-28 in the Code meant that the new expectations

⁴²⁴ Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 140.

⁴²⁵ Inger Holt-Seeland, *Women of Cuba* (Westport, L. Hill, 1982), 63.

regarding family life now had the full support of the Party and the FMC. Fidel Castro explained that the Family Code had become “an important legal and educational tool to help overcome ... habits and prejudices” that relegated women to the home.⁴²⁶ Castro’s statement shows that although the Code was not necessarily an effective legal tool, it served a crucial purpose as a means of educating the public about the expectations of men and women within marriages in modern Cuba.

Despite the criticisms that surrounded Articles 24 to 28 of the Family Code, these remain some of the FMC’s most important initiatives made on behalf of women in Cuba. Larissa A. Grunig argued that although the Family Code “failed to eradicate *machismo*, it has resulted in at least some men taking their children to daycare centres, helping with housework and doing the shopping”, which was an improvement.⁴²⁷ For Espín, the significance of the Family Code lay in its ability to teach future generations that women should have the rights to work and be educated. Margaret Randall explains that for Espín, “this will be the only way ... that future generations will grow up with a new morality gleaned from a changed image of how men and women should interact.”⁴²⁸ Espín’s viewpoint shows that although it is difficult to enforce many of the Family Code’s articles, it is rather more important that these laws exist as an example of what a healthy relationship ought to look like.

The Family Code was an especially important development in the evolution of women’s roles after the foundation of the FMC because it showed that the Federation

⁴²⁶ Castro, *Mujeres y Revolución*, 159. [Translation mine]

⁴²⁷ Grunig, *The Cuban Women’s Federation*, 12.

⁴²⁸ Randall, *Twenty Years Later*, 41.

was not merely an extension of the government, but instead was also a powerful representative body working on the behalf of women in Cuba. The Family Code was a clear manifestation of the FMC's ability to foment real change within society, even when those changes were at odds with the beliefs of a traditionally patriarchal society. For Espín the introduction of the Family Code was her most challenging and widely important achievement, because it sought to address the centuries-old tradition of inequality between men and women. The Family Code, despite the criticisms leveled against it, was therefore an important accomplishment for Espín – and indeed for women and men in Cuba - because it set the standard for gender equality for future generations to live by.

Conclusion

In large part due to the efforts of Espín and the FMC, the number of women employed in the public sector rose drastically after the creation of the FMC. In 1953, before the revolution, there were just over 350,000 women employed in paid positions in Cuba,⁴²⁹ and by 1975 this number had risen to 670,000.⁴³⁰ Moreover, women were no longer working as domestics, but instead were increasingly taking on professional roles. The dramatic increase in the number of working women shows how the FMC projects helped hundreds of thousands of women to become better educated and gain respectable employment, ensuring their financial independence. Not only did the massive incorporation of women into the labour force represent a change for the

⁴²⁹ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 176.

⁴³⁰ Espín, *Second Congress*, 33.

economic landscape of Cuba, but also there was a shift in the types of work that women now performed. Rather than being employed in typically “feminine” positions, women had now begun to be employed in a wide variety of professions. In 1975, for example, women comprised 60% of the workforce in education, 64% in public health, 41% in industry, and 37% in commerce.⁴³¹ The diversification of women’s roles in the labour force was significant because it would continue to open up opportunities for women to become more financially independent, better educated, and also more committed to the revolutionary cause.

The FMC’s initiative to incorporate women into the workforce had many important implications for Cuba, because it not only changed the face of their economy, but also had a profound impact on family life and gender relations. Despite the fact that Espín was not interested in establishing traditional feminism through the tasks of the FMC, many of their initiatives changed the way that people in Cuba thought about issues of gender. At the Second Congress of the FMC in 1974 Espín noted this change in mentality, saying that

[M]en already regard women as their female comrades in the daily battle for the future we are trying to create. Together man and woman ... have lived through the Revolution’s glorious moments; together they have taken up arms and

⁴³¹ *ibid.*

remained alert against [the] enemy's aggressions; together they study in our centers, and together they work for the country's future.⁴³²

Espín's statement shows how, through the work of the FMC, women were able to prove definitively their value in society. Women had now left their traditionally domestic roles and sought employment, expecting their husbands to begin to share the tasks of caring for home and children. Women had proved their capabilities as revolutionaries and as workers, and began to change gender stereotypes to reflect this distinctive new reality.

The initiatives discussed in this chapter served to show the vast importance of Espín and the FMC in the development of socialist Cuba. Faced with the task of mobilizing women into the work force, the FMC had to confront the many obstacles that would discourage or prevent women from leaving their homes. These included the logistical problems of childcare, sexism, education, and training. Espín's practical approach and her own experience as a woman working in a primarily male field meant that she was able to navigate the problems facing Cuban women and provide solutions to their problems. Volunteer brigades, childcare centres, women's incorporation into the labour force and the Family Code were all crucial ways in which women, through the efforts of Vilma Espín and the FMC, finally became a political force in revolutionary Cuba

⁴³² *ibid.*, 51.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

It is difficult to say what the Federation of Cuban Women would have been like if Vilma Espín had not been its leader, but it seems likely that a more radical and internationally popular form of feminism would have been a part of the project. By contrast, Espín believed in practicality. Her scientific mind and training gave her the ability to see that what Cuban women needed from the FMC was not more enforced government ideology, but rather an organization that would attend to the real needs of women and would thereby help women become politically, socially, and economically active. The FMC was, early on, very successful not only because of its practical approach to politics, but also because at its helm was a woman who was admired throughout Cuba. The FMC gave women, perhaps for the first time, direct contact with the government through their grassroots organizations, allowing them to share their challenges, and to see how the FMC addressed them. Although, as has been argued, the FMC became less effective after 1975, and the grassroots influence less important, the period between 1960 and 1975 was a time of huge and important change for women in Cuba.

During the first 15 years of the Cuban revolutionary process, the FMC initiated some of its most important and influential programs. The Center for Democracy in the Americas has identified what they believed to be the six key points of development for Cuban women under the FMC. These included the literacy campaign, the Family Code, access to education and health care, increased labour force participation (and in

professional employment), the incorporation of women's rights into a revolutionary platform, and the formation of a powerful, nation-wide women's organization.⁴³³

Although the FMC still exists today, the major changes listed above had all been enacted by the end of 1975, which illustrates the importance of this early period of the FMC's influence. The FMC continued to work on these initiatives after 1975, but its projects became less controversial, and in many cases less effective. Criticisms about the FMC and about Espín herself that had, in the early years, been largely perfunctory became a real cause for concern for women after 1975 as the momentum that filled their initial projects began to ebb away.

There was an increasing sense of disillusionment that accompanied the later years of FMC influence, largely due to its noticeable rigid structure and because it was beginning to become alienated from the expectations of women in Cuba. The Center for Democracy in the Americas has argued that the FMC has basically lost touch with its grassroots organizations in recent years, stating that the FMC "left little political space for other organizations to form or serve Cuban women, even as it was inactive in some neighborhoods... Rather than empowering them to shape their own agenda, or amplifying their voices, many women at the grassroots complained the voice [the FMC] preferred was its own."⁴³⁴ Indeed, Julie D. Shayne agreed that by 1999, the majority of Cuban women believed that the FMC was "extremely top-down in structure and inextricably linked to the government."⁴³⁵ The structure that was originally meant to

⁴³³ Center for Democracy, *Women's Work*, 6.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³⁵ Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 139.

ensure that women's concerns were addressed by the FMC was thus transformed into a symbol of its inflexible nature.

The Family Code, which is still a part of the Cuban Constitution, remains an important document that has a great symbolic value for what it represents to Cuban women. Although the Family Code suffered from a lack of accountability, for many Cubans it was more important for the message that it sent about the change in gender relations. María López Vigil said of the Family Code that it "could be a thousand times better, but I think it helped create a good deal of awareness, in men and women too, of everyday machismo. It wasn't a law that forced anyone to wash the dishes at home, but it did make many me aware of the idea that they have to wash the dishes ... and it taught a lot of women that washing dishes is a man's thing too!"⁴³⁶ López Vigil's statement shows the reason that the Family Code had such a lasting significance; namely because its mere existence shows that something had changed fundamentally about Cuban society. The introduction of such a progressive bill in itself illustrates the change in mentality regarding the role of women in Cuba.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 141 (López Vigil quoted by Shayne from López Vigil, 1998).

⁴³⁷ The Family Code has undergone many changes between 1975 and the present, including an amendment in 2003 to allow parents to choose which partner (husband or wife) would stay at home with the children (Center for Democracy in the Americas, *Women's Work*, 33). Currently, Vilma Espín's daughter Mariela Castro who works for the Cenosex (Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual) organization that educates about, and defends LGBT rights is attempting to change the Family Code to include the "recognition of unions between persons of the same sex." ("Algunos consideraciones sobre la actuación jurídica, ante la solución de los conflictos de las personas LGBT. Una mirada crítica desde Cuba." Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual, accessed Oct. 10th, 2013, <http://articulos.sld.cu/sexualidadiversidad/2011/02/01/algunas-consideraciones-sobre-la-actuacion-juridica-ante-la-solucion-de-los-conflictos-de-las-personas-lgbt-una-mirada-critica-desde-cuba/#more-25>)

Ironically, the decline in the FMC's power after 1975 has, in recent years, been blamed on the introduction of the Family Code, with some critics arguing that the FMC in fact became ineffectual *because* of the Family Code. Julie D. Shayne explains that because of the Family Code, "Cuban society perceived itself to be more evolved than other nations with respect to gender relations. The Cuban government falsely came to this conclusion due to the existence of an ineffectual law, thus surrendering a battle that as of yet is nowhere close to being over."⁴³⁸ Shayne's comment indicates that the reason the FMC was less active after implementing the Family Code was because they felt that the issues that women faced had been fully addressed by the Code (when, according to Shayne, they had not). In terms of drastic new initiatives, the activities of the FMC did slow down after 1975, but that does not mean they were inactive. Their work was instead focused rather on maintenance and improvement of their existing programs, which was important work in itself, if not very novel.

One aspect of women's incorporation into public life, for which the FMC and the party were heavily criticized, was the relative lack of women in the upper echelons of the revolutionary government. Despite the government's alleged support of the FMC's initiatives to introduce women into the working world, they were extremely underrepresented in politics. A list of the senior party officials compiled in 1979 showed that only one of 26 was female; and that one was in fact Celia Sánchez Manduley.⁴³⁹ For many, the lack of women in the government was representative of a larger issue,

⁴³⁸ Shayne, *The Revolution Question*, 142.

⁴³⁹ Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook*, 507. Celia Sánchez Manduley (who was discussed in Chapter 2) was a female guerrilla who became Fidel Castro's personal secretary and confidante during the revolution, and went on to be one of the few powerful women in the Communist party.

because it indicated that the government's support of women's incorporation into the public sphere did not extend to the realm of politics. The absence of women in the country's leadership also led to suspicions that the "basic ideological concepts that guided the FMC were determined by male elites, as was the overall overall revolutionary goal of "sexual equality" based primarily on a program of equal opportunity (with certain restrictions)." ⁴⁴⁰ Espín's accomplishments on behalf of the FMC indicate that this statement may oversimplify the problem, but the fact remains that the relative absence of female representation in the political leadership indicates a lack of faith in women's abilities. ⁴⁴¹

In the later years Espín herself came under fire because she could not keep pace with the rate of change among women in Cuba. It was believed that although Espín remained the president of the FMC until 2007, she was "increasingly out of touch with young women on issues that concerned them." ⁴⁴² Although the FMC became a less important organization in later years, Espín's legacy was primarily a positive one. Larissa A. Grunig argues that

The role of Vilma Espín [as president of the FMC] 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

⁴⁴⁰ Smith and Padula, *Sex in Revolution*, 54-55.

⁴⁴¹ According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union of Cuba, in the most recent elections held in February 2013, 48% of those elected to the National Assembly of the People's Power were women. Although this is an improvement, there are still very few women in the Council of Ministers and the Council of State which are the highest levels of government in Cuba ("Last Elections" Inter-Parliamentary Union of Cuba, accessed October 15th 2013, http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2079_E.htm).

⁴⁴² Center for Democracy, *Women's Work*, 23.

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.⁴⁴³

Grunig's statement shows that, despite the challenges to Espín's reputation, her special position as the leader of a mass organization and close collaborator with Fidel Castro did not damage the efficiency of the FMC, but rather made it possible for her to make changes that might not have been possible under another leader.

Espín's refusal to allow feminist dogma to affect the FMC's agenda did not, despite the criticism of western feminist groups, have a negative impact on its efficacy. Indeed, Espín's insistence that a Cuban form of feminism that did not pit women against men proved to be a very successful tactic because it neither alienated women (most of whom were housewives) nor created unnecessary enmity between men and women. At the Second Congress of the FMC in 1974, Espín explained that "the male mentality has ... developed: men already regard women as their female comrades in the daily battle for the future we are trying to create. Together man and woman ... have taken up arms and remained alert against [the] enemy's aggressions; together they study in our centers, and together they work for the country's future."⁴⁴⁴ Espín's statement shows that she saw the FMC's work as a fundamental feature of the revolution, and that working together with men was the only way to achieve their goals.

⁴⁴³ Grunig, *The Cuban Women's Federation*, 14.

⁴⁴⁴ FMC, *Second Congress*, 51.

Before the introduction of the FMC, life for women in Cuba was difficult. Rates of education, literacy and employment were very low, while rates of infant mortality, prostitution and domestic service were high. The FMC sought to change not only the standards of living for women in Cuba, but also the mentality about women that surrounded their desire to be socially, culturally and politically active. Raquel Revuelta, an elderly woman who remembered the days before the FMC, commented on the major change that had taken place in women's lives, saying that "women are human beings now and they carry themselves like human beings."⁴⁴⁵ Although the official task of the FMC was to mobilize women in support of the revolution, they did much more than that: helping to better women's lives by changing the way that women were thought of in society. When asked about the early years of the FMC, Espín said that they were "truly heroic years, beautiful years, in which women grew tremendously." For Espín, one of the greatest accomplishments of the FMC was the fact that "in each one of the great tasks undertaken by the revolution, the [F]ederation has acted as a channel and catalyst for the masses of women, orienting women's efforts toward specific and necessary work."⁴⁴⁶ Espín and the FMC had a lasting significance in Cuban society because they were able to simultaneously incorporate women into the revolution, as well as giving women the tools to better their lives.

Fidel Castro, who supported women's empowerment and helped to found the FMC, once said that the "revolution has really been two revolutions for women; it has

⁴⁴⁵ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 345.

⁴⁴⁶ Espín, *Women and the Cuban Revolution*, 46.

meant a double liberation: as a part of the exploited sector of the country, and second, as women, who were discriminated against not only as workers but also as women.”⁴⁴⁷ Espín’s experiences in the revolution as a guerrilla and her work on behalf of the FMC were emblematic of the type of double-liberation that Castro is referring to — not only did women fight on behalf of the revolution, but they also struggled to become incorporated into society as active citizens. Castro said of the FMC that the “remarkable change that has taken place in the political and ideological consciousness of our female population, [was] undoubtedly one of the most outstanding historical victories that the revolution can exhibit today.”⁴⁴⁸ His statement shows the importance of the FMC’s accomplishments not only for Cuban women, but also for the face of the revolution itself.

Vilma Espín’s life and experiences are of crucial importance to an examination of the workings of the Federation of Cuban Women because of the fundamental role that she played in the creation and realization of the women’s organization for several decades. Espín’s progressive upbringing, her education, university training, and her own strong will deeply influenced all aspects of the FMC’s work. From educational schemes, to childcare centres, sanitation brigades and the Family Code, Espín’s scientific approach, refusal to adhere to feminist ideology, and strong sense of women’s needs and challenges, guided the advancement of the Federation. Although there were undoubtedly concerns about the FMC losing touch with the grassroots of the

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴⁸ Puebla, *Marianas in Combat*, 73.

organization, and criticisms of Espín, the fact remains that Cuban women made great strides in terms of quality of life, and sexual equality during the early years of the revolution. Espín's personal qualities as a leader shaped the course of the FMC, under whose leadership it changed the lives of women living in Cuba — and they continue to benefit from her lifetime of work.

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