

*State, Gender and
Institutional Change
in Cuba's 'Special Period':*

*The Federación de
Mujeres Cubanas*

Maxine Molyneux

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Maxine Molyneux

Institute of Latin American Studies
31 Tavistock Square London WC1H 9HA

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Maxine Molyneux is Senior Lecturer in Latin American Sociology at the Institute of Latin American Studies.

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The Federación de Mujeres Cubanas

'We have gone through three periods since the revolution: in the first we looked to the state to solve all of our problems, and we managed more or less OK. In the second, from 1988, we found the state couldn't meet our needs, and we were unable to meet them ourselves. Since 1993 we no longer rely on the state because we know that it cannot deliver what we need. But at least now we can begin to provide for ourselves'. Former FMC functionary, now working in an NGO.¹

Introduction. A Debate on Change

The first half of the 1990s has been a time of particular uncertainty in Cuba, a crisis associated, on the one hand, with the collapse of the Soviet system and the impact of this on Cuba, and, on the other, with the emergency associated with the 'special period'.² When, in 1990, Cuba was officially declared to be in the 'special period in peacetime', this was a signal that the campaign of *rectificación*,³ begun in 1986 had ended and that a new era, one of even greater austerity and resulting from the collapse of the Soviet system, was at hand. As subsidies and trade with the Eastern bloc plummeted after 1989, the Cuban economy, already faltering throughout the latter part of the 1980s, suffered a severe if anticipated shock. The years 1989-1993 registered the lowest growth rates since the revolution in 1959 – a near 50% fall in GSP.⁴ The crisis was reflected not only in the sharp contraction of the economy, but also in the acute shortage of basic goods and energy supplies

¹ Author's interview, January 1996. All interviews have been anonymised, some at the request of respondents.

² The 'special period', inaugurated in 1990, was a response to the foreign exchange and fiscal deficits caused by the cessation of economic support from the Soviet bloc. It stressed self-reliance, rationing, across the board cuts and moral incentives (see Deere, 1991, and Pastor and Zimbalist, 1995).

³ On the campaign for the 'rectification of errors' see Eckstein (1991), Mesa-Lago (1989) and Pastor and Zimbalist (1995).

⁴ Cuban economists estimate that: 'La caída acumulada del producto bruto social global desde 1989 a 1993 se aproxima a un 45%.' Carranza et al. (1995). The Global Social Product (GSP) differs from Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of economic growth. Among other things, it excludes non-productive sectors such as health and education.

which hit the Cuban population hard.⁵

While government policies, foreign investment and tourism had brought some alleviation of the worst hardships from the middle of 1994 onwards, there could be little doubt that the political and economic model espoused for the past 37 years was in crisis. Among the population there was a widespread recognition that the system had to yield to the forces of change, while the political class was preoccupied with the pace and direction of such change. That this process had accelerated over the last few years, beyond what was initially foreseen, was evident from the rush in 1995 to legalise new property relations and economic activities with the passing of a revised property law, the legalisation of small businesses, and the announcement of new taxation measures effective from 1 January 1996. The spread of markets throughout the island, and of informal sector activities, most notable in Havana in the rapid expansion of the *paladares* or semi-private eating houses, and in the omnipresent *jinoterías* in the tourist areas, were evidence of the multi-faceted nature of the move towards a greater role for the market.⁶

For any society, the removal of its ideological and strategic patron and a near 50% collapse in national output over a five year period would be challenge enough. Combined as this was with an unrelenting and vengeful pressure from the USA and with an apparent inability of the regime itself to take any political initiatives, the situation was especially acute. Yet it was in this very situation of protracted crisis, in which the dangers of a violent upheaval and of the loss of the very considerable social gains of the revolutionary period were ever-present, that a debate opened up on the future of the Cuban political system in which, for the first time since the triumph of 1959, the possibility of alternatives was creatively explored. Both in Havana and in Miami voices were raised which sought to chart a course for Cuba that would navigate the worst dangers facing it. Such a course would avoid the imposition on Cuba of 'shock therapy', to be compounded by the revanchist proclivities of returning exiles,⁷ but would also demand from the regime a

⁵ In the second half of the 1980s the Cuban economy stagnated, with an average growth rate of less than 0.2%. Pastor and Zimbalist (1995) calculate that the real GDP growth rate in 1990 was -3.1%, in 1991 -14.0%, and in 1993 it was -20.0%. However, by 1994 there were signs of recovery with GDP rising by 0.7%, then by 2.5% in 1995. Government budget projections for 1996 were for a growth rate of 5.0%.

⁶ *Paladar*, literally 'palate' or 'taste', i.e. a semi-private eating house; *jinotera*, literally 'female jockey', i.e. a form of casual prostitution.

⁷ The largest exile group, the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation, has called for shock therapy as the solution for Cuba's economic problems.

political change consonant with the economic reforms it was introducing.

Examples of such views from within the island can be found in material produced within Cuba during the 1990s by semi-official and independent groups, and in analyses attuned to such changes produced abroad.⁸ Thinking along these lines, from within Cuban research institutes, can be found in a volume of papers presented at an international workshop on democracy held in Havana in 1994.⁹ One contribution, written from a position that stressed the achievements of the revolution, argued that political liberalisation was both urgent and possible in contemporary Cuba.¹⁰ The author, Haroldo Dilla of the American Studies Institute, had little time for the argument that political change should be postponed until the economy had righted itself, or for the view, often voiced by supporters of regime dogma abroad, that democratic and constitutional politics were not 'appropriate' to Cuba. While critical of US hostility, he also dismissed the claim that the confrontation with Washington made such a democratisation impossible.

In addressing the question of what a desirable model for democracy in Cuba should be, Dilla advanced two broad arguments that can serve to guide an assessment of the Cuban past and of possible future paths. On the one hand, he argued that while the Cuban leadership had enjoyed considerable legitimacy in the initial revolutionary years, and had continued to do so because of its social achievements, it had failed to meet the political aspirations of the population. The 'institutionalisation' introduced in the mid-1970s, associated with the 1976 socialist constitution and the system of *poder popular*, had allowed some decision-making powers at local level, but had done little or nothing to lessen the degree of centralisation and 'verticalism' in the political system as a whole.¹¹ Citing both Marx and Huntington, the paper stressed that economic change, especially that associated with the 'special period', could not be disassociated from political reform, i.e. democratisation. On the other hand, the very crisis of the Cuban system was not just a result of events in the USSR or of US pressure: it was a result of the very *success* of the revolution itself, which had produced a population more educated, more politically conscious, and more experienced in mass participation than the one that had existed before. This was all the more so because of the social effects of three decades of emigration (of much of the

⁸ See the interviews with nine Cuban intellectuals in Havana in NACLA, Vol. XXIX (Sept/Oct 1995). For examples of this view in Miami see *La Opinión*, the news-sheet of the Coordinadora Social Demócrata de Cuba.

⁹ Dilla (1995).

¹⁰ Dilla's essay is entitled 'Cuba: ¿Cuál es la democracia deseable?'.

¹¹ Dilla (1995).

middle classes) and the upward mobility of those hitherto disenfranchised: the crisis of the Cuban revolution had, therefore, occurred at the time when Cuban society was best able to respond creatively to it.

The discussion that follows, part of a broader comparative study of socialist states and their transitional periods, is a reflection on this debate, conducted within Cuba and abroad. Its particular focus is on one of the mass organisations, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), and on the place of gender issues within the current period of change.¹² Moreover, it seeks to locate the discussion of gender and of the FMC in the context of the two arguments summarised above, linking the issue of political change and liberalisation to the impact of economic change, and, at the same time, showing how the social achievements of the Castro period have created a situation in which a creative, revitalising response to the present crisis may yet be possible. As Dilla himself argues: '...Civil society has changed. In the first place, its popular sectors are today more educated, with better political formation and greater ability to participate. New generations have entered political life carrying a message of political commitment, but demanding new spaces and renovated forms in which to exercise it. Half of the population – women – is hoping for greater opportunities to express its aspirations in an autonomous manner against a patriarchal order weakened, but not destroyed, by more than thirty years of revolutionary life'.¹³

Cuban officials avoid the term 'transition', doubtless on account of its evocation of the 'double transitions' in Eastern Europe or in Latin America, which involved a liberalisation of both the state and the economy, in a process of 'redemocratisation'. This explains why, instead, the new policy stance in Cuba is referred to simply as 'the special period', itself implying exceptionality with the door still open to a modified return to 'normality' if all goes well. Yet the Cuban leadership *has* embarked, albeit reluctantly, on a transition of sorts, a 'creeping *perestroika*', the direction of which is, for both internal and international reasons, irreversible. The evident hope of the Cuban leadership is that, if they can restore a measure of economic growth and maintain basic provisions, they can buy time and thereby avoid political upheaval: in private they defend their position by arguing that political change *will* come, but *only after* the economy has been revitalised; their past record, and current rhetoric, suggest that a rather different agenda, that of postponing political change as long as possible, is uppermost in their minds. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the potential for change, in

¹² This study draws on two research visits to Cuba, one in 1981 the other in January 1996 as well as on other comparative work, referenced below, on social policy and regime transition in socialist states.

¹³ Dilla (1995).

particular for the female population, and the contradictory forces operating on Cuban society to-day, within the broader context of the current crisis of Cuban society and the political legacy of nearly four decades of revolution.

The 'Woman Question' and the Revolutionary State

The FMC is one of the largest of the mass organisations in Cuba:¹⁴ in 1990 it claimed a membership of 3.2 millions, or 80 % of the adult female population. The FMC is examined here with three concerns in mind. First, to what extent does it confirm the thesis of Cuban exceptionalism,¹⁵ and show itself to be an organisation different from those found in the former Soviet bloc? Secondly, to what extent has its record indicated a capacity for adaptation and flexibility in the face of change? Thirdly, how far have its present priorities reflected an awareness of the needs of its constituency and equipped it for the changes ahead?

An analysis of the Women's Federation is of interest for three main reasons. The first is because in membership terms it is not only the largest mass organisation in Cuba, but the largest women's organisation ever seen in Latin America.¹⁶ Secondly, its record raises questions about the nature of the regime and its legitimacy in the eyes of its constituency.¹⁷ The record

¹⁴ Other than the FMC, the most important interest groups represented in mass organisations are la Asociación Nacional de Pequeños Agricultores (ANAP), the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (CDRs), the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC) and the Unión de Juventud Comunista (UJC).

¹⁵ This is the official regime view, also found among some of Cuba's supporters. For an example of the view that Cuba is not comparable to other cases of state socialism see Lutyens (1995). Lutyens writes: '...recent feminist conclusions about socialism and socialist women cannot be automatically extended to the Cuban case' (p. 100).

¹⁶ Eva Perón's Peronist Women's Party, founded in order to mobilise support for the Argentine regime in 1949, had at the time of the 1951 elections 500,000 members, with 3,600 branches in the country as a whole (Miller, 1991), at a time when Argentina's total population was substantially larger than that of Cuba in the 1980s, the latter being under 11 million.

¹⁷ The unexpectedly rapid collapse of the former Soviet bloc has shown how difficult it is to make assumptions about the way that the effects of state policies are experienced by their populations. Claims regarding the legitimacy of communist parties cannot be tested and are therefore based on speculation rather than on hard evidence: while it is probable that, despite the denial of political freedoms, such regimes can, for social and patriotic reasons, enjoy legitimacy, it is also evident from the eastern European experiences that, over time,

of the Cuban revolution in regard to 'women's emancipation' is an achievement celebrated both internally and to some degree externally as evidence of socialism's superiority over capitalism. As with the record on healthcare delivery, the FMC and the Communist Party are jointly credited with achieving above average levels of progress for the Latin American region on key indicators such as female mortality, educational levels, legal rights and employment. This is argued to have provided the regime with legitimacy and considerable support among the female population. If this latter claim were to be substantiated then the Cuban case differs from the experience of Eastern Europe and suggests a greater degree of support for government institutions than prevailed there; it also suggests that the FMC may enjoy a correspondingly greater degree of effectiveness in responding to the needs of its constituency.

A third reason for focusing on the FMC is that its membership and constituency contain a high proportion of those who are most likely to be threatened by any process of adjustment that eventuates from attempts to resolve Cuba's economic crisis. As studies of the social effects of adjustment have shown, the move towards a greater role for the market can be expected to exacerbate social inequalities and deepen gender divisions.¹⁸ In Cuba's transition too, there is already evidence that women suffer a disproportionate burden of the costs of adjustment, and this trend is likely to accelerate. If the current regime is to avoid the fate of the Sandinistas in the Nicaraguan elections of 1990, when a majority of those who voted for their opponents were women, it will have to address the fact of the gendered nature of economic restructuring and be seen to be taking adequate measures to offset them. Much depends then, on the character of the FMC.

The official account of the FMC attributes its origins, in predictable but by no means inaccurate manner, to socialist principle combined with what must in rather more critical terms be characterised as paternalism. According to these accounts it was 'Fidel himself' who set up the women's organisation, the Federation of Cuban Women, in 1960, and who appointed his sister-in-law Vilma Espín as its head, a position she has enjoyed ever since.¹⁹

stagnation in the political field can undermine this legitimacy and that, once possibilities for social advance other than through the Party become available, much of the regime's support can disappear, and in a very short period of time.

¹⁸ See Afshar and Dennis (1992); and, for a recent discussion of the broader issues of macro-economic policy and its gendered effects, see *World Development* (1995).

¹⁹ Espín had been active in the revolutionary movement but she was at first unconvinced about the need for such an organisation, and later recalled wondering: 'Why do we have to have a women's organisation? I had never been

The goals of the FMC were set with a clear view to organising and mobilising women for the defence and consolidation of the revolution. In organisational function as well as in structure it followed the pattern established in other socialist states, operating as a 'mass organisation' under the general direction of the Party – in Lenin's terms acting as 'a transmission belt'. Its leadership was drawn from the handful of women who were close to the guerrilla command in the 1950s and who, like Vilma Espín herself, had been active in the pre-revolutionary struggles. The authority of the revolution was thus present at the apex of the organisation, as formal endorsement but also as hegemonic control.

In its goals, organisation and ideology there was little to differentiate the FMC from women's organisations elsewhere in the communist world. It sought to achieve the political mobilisation of women in order to consolidate political power and to implement a socialist programme of economic and social transformation.²⁰ These goals were expressed in terms of an ethical commitment to 'women's emancipation', premised on women's entry into work, formal juridical quality and social rights to health and education.²¹

Like its counterparts elsewhere, the FMC was charged with the task of helping to improve women's situation and to work for equality within the context of carrying out party policy. It was responsible for channelling demands and grievances to the leadership and could, therefore, perform the role of a mild form of pressure group. Most of its efforts were directed towards political and ideological work among women, which in the early years aimed to mobilise them into campaigns to extend basic health and literacy to the population²² and into voluntary work schemes.²³ It was also

discriminated against. I had my career as a chemical engineer. I never suffered.' Quinn (1977).

²⁰ 'The basic function of the FMC is to incorporate women into the construction of socialism elevating the general political, cultural and technical level of the nation. All the FMC's activities are designed precisely to mobilise women, organise them and improve their conditions'. Espín in 1971 (in Espín, 1985).

²¹ For comparative perspectives on women and socialism see Jancar (1978), Molyneux (1981) and Turgeon (1989). The strategy of 'emancipating' women by drawing them into the labour force was justified by reference to the theories of Engels on capitalism and the division of labour, wherein women's oppression was based on their exclusion from the labour market.

²² The literacy campaign of 1961 involved thousands of FMC members who acted as 'loving mothers' to 70,000 literacy workers, performing such tasks as delivering their mail, making their beds and cooking, as well as replacing schoolteachers who were involved in the campaign.

involved in popularising legislative change such as the Family Code (1975) and the socialist constitution (1976) and in helping to realise other aspects of government policy which directly affected women and the family.

While claiming to represent women's interests and acknowledging that women did, indeed, have distinct concerns, it sought to define these in terms of party goals. In reality, such official women's organisations had little scope for independent initiatives, but there were some cases where they successfully challenged party policy on a limited range of issues. In two much cited examples the FMC opposed attempts to follow the Soviet practice of banning women from more than three hundred jobs on 'health' grounds, and successfully lobbied to permit men to attend to family members in hospitals where previously only women were allowed.²⁴

Integral to the issue of the FMC's capacities and programme is that of the character of the revolutionary state itself, and more generally that of what concepts can be used to describe the socialist regimes of modern Europe and the third world, and, in this particular context, the degree to which Cuba can be assimilated to them. While this is not the place to go in detail into these issues, two points can be made. First, while not 'totalitarian', in the sense of wholly monolithic or unchanging, and for a time at least enjoying some popular support, the socialist regimes of the communist bloc did exhibit a high degree of centralised control by the party elite, through the bureaucracy of party and state. The reality sometimes fell short of their aspiration, and an autonomous civil society continued in some measure to exist (in the family, churches, underground intellectual groups, informal, often illegal, economic activity), but these were nonetheless authoritarian societies. Moreover, while the ruling parties themselves sought to explain and legitimate their activities through appeals to 'the masses' and to engage in various forms of 'participatory democracy' (elections, mobilisations, mass meetings, consultations etc.), these were measures which in no instance left the initiative to the peoples of these countries: the initiative always lay at the top, as the record showed. In overall terms, the party leaderships put through policies that were designed, in addition to guaranteeing their own power, to promote economic development and social change. They implemented a broad top-down programme of socialist modernisation that was supposed to lead to the emergence of a superior form of social and political existence.²⁵ This idea of progress

²³ Voluntary work was a continuing feature of the Cuban revolution; the FMC mobilised women by calling at people's homes.

²⁴ Bengelsdorf (1988).

²⁵ Thus Dilla characterises the Cuban system as 'un entramado administrativo complejo, centralizado e impenetrable por la población y sus representantes electos'.

sustained the revolutionary elites, just as it justified repression of alternative views and policies. Policies on all issues, women included, need to be seen in this context.²⁶

Writers on Cuba have been divided as to the nature of this model, but equally as to how far Cuba fits the standard identified above. The reasons for stressing difference have been often put: the Cuban revolution initially had a popular, nationalist and democratic character, and in its first phase was devoid of overt Leninist authoritarianism and direct Soviet influence;²⁷ the revolution enjoyed widespread support on patriotic and social grounds and a high degree of participation; despite widespread and continued violations of internal norms of legal and human rights practice, its level of coercion was significantly less than in other communist states;²⁸ not least, the regime in Cuba survived the collapse of communism elsewhere. As far as gender relations were concerned, Cuba also exhibited less of the puritanism of other Soviet bloc states, an aspect of the island's society which outside observers too often interpreted as evidence of women's emancipation. All these arguments are important and relevant: they do not, however, gainsay the fact that the post-1959 state, for a combination of shared necessity of all post-revolutionary regimes and deliberate imitation of Soviet models, came to exhibit, where it did not do so from the start, many of the distinguishing features of such a regime.

The character of the Cuban Revolution owes much to the particularities of Cuban history and is often presented as a singular, autonomous, occurrence, but it needs also to be understood in its conjunctural context; it was born at the end of a decade which had witnessed the accelerating momentum of the Cold War, and itself became embroiled in the confrontation between East and West in the Missile Crisis of 1962. The tense international situation helped to lock Cuba into a mould, as an ally and showcase of the Soviet Union, which had profound effects on its population as a whole, ones which were clearly gendered in character. Although enjoying considerable popular support, which continued for some time after the initial confrontation with the USA, the Cuban leadership had nonetheless set in place a system by the mid-1970s which, modelled on the USSR, was premised on centralised,

²⁶ Molyneux (1981).

²⁷ In support of this argument is the criticism of Cuba by eastern bloc analysts for its 'adventurism' in the Guevarist phase. See Pade (1988) for an East German view.

²⁸ The Cuban record on repression is not, however, without its gendered elements; the persistent persecution of homosexuals, many of whom were sent to the UMAP labour camps, is among the most reprehensible instances. See Young (1981).

bureaucratic control, and, without Soviet subsidies, was economically unsustainable. The Cuban Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1965, was a highly centralised body, modelled on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: not even its most uncritical sympathisers could claim that it differed in any major respects from this paradigm. The Cuban press was as controlled as that of the eastern European states. The party bureaucracy, dominated by men, sought to direct all social and political life; if the secret police were less evident than in the USSR and its allies, other bodies – notably the CCP itself and the committees for the defence of the revolution, the CDRs – performed analogous functions. The political process was, despite a greater use of flamboyant mass meetings, and a more sustained commitment to participation through voluntary labour in the development efforts of the state, broadly similar.

Much was made, in Cuba itself and by supporters abroad, of the personality and role of Fidel himself: but even this undoubtedly distinctive feature, hailed in an early work of solidarity by Jean-Paul Sartre as ‘the dialectical unity of Fidel and the masses’, was no guarantee of democracy or of administrative efficiency. Changes introduced to reform the system increased participation at local level, but left party control of the state machinery intact. The establishment from the early 1970s of local assemblies with elected bodies, first at provincial and then at national level, achieved a degree of local involvement in decision-making, but fell far short of democratic change.²⁹ A tropical, indigenous, regime it may have been, but in its essential features it was, and remains, a highly bureaucratised state of the standard socialist type. If this was true of the party and state in general, it was also true of policy on what, in conventional socialist terminology was referred to as ‘the woman question’, and the ideological and organisational forms this took. Whatever claims it may make, the FMC would find it difficult to maintain that, in the annals of socialist states and their mass organisations, it had contributed much originality to this genre.

²⁹ This was the system known as *poder popular*, ‘popular power’. Whatever the leeway on local issues, these were of a very limited character, pertaining to questions of municipal administration, and the upper echelons of the system, at province and national level, were under CCP control. The significance of the National Assembly can be gauged from the fact that it met for only a short period every year. It was noticeable that the term repeatedly used to identify the function of this system was *canalizar las inquietudes de las masas* (interview with Jorge Hart Davalos, member of the Asamblea Provincial, Havana, March 1981).

The FMC in the 1980s: Adaptation and Resistance

The combined effects of Cuba's insertion into the Soviet bloc, the reformulation of Cuban political and cultural activity along Eastern bloc lines, US-enforced international isolation and the regime's own controls over intellectual life all but succeeded in insulating the revolution from the major international currents of social and political thought until the early 1980s. It was then that, in response to a variety of related circumstances, some internal, some international, a measure of opening up began to occur. The exodus of 120,000 Cubans from Mariel in 1980 was followed by a loosening of some control over economic and social life, with a small private sector being allowed to develop in the service and agricultural domains, and a greater – if still limited – measure of contact was permitted with the Western world. The FMC was perhaps more exposed to these processes than some of the other mass organisations, if only because the UN Decade for Women of 1975-1985, and the Latin American presence within it, became an important and new focus of its international activity.³⁰

By the later 1970s it had become evident that the FMC was no longer operating just within the old socialist policy universe, but also existed in tension with two complementary forces – one coming from outside, from a self-confident international women's movement which had strong regional counterparts in Latin America,³¹ the other generated internally by women's increasing expectations and self-assertiveness. In retrospect it can be seen that the UN Decade was a defining moment for the debate on women's place

³⁰ Hitherto much of the FMC's international activity was developed within the context of two concerns. One arose from its membership of the Soviet bloc and involved exchange visits by delegations from 'fraternal' states and membership of international communist organisations. Vilma Espín had been active in the Soviet controlled International Federation of Democratic Women established in 1960, and acted as Vice President for a time. The other – regional – concern was Latin America, where efforts were directed at developing solidarity for revolutionary currents approved by the Castro leadership. See Miller (1991), one of the few analysts who has examined the importance of international links in the Latin American Women's movement.

³¹ The FMC had at first remained aloof from the regional feminist *Encuentros*, but their members began to attend from 1988 when four delegates went to the meeting in Taxco, Mexico. There they were exposed to a variety of different feminisms (including that of the Sandinista delegates from Nicaragua), at a time when there was also emerging a less orthodox left, one more sympathetic than its predecessors to feminist ideas.

in society in the communist states.³² As they saw it, the communist states had a 'superior record' on women's rights and social indicators preferable to most of the capitalist states; the Decade presented them with an opportunity to make their case and to participate in the bid for UN resources. Many an official women's organisation declared itself to be a non-governmental organisation for the purposes of this exercise and the FMC, too, duly followed suit. It was in the context of regional meetings for Latin America that the Cuban delegates also encountered the diverse currents of activism within the women's movements of Latin America, including one for which they had hitherto had little but contempt – feminism.³³

As far as feminism itself was concerned,³⁴ the FMC had since its inception maintained an attitude of open hostility to it and this remained unchanged throughout the 1970s. The official position of the FMC, in keeping with the standard Soviet line, attributed women's subordination to capitalist imperialism, a system which both men and women should unite against. Feminism was seen as 'bourgeois' and divisive, and in its insistence on autonomous organisational forms, at variance with the FMC's acceptance of 'democratic centralism' under overall Party control. Feminist writings were therefore banned, and there was never any debate with feminist theory within the FMC or beyond it. Vilma Espín insisted that the FMC was a 'feminine rather than a feminist' organisation and clarified the difference on the eve of the UN Decade for Women explaining that: 'We never fought for partial demands, we were always conscious that the problem of women is a part of the whole society and integrally related to the struggle of all the people for their liberation, to men and women together sweeping aside the very foundations of capitalist society to build a new life.'³⁵

In 1977 Espín continued in her refusal to be identified with feminism, but rather than offering a blanket denunciation, she was careful to identify the main enemy as feminism of the North American variety, i.e. liberal, non-

³² I have argued this at greater length in Molyneux (1990) and (1991). Other developments of the time, noticeably the increased concern of states with human rights, something to which the USSR and its European allies also had to pay lip service, played a parallel role.

³³ See Sternbach et al. (1992) for a discussion of Latin American feminisms and for details of the *Encuentros*.

³⁴ That there are different feminisms as well as different women's movements, alerts us to the heterogeneity of women's interests, and to the varying ways in which they are socially constructed. But what most definitions of feminism agree upon is that as a social movement and body of ideas it challenges the structures and power relations that produce female subordination.

³⁵ Espín (1990).

socialist and radical variants: 'We have never had a feminist movement. We hate that. We hate the feminist movement in the United States. We consider what we are doing is part of the struggle. We see these movements in the USA which have conceived struggles for equality of women against men! That is absurd! For these feminists to say they are revolutionaries is ridiculous!'³⁶

However, the FMC was not able to sustain this negative position entirely: as feminism began to attain greater support within the Latin American left, and even acquired a popular following in the region, the policy shifted to one of co-optation. A gradual absorption of feminist issues into the policy process occurred, urged on by UN women's advocacy. A handful of younger women, sympathetic to feminism, began to work within the FMC, and later, a few were even sent to Europe, some to England, to study gender issues. At the same time, pressure from within the island had been mounting. By the mid-seventies, it was evident that the Cuban record on 'women's emancipation' was, in its own terms, in need of improvement. Women's participation in the organs of institutionalised power, particularly those with any real authority, remained at strikingly low levels.³⁷ Moreover, daily life for women in command economies was hard, especially where there was reliance on a considerable degree of mass participation and voluntary work. These problems had become all too apparent from within as well as from outside due to the growing international scrutiny to which Cuba was subjected in feminist fora in Latin America and in activities of the Decade.

Although, in contrast to several countries of the Soviet bloc, no dissident feminist groups or writing emerged in Cuba itself, the leadership was prompted into a growing awareness of the problems faced by women in work, in political life and in the family, and the difficulties women had in managing everyday life. As the seventies progressed, although the US embargo took much of the blame, public disillusion, as well as scepticism about the FMC's role in regard to women, set in. The Party had counted on the substantial involvement of women at the base of the political pyramid, in the institution of popular power and in the CDRs. Here women carried out the tasks of community management, and *vigilancia* (neighbourhood watch), and those who were *integradas*³⁸ helped to mobilise women to participate in national campaigns. These women, too, voiced their grievances against the system, making persistent demands for improved childcare, housing and transport,

³⁶ Quinn (1977).

³⁷ Women constituted 23.91% of Party members in 1988 and 18.21% of the Central Committee. Until 1985 there were no women in the Politburo (Lutyens, 1995).

³⁸ Meaning activists in one of the mass organisations, or in the Party.

and longer opening hours for shops. These areas, neglected in what was in many other respects an exemplary record of public provision, were far from the concerns of the FMC.

From the mid-seventies, galvanised perhaps by its participation in the UN Decade, there occurred a shift in emphasis towards the achievement of greater sexual equality and the enhancing of women's political participation. The Family Code of 1975, modelled on the East German legislation passed a year before, laid the basis for a campaign to increase male responsibilities within the household. This phase of greater awareness of the need to address the problems women faced, dubbed the 'revolution within the revolution'³⁹ by one analyst, saw a greater emphasis on improving women's situation overall, an emerging critique of gender divisions in everyday life and a revised FMC agenda showing more sensitivity to the kinds of issues which had been raised within women's movements. The film *A Portrait of Teresa* shown in 1979 offered a subtle critique not just of Cuban machismo and the double standard in sexual mores, but of a system which demanded so much of its women.⁴⁰ In the early 1980s, in the period of modest liberalisation, the FMC continued to amplify its scope, taking up some important issues, particularly with regard to working women, who while not the majority in the membership nonetheless constituted the majority of Congress delegates. In 1984 Cuba hosted the preparatory regional meeting for the Women's Conference marking the end of the UN Decade. This was attended by Latin American feminists, many of international repute; some, known to have a position of critical support with regard to Cuba, were granted an audience with Castro himself. One participant recalled that this seemed 'indicative of some kind of reconciliation with feminism, yet how much this was a genuine accommodation and how much window-dressing is hard to say'.⁴¹ In any event, the FMC's Congress of 1985 seemed to many observers to show signs of a greater sensitivity in its handling of gender issues than had been evident in the past.

None of this, however, was accompanied by significant changes in the style of work of the FMC, or in the internal character of the organisation which continued much as before. The 1980 Congress had noted that the work at local level in the delegations and blocks was unsatisfactory, and that attendance was falling in the study circles.⁴² This decline continued through-

³⁹ Stubbs (1994).

⁴⁰ Film has served both as an expression of discontent and as a safety valve in the communist states.

⁴¹ Author's interview, 1996.

⁴² Smith and Padula (1996).

out the 1980s; in 1985 Espín had to defend the very existence of the organisation in the face of harsh attacks on its performance, exciting speculation that it might cease to function. There appeared to be a disjuncture between the revitalisation taking place within official discourse and the practice of the organisation itself.

The character and priorities of the FMC could not, however, be detached from general trends in society as a whole. In the mid-1980s the limited process of economic liberalisation was halted. In one of those sharp counter-moves characteristic of socialist states, Castro turned against the farmers' markets and closed them down, arguing that they had led to the emergence of social inequalities and worse, a corrupt, parasitic sector that was undermining the revolution. This did not at first greatly impact upon the FMCs agenda, and it appeared to maintain a commitment to the tenor of the 1985 Congress. Yet in response to pressures of a quite different kind, it was called upon to undergo a revitalising transformation which came from dramatic changes in the policies of the Cuban state as a whole: just as the Soviet bloc was embarking on its reforms, and indeed to some extent perhaps because of this very fact, Cuba took a very different path, that of the 'rectification of errors' campaign, marking a return to earlier policies and slogans designed to save the revolution from its internal weaknesses.

Rectificación occasioned much triumphalist rhetoric from within and was greeted by at least some writers abroad as proof of the vitality of the Cuban revolution. It gained some popular support from its attack on bureaucratic inertia, privilege and corruption, and from the opportunity it afforded for greater public discussion about the social problems Cubans faced. On the other hand the suppression of the nascent private sector was accompanied by a political clampdown, designed, in part, to pre-empt infection from the growing mood of reform in the USSR itself and to prevent a recurrence of the Mariel crisis of 1980. The meaning of the *rectificación* period was evident in the critical manner in which the Cuban press reported, or often failed to report, events in the USSR and eastern Europe – which contrasted with the regime's support for the Chinese party in their suppression of the Tien An Men demonstrations in June 1989. Signs of political unease within the regime were also evident: in one of the most dramatic such moments in the history of the Cuban revolution, senior military officers, close allies of Castro and heroes of the internationalist activities in Angola and elsewhere, were tried and executed in what independent observers saw as an unfair and politically motivated trial. The truth of what occurred in the Ochoa trial may never be known: that something serious was wrong, and that Ochoa was shot in order to emphasise the need for unquestioning obedience of the regime, was not in doubt. Such were not the actions of a regime confident of its direction or united in its intentions.

If judged by economic indicators, the consequences of *rectificación* were a failure, in that the general orientation of the economy did not change substantially in this period and the policies pursued did little to halt the coming crisis. At best, it merely staved off, in the name of a return to an unattainable socialist purity, the reforms which Cuban society needed; at worst, it built up further political discontent and further distorted the economy. Trade and other links with eastern Europe were maintained until 1990. The economy as a whole returned to the more centralised, unresponsive but still functioning, mode of the 1970s.

In any event, as far as women were concerned, there was evidence of a continuing commitment to address some of their needs and some of the social problems which involved women: measures were taken to increase childcare provision following demands made at the 1985 congress, and a greater stress was placed on the need to share housework, in line with the 1975 Family Code; there was increased provision of contraception, and renewed efforts at sex education in attempts to reduce the high rate of teenage pregnancies. At the same time, more efforts were made to incorporate women into economic activity, with the result that their participation in the labour force grew.⁴³ In terms of policy, it could be argued that the FMC and the Cuban state in general maintained a gender-aware policy stance in the *rectificación* period,⁴⁴ and its rhetoric reflected some of the concerns of its constituency. But against this positive interpretation other considerations should be registered: the overall concern of the *rectificación* period was that of improving the productivity of the labour force, and mobilising large numbers of 'voluntary' workers. This mass mobilisation was not without its social costs, resulting from 'a crisis in time management' as people struggled to fulfil the multiple demands made upon them. 'Participation' there was, but to what extent it could be taken as a sign of support for the regime is difficult to say. Volunteering for such work was often the only way to gain a promotion at work, housing points or access to scarce goods. It was arguably considerations of regime survival, above all, that determined the policy of the FMC in this period as in others. Whether in the increase in the number of

⁴³ As part of this effort, the FMC established a homeworkers programme which in 1989 involved some 62,000 women, many of whom were seamstresses, and none of whom enjoyed the social protection enjoyed by employees. The FMC did seek redress on this, but without success. (Smith and Padula, 1996).

⁴⁴ See Lutyens (1995) for a positive assessment of this period. Lutyens also claims that 'A look at the situation of Cuban women in the rectification period shows where their cumulative gains and current circumstances contrast with the deteriorating conditions of other post-socialist women'. The point, however, is that Cuba and Eastern Europe cannot be compared since they were not at comparable stages of the adjustment process; indeed Cuba's had barely begun.

childcare centres, women in work, or the concern with teenage pregnancies and abortion, these policy responses reflected above all the concerns of a state worried about the deepening economic and social crisis it was facing. It was probably less to do with an acceptance of the Decade's parameters on gender issues or of greater sympathy for feminism, than with the increasingly evident crisis of revolutionary institutions, including the FMC, and the intensifying pressures on women and the family.⁴⁵ More generally, the underlying structures of state and economy, and the assumptions that had prevailed since the 1960s, remained unchanged.

This was reflected above all in the fact that by the second half of the 1980s the FMC was reputedly the most unpopular mass organisation on the island, unable to halt declining attendance at meetings, address the growing dissatisfaction arising from a deteriorating economic performance, or, of course, the increasing desire of many Cubans, particularly the young, to flee the country by any means, legal or illegal. Despite the evident efforts to assimilate some of the debates about women's place in society and the resultant modernisation of its rhetoric and improved policies on some issues, the Federation had failed to achieve a strong political profile. For some analysts this was because it did not seek to mobilise around issues of a feminist or controversial kind and rarely contested official policy. Its main periodical, *Mujeres*, avoided difficult (ie interesting and relevant) questions, preferring 'to stick to recipes'.⁴⁶ Certainly it was widely acknowledged to have failed to attract younger women into its ranks, and its own cadres responded by denouncing the increasingly depoliticised youth as morally bankrupt and frivolous. By the end of the decade it was seen as having lost momentum and there were again calls for it to be closed down.⁴⁷

This contradictory evolution was evident by the time of the Fifth FMC Congress, held in 1990. A random survey of 100 women taken a week before the Congress revealed a striking indifference to the FMC's activities. Seventy per cent of respondents did not know that the Congress was taking place, and only six had great hopes of its outcome. An ambitious agenda had been promulgated and discussed prior to the Congress itself; but at the Congress

⁴⁵ It cannot be excluded that at least part of the shift in Cuban policy was influenced by the growing discussion within the Soviet Union of how neglect of women's concerns was linked to rising social problems – marital instability, delinquency, absenteeism, crime.

⁴⁶ Azicri (1988).

⁴⁷ Bengelsdorf (1994). Padula and Smith (1996) note that some observers interpreted the removal of some leading FMC members at the Fourth Party Congress in 1991 from the Central Committee as an effort by the Party to distance itself from a dying institution.

it was overruled by a more traditional stress on mobilising women in defence of the revolution (under the old patriotic slogan 'Socialism or Death') and was, as a consequence, never realised.⁴⁸ The Congress ended with a unanimous vote of confidence for Castro, described as 'the Father of all Cubans, and guide to all Cuban Women'.⁴⁹ In the words of one Latin American feminist in Cuba for the preparatory regional meeting of the Cairo Population Conference: 'the atmosphere had changed, the old guard were back, the ones who were sympathetic to feminism seemed to have disappeared'.⁵⁰

In the period that followed, the main determinant of women's position was not any shift in FMC attitudes to feminism, but the crisis which engulfed the whole Cuban regime and society as a result of events in eastern Europe. The collapse of communist party rule in the revolutions of 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union removed the economic support that had sustained Cuba for thirty years. The precipitate decline in the economy exposed the population to extremes of deprivation they had never dreamt of, and, while women struggled to cope as best they could, the FMC uttered not a word of protest about the policies pursued nor tried to place them in a gender perspective. Instead women were once again called upon to support the revolution by redoubling their efforts. Thousands entered the micro-brigades to build houses, or volunteered to work in the agricultural sector.

'Emancipation' and Instrumentalism

After more than three decades of socialist policies, the Cuban population as a whole had achieved greater access to health and education, and the poorest quintile had seen a marked improvement in their standard of living. With

⁴⁸ Stubbs (1994) notes: 'Discussion was stymied at the congress when the FMC leadership shifted from an exciting gender agenda to one of defence and production for reasons of national political expediency. Many women accepted the policy decision at the time, though with mixed feelings, but the grass-roots work was not lost' (p. 197).

⁴⁹ Smith and Padula (1996) note how those who dissented from this paternalism could be treated: 'In 1991, María Elena Cruz Varela, a 37 year old award winning poet, socialist and mother of two, publicly renounced Castro as 'not my father' and protested in an open letter to the commander in chief the lack of democracy and respect for human rights in Cuba. In response a 'rapid reaction Brigade' dragged her from her Havana apartment, beat her and made her physically swallow some of her own writings' (p. 534). She was imprisoned for 18 months.

⁵⁰ Author's interview, 1996.

regard to women, Cuban socialism had presided over their mobilisation into considerable activity at all levels of public life, but had imposed a heavy toll on daily life, one common to 'shortage economies', while the social division of labour remained unchanged in its essential features as far as the gender order was concerned. Thus the decades of communist rule, for all that they did bring changes in social relations, in only a limited way altered the balance of power between the sexes either in the home or in the public realm.

The role played by the FMC in this process was in many ways a contradictory one: it was an authoritarian organisation which took its orders from above and allowed little internal dissent, let alone public debate of policy issues. It was itself a pyramidal organisation whose senior members were never, any more than any other officials of the party or state elite, subject to a genuine electoral process. Its input into policy, even as a mild form of pressure group on behalf of women, was hampered by its primary allegiance to the party and by the latter's control over budget allocation and overall policy. It had relatively few resources to undertake research on issues relating to women; the result was that even if it had wished to, it had limited means of arguing for or against policies on the basis of their popularity, effectiveness or likely impact on women's lives, beyond what its officials reported.⁵¹

Yet the FMC was supposed to represent more than just a mouthpiece of the party, and it did provide a space, albeit one within determined limits, for activities and discussion around issues of gender and power. Any attempt to assess its significance is bound by larger considerations about the meaning of the revolution and the socialist project itself. For those who see the entry of women into the public sphere, their education and employment as a good in itself, the Federation clearly assisted in this role. For those who stress the negative terms of that involvement, placing the emphasis on the Federation's lack of autonomy and authoritarian character, the gains are diminished as an effect of instrumentalist policies or the inevitable processes of modernisation.⁵²

Within the prevailing political context there can be little doubt that the

⁵¹ The fact that it was throughout this period, or at least until an apparent separation in 1982, run by the wife of Castro's brother Raúl, the latter generally held to be the most intransigent member of the whole revolutionary leadership, did little to inspire confidence in the FMC's overall ability for initiative. This was all the more so since Raúl Castro was himself a regular speech-maker at FMC congresses.

⁵² For examples of these differing views see Domínguez (1977) and Bengelsdorf (1988).

FMC played an important role in helping to realise government goals in relation to women. Women's emancipation constituted one of the ideological platforms of state communism, and the women's union had a legitimate role in promoting these principles. Its claims to have advanced the project of women's emancipation and hence to have improved the lot of its female citizens was an achievement of which the regime was particularly proud. It certainly made available abundant evidence of the benefits that Cuban women enjoyed under the patronage of the state, in terms of education, health and expanding employment opportunities. But there is another reading of this history of progress, one which is not captured by the statistics, and which places these gains in a more negative light. This is suggested by the experience of the former Soviet bloc in relation to 'the woman question', and may bear upon considerations of the prospects of the Cuban regime's institutions and its own survival into the next period.

With regard to the Cuban record on 'women's emancipation' it is impossible to say whether popular attitudes will turn out to be significantly different from those that emerged in other parts of the post-communist world. Here there was considerable criticism of the nature of the official project of 'emancipation' in general, its many shortcomings even in its own terms, and of the attempt to realise it through state intervention, from above, via state-sponsored women's unions. Such a programme of emancipation, for all its undoubted social achievements, in the event redounded less to the credit of these regimes than was supposed by many analysts, especially under conditions perceived as dependent on an unacceptable concentration of political power at the centre.

The experience of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has shown how commitments of principle which are worthwhile in themselves, such as 'the emancipation of women,' can come to be perceived as little more than meaningless slogans because of the manner in which the state may seek to realise them.⁵³ As for the institutions which were designed to represent the interests of certain groups, such as the official women's organisations, these came to be seen as objects of derision, their staff as 'bureaucratic dinosaurs'. This was true even of those cases like former Yugoslavia where, in the aftermath of World War II, the women's organisation did, like the party, have considerable popular support. After 1989, these organisations, far from being deployed by, or being available to, those most affected by the restructuring process to defend their interests, withered away, bereft of both popular support and state sponsorship. It is indeed striking in the post-communist countries, where some organisations formerly associated with the

⁵³ For a discussion of the 'backlash' effect in the former Soviet bloc see Molyneux (1994) and Funk and Mueller (1993).

communist state, such as the press or trades unions, did find a new political role, how small a role in the transition period was played by women's organisations.⁵⁴ Where effective advocacy by women's organisations did occur, this was undertaken by independent women's associations, ones often formed on a 'dissident' basis in the pre-collapse environment.⁵⁵ Only later, as the former Party organisations acquired independence and new agendas, did some of them manage to revitalise themselves as genuine non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Ultimately, such judgements in the case of Cuba will have to wait until the emergence of an internal feminist critique, and until this is, in turn, put into perspective by history. It is often said by Cubans themselves that the FMC did play a useful role in the early period of the revolution and enjoyed support by virtue of its positive association with a popular revolution. The latter brought tangible benefits to many who had suffered under the previous system, and who now enjoyed a measure of upward mobility. As a women's organisation dedicated to sexual equality, it may even have benefited from Cuba's long and distinguished history of activism by women's movements,⁵⁶ although it chose to distance itself from that past, preferring to attribute to the revolution of 1959 the key role in women's history of struggle. Whatever its failings, Cuban socialism had created a distinctive kind of women's movement, albeit one which was a creature of the state. The FMC represented a sustained and in some ways a successful attempt to legitimate an institutionalised women's movement rather as populist regimes in Latin America had played an innovative role in shaping an institutionalised labour movement.⁵⁷ The Cuban Communist Party sought to construct new gender-state relations and the women's movement it created was authorised to represent and pursue women's interests, officially defined. In a myriad of ways – by mobilising women, creating a female constituency, funding a women's organisation, and diffusing an official discourse of women's rights and sexual equality – the leadership effectively legitimated women's claims on the state and against certain structures of authority and discrimination. But, as has been written of Chinese Communist Party thinking, it is as if a bargain is struck: in return for policy initiatives supporting women, the state

⁵⁴ One potential exception is the political party *Women of Russia* which operated as a separate organisation winning 23 seats in the Duma elections of 1993 and three in those of 1995. This was, however, in reality a grouping of communists, with little particular concern for women's issues, and after the 1995 elections it more or less re-merged with the Communist Party. It was, amongst other things, vociferous in support of the war in Chechenia.

⁵⁵ See Rueschmeyer (1994).

⁵⁶ See Stoner (1991) for a history of women's rights activism in Cuba.

⁵⁷ Castañeda (1994).

expected complete loyalty to the Party line and brooked no rivals.⁵⁸

The successes of the FMC were, therefore, limited by the very character of its organisational form. After the excitement of the first decade and despite some enlargement of its agenda, it became, as many observers indicated, increasingly ossified: along with other mass organisations it was criticised for its bureaucratic character, something which placed evident limits on its pretensions to act on behalf of its constituency. Much feminist criticism of the FMC and of the Cuban record with regard to its policies on women has focused on the resilience of patriarchal privilege, sexual inequality, *machismo* and of the social and gendered divisions of labour, with the implication that the women's union and the state could and should have devoted more efforts to 'transforming society'. While it is undoubtedly true that the organisation could have done more to address these issues, the problem may have been the reverse, namely that *too much* intervention occurred, that too much energy was expended in attempts to force a diverse population into conformity with the Party line. The FMC's lack of autonomy and its instrumentalism may have enhanced its effective capacity to bring about change in some areas, but it seems also to have generated some resistance to conformity. This resistance was evident in its declining support, in the falling proportion of women in most political institutions, and in young people's boredom with the old rhetoric, all of which may have symbolised a more general dissatisfaction and retreat from an increasingly exhausting public domain.

The FMC in the 1990s

The 1990s held out the prospects of even greater challenges to the FMC, on the one hand resulting from the failures of the policies of *rectificación* to prevent the economic collapse of 1993-94, on the other from the policies adopted in response to the deepening crisis. If the effects of the former were predictable, and negative in human terms, those of the latter were more varied and threatened further to detach the FMC from its constituency.

The consultative efforts prior to the 1990 Congress had led the FMC to develop what its officials described as a somewhat more 'feminist' approach⁵⁹ and to seek a more visible role among its constituency. These imperatives, however, came at a time when the demands placed both on the organisation and on its members were acknowledged to be particularly

⁵⁸ Croll (1978). Also see Valdés (1992) on Cuban political culture and the particular significance of *lealtad* (loyalty).

⁵⁹ Interview with FMC official, Havana, January 1996.

severe. The FMC had faced a difficult situation during the years of *rectificación* and the 'special period' placed its dual function as a promoter of women's equality and arm of the party, under renewed strain. Partly in response to this new situation, the FMC renewed its attempts to re-fashion itself as an NGO, a status few were prepared to credit, given its ties to the Party and the regime, and one which it did little to confirm in its rhetoric.⁶⁰ The Sixth Congress in 1995 re-emphasised the principal role of the organisation as 'defence of the revolution', while the General Secretary's speech once again invoked the heroic, militant, and nationalist past of Cuban women, placing the *federadas*⁶¹ at Fidel's right hand in resisting the imperialist blockade and defending the gains of the revolution. The re-articulation of the themes of revolutionary nationalism, *lealtad* and identification of the Party with Cuba's national history, together with the invocation of a militant Cuban womanhood, underscored the political character of the FMC in a frank re-statement of its priorities.

The combination of economic crisis and restructuring policies nonetheless placed the FMC under pressure to justify its existence in somewhat different terms: to its existing functions it added renewed fundraising efforts in the international arena for its projects, ranging from healthcare delivery and social work to publishing programmes. Yet, while it claimed to defend the cause of sex equality through governmental and policy channels, it acted less as a vehicle for advancing women's interests than as one which had to manage female discontent and mobilise increasing numbers of *federadas* into voluntary work. On paper the organisation maintained and even increased its organisational strength. In 1994 over 3.5 million women paid their dues as a result of special efforts to increase membership and to collect the money on which the FMC depended for a substantial portion of its funds. In the same year it claimed representation in 72,874 *delegaciones* and 12,114 *bloques*; it had a paid staff of 1,327, and 242,008 voluntary leaders at the base of the organisation.⁶²

⁶⁰ The Cuban Report in the *Mujeres Latinoamericanas en Cifras* series contains an insert from the FMC leadership criticising the authors for what it sees as errors and bias in the interpretation. Among the points made is the following: 'Queremos apuntar que resulta un error insertar a la FMC bajo el rubro de Acción Estatal, cuando se trata de un ONG'. Instituto de la Mujer-/FLACSO (1992). It is worth noting that at the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) the FMC was represented at both the NGO forum (the *only* Cuban women's NGO) *and* at the governmental meeting.

⁶¹ *Federadas* is the Cuban term denoting FMC membership.

⁶² The percentage of adult women nominally affiliated to the FMC rose from 74.0% in 1974 to 82.3% in 1994. In 1994 the total number of *federadas* was 3,657,220, the largest percentage made up of housewives at 42.5% and workers

Despite these impressive figures, FMC activity at neighbourhood level was patchy, sometimes minimal, and as the CDRs declined in importance, so too did the FMC. In 1996 the FMC was widely regarded as 'irrelevant' to the needs of Cuban women, and while some acknowledged that there were some good people working within it, 'the top layer is too rigid, everyone says that as an organisation it has to change'.⁶³ It had therefore not succeeded in acquiring a more positive image in the eyes of the Cuban public, and it had not been helped in these efforts by the fact that for the previous two years, as a result of a paper shortage, it had been unable to publish its periodicals *Mujeres* and *Muchachas*. The general contraction of resources associated with the special period inevitably affected its overall organisational capacity as well as the morale of its supporters, be these its permanent staff on their dwindling real incomes or the large voluntary workforce of *federadas* whose time was already under considerable pressure from the demands of surviving in increasingly difficult circumstances.

From its own organisational perspective and from the vantage point of what were seen as the recovery years of 1995-6, it had not only survived the worst years, but it saw itself as well placed to play a key role in the changing policy environment. In early 1996 it was preparing to engage in an island-wide 'consultation' process for feedback on the resolutions of the Sixth Congress and it had already held a number of, in its view, successful sessions. With the easing of the paper shortage, *Mujeres* and *Muchachas* were to be revived and a new periodical was planned for diffusion abroad, largely for fundraising purposes. While the FMC's magazines were to be aimed at a broader and younger readership, it was significant that editorial control of these was to remain in the hands of senior members of the FMC's revolutionary generation.

The organisation also counted among its successes the *Casas de Orientación de la Mujer y la Familia* (also known as *Casas de la Mujer*, or *Casas*) an idea loosely based on the 'Women's Houses' supported by women's movements in Latin America and elsewhere which offered a variety of services as refuges from domestic violence and centres of advice and support. Following demands made at the previous Congress in 1990, it had also expanded the number of childcare centres to a total of 1,156. Its activity in the field of health was given prominence and a new project, assisted by UN funds, was underway in which the FMC organised voluntary healthworkers for an extensive screening for cervical cancer.

at 38.9%. Students (10.5%), pensioners and others accounted for the rest. FMC (1995a).

⁶³ Author's interview with ex-FMC member.

The mobilisation of women into voluntary work was an important aspect of the Federation's response to the crisis, continuing in some measure the policy of the *rectificación* period. However, if voluntary programmes were important in themselves, and could provide the organisation with a civic role in the transition, they revealed some of the ambiguity of the FMC's dual function as a women's organisation and as an arm of the state. This was particularly evident in the FMC's social work programme, which involved some 53,000 volunteers. In keeping with its growing concern with what it saw as a crisis in the family it directed considerable energy and resources towards 'family support' initiatives, much of which aimed to help more than 10,000 single mothers and 36,000 children in need. The FMC's volunteers helped in locating absconding fathers for purposes of legal recognition of children and support, and in arranging subsidies and care for abandoned or distressed children.

Much of this work was channelled through the *Casas de Orientación de la Mujer y la Familia*, which by 1994 numbered 155 throughout the island. These *Casas* served as a vehicle for FMC initiatives at local level: as such they differed radically from those established by women's movements in other countries. They were, as their name suggested, designed principally to 'guide' (*orientar*) women; they offered a drop-in social, psychological and legal advice service and organised a range of courses, some of which aimed to help women to acquire a trade and set up their own small businesses. In 1996 the most important of these *Casas*, in the Municipio Plaza de la Revolución, located in Havana and serving a population of 171,000, offered courses in bicycle repair, sewing and hairdressing.⁶⁴

The offer of such services could potentially fulfil a useful purpose. However, the manner in which they were delivered revealed the FMC's difficulties in meeting the needs of its constituency. In the first place the courses on offer were rather limited in scope and character, but they were also arranged to run for as long as six weeks to three months, with meetings twice, sometimes three times a week. This unnecessarily lengthy period of time, given the relatively low level of skill attainment involved, was required because the courses also included a sizeable element of political and ideological training (*orientación*), suggesting that these courses were designed to function more as recruitment channels for the FMC than as disinterested services for female citizens.

This underlines the fundamental problem faced by the FMC in its role in providing social services. The offer by the *Casa de la Mujer* of free advice

⁶⁴ This information is based on a meeting with the Director, and member of the FMC for 25 years, and several staff, at this *Casa*.

from social workers and legal experts again constituted, at face value, a useful resource for women; but because the FMC was perceived by its clientele as an arm of government its advice was not seen as disinterested, nor was it offered as such; nor, of course, could those visiting the *Casa* expect to find redress from the actions of the state itself. Those seeking help in handling difficult issues such as drug dealing and abuse in their family, a *jinotera* daughter, a suspected AIDS infection, an alcoholic or violent husband, or a son considering the option of becoming a *balseiro*, knew that they would receive an official response, one which exposed the person seeking advice to a political lecture, or worse, to the risk of involving the law, whether the person seeking advice wished it or not.⁶⁵ The rates of take-up among the population for the services on offer at the main *Casa* in Havana were strikingly low, with only 181 visits recorded for 1995. This indicates some reluctance on the part of women to avail themselves of these services, and it was not difficult to see why.

The very multifunctionality of the FMC and its overall character thus prevented it from effectively serving the needs of its constituency in this type of work. As an organisation it has always suffered from overloading, and this continued because it felt itself unable to disperse its activities to non-state agencies. If the FMC were to play a useful role in the delivery of social welfare, it would have more success if it redefined its status, either acting as part of the welfare ministry, i.e. as an acknowledged and adequately funded department of the state, or acting as an autonomous body, a genuine NGO, along with others. In the present context, as the only permitted women's organisation, and encumbered by its function as a Party organisation, it has been inhibited from developing a serious response to the changes which Cuba faces in the future. This failing was widely criticised by former *federadas*. As one explained: 'The FMC not only lacks analysis, it also lacks a sense of its own purpose: this is why it is perceived as irrelevant by the mass of Cuban women whose lives have changed so dramatically.'⁶⁶

The Federation's public response to the new policies has been to play down their effects on women, and to join in the Party leadership's moralising stance in relation to those who were 'enchanted by capitalism'. It did,

⁶⁵ When I asked the Director of the *Casa de la Mujer* in Havana what advice a woman would be offered in the case of drug abuse or domestic violence she replied 'It's simple, it is a legal offence' (author's interview, January 1996). Such an approach does not encourage use of such services, let alone the capacity of individuals to deal with their problems. One official's response to my enquiry about violence against women was that 'the greatest violence is that of the blockade'.

⁶⁶ Author's interview, 1996.

however, acknowledge the extra strains endured by women in the special period; Vilma Espín made a point of praising the efforts of Cuban women in her speech to the Sixth Congress. But, again, many of the most serious problems women faced – housing, poverty, job loss, not to mention sexual abuse, rape or rising violence against women resulting from the overall crisis – were ones which the organisation felt either unable to acknowledge publicly or refused to discuss except in familiar rhetorical terms. This resulted in part from the continuing role the FMC played in disseminating Party propaganda both at home and in the international arena. But in an epoch in which analysis rather than slogans were called for, it was able to offer little in that regard.

Given these problems it is hardly surprising that the FMC was seen as unable to respond to the policies adopted to deal with the crisis. Yet its natural constituency had already come under the deepening pressures of the process of adjustment under way. The new policies created additional social and political tensions which the FMC showed little sign of responding to and which would, in all probability, weaken still further its claims on its constituency.

The Costs of Adjustment

Most discussion of the ‘special period’ has focused on Cuban economic performance, but there has been less discussion of the human costs of the adjustment process – let alone of the costs borne by women, whether actual or prospective. This is a general problem with the ‘transition’ literature – as numerous accounts have attested. Part of the difficulty is that the human cost of macro-economic policies is hard to measure with any precision, and requires longitudinal data to reveal its full effects. But information in Cuba’s case is even more restricted, owing to deficiencies in data collection, and to the fact that certain data have not been made available to outside scrutiny. Cuban sources⁶⁷ do, however, instance rising numbers of job losses, and for the worst years of the crisis (1991-94) declining health and living standards due to shortages of basic goods, the rise in the cost of living and the sharp contraction of supplies of energy and transport.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ The fullest report is that produced by the National Institute for Economic Research (Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Económicas, 1995).

⁶⁸ Great efforts have been made to protect the health of the population in the crisis, even in the context of acute shortages. Some measure of the human impact of shortage, and of government efforts to alleviate it can be gained from the data on infants: while the incidence of low birth weight rates rose from a low of 7.3% for 1989 to 9.0% in 1993 and 8.9% in 1994, infant mortality rates (i.e. deaths of infants under one year per 1,000 live births) continued to decline from

Poverty is not acknowledged in official sources, but it has always existed in communist states, even if not at the levels of immiseration found in many third world market economies. Cuban figures for 1986 indicate that 33.8% of the population lived below the average income, while a CEPAL-FLACSO report of 1992 notes that since 1989 there had occurred 'a general impoverishment' of the population⁶⁹ reflecting, among other things, unemployment, the erosion of savings and rising costs of living. Moreover, falls in real minimum wage levels impact upon social benefits. Pensions and unemployment benefits are normally pegged to the minimum wage, and consequently decline. There have been some tentative moves away from a universal system of benefit in the direction of targeting, and there has been a turn towards the introduction of user charges for some educational and other services. These include cultural and sporting activities, services in the education sector such as evening language classes, payment for school meals except for those on the lowest incomes, and even loans for higher education students' maintenance. This shift, in the words of one analyst, 'has ended an era for the revolution, bringing market relations back into spheres from which they had long since been banished'.⁷⁰ While efforts are made to develop policies which conform to the principle of 'adjustment with equity', and measures have been taken to target those in need through a variety of social programmes (family doctors, 'nutritional vigilance' campaigns), the task confronting the government with respect to poverty alleviation is a formidable one.

The existing difficulties are likely to intensify with the effects of increasing job insecurity as the labour market drifts away from protected, full-time jobs towards marginal, often undeclared, or irregular jobs, and towards higher rates of unemployment. Poverty is likely to worsen among the groups which constituted the majority of the poor in the previous epoch, among them women and Afrocubans,⁷¹ but if trends elsewhere are replicated, Cuba will face an emerging category of 'new poor' – young people in search of their first jobs, low skilled workers, older women, and the new unemployed. Some rural areas are vulnerable to poverty, as are regions where dependency on under-performing state industries has generated high employment.

Poverty is less a product of growing social inequality than of falling

10.7 in 1991 to 9.9 in 1994. Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (1995).

⁶⁹ Instituto de la Mujer/FLACSO (1992).

⁷⁰ Morris (1994).

⁷¹ Official data are beginning to reflect an awareness of the situation of Afrocubans. The INIE Report (1995) for instance contains data showing that the lowest wages are paid in regions where the concentration of Afrocubans is greatest.

income levels. Growing social inequality was an anticipated consequence of the move to the market, one which the Castro leadership attempted to curb in 1986, but Cuba is now braced for a growing polarisation of incomes as the reforms raise the incomes of resource holders and widen the unequal distribution of wealth.⁷² Yet, while shifts in this direction are confirmed by the evidence, inequalities have grown more slowly than might be expected, dependent as they are on the pace and character of the restructuring process itself, on employment levels and social expenditure programmes.

The new policies adopted in Cuba involve the (as yet limited) liberalisation of the economy and include the legalisation of the use of dollars and of self-employment,⁷³ the devolution of state farms to workers' co-operatives, the re-legalisation of farmers' markets in 1994, the further expansion of tourism, selective foreign investment (largely through joint ventures) and most recently tax reform.

The effects of the adjustment so far have been cushioned by the maintenance of extensive commitments to the social sector and to the social wage in the form of free healthcare and education such that a safety net, if precarious, was still in place. At the National Assembly in May 1994 there had been 'an explicit rejection of the monetarist, neo-liberal approach' with stabilisation seen as a political and social problem, not a 'technocratic' one.⁷⁴ Social security spending had risen by 33% from 1989-93, partly to cover unemployment benefits, and while it has fallen since then, efforts were made to protect social expenditure in the 1996 budget. Many government welfare services, including childcare centres, were still functioning in 1996, although with considerably reduced capacity.⁷⁵ However, despite the serious efforts which had been made to protect the health and education sectors from attrition and cuts, both were badly affected by shortages, only partially alleviated when international relief was obtained. It is only a matter of time before social sector reform is introduced, if only to reduce inefficiencies and achieve better

⁷² The great socio-economic divide in Cuba in 1996 is between those who have regular access to US dollars and those who do not. But there is also significant social inequality in relation to housing which in turn permits some to maximise their advantage by letting out rooms, or establishing profitable *paladares*. More than 70% of the Cuban population have entitlements to their dwellings, but these are highly variable in size and quality.

⁷³ These measures were passed in 1993.

⁷⁴ Morris (1994).

⁷⁵ With respect to childcare, a private sector has been allowed to develop under FMC supervision. Smith and Padula (1996) report that by 1991 in the municipality of Matanzas 156 women were caring for some 2,000 children in their homes.

targeting in order to reach those most in need. Moreover, given Cuba's economic prospects, it is unlikely that the extensive commitment to social welfare can continue at anything approximating present levels. Further adjustment and stabilisation measures are inevitable, and even if the government succeeds in cushioning their effects to some degree, a substantial proportion of the population is threatened with growing insecurity. The prospects for the FMC's constituency is therefore bleak, at least until the reforms take their effect; adjustment has a distinctly gendered character, and as its record shows elsewhere, it tends to exacerbate social divisions and gender inequalities.

The economic policies which have been put in place in Cuba to date involve four related elements, each of which, as we shall see, has particular gender implications: reductions in public sector employment; the adoption of a selective programme of foreign investment favouring the expansion of tourism; controlled growth of petty trade; and tight fiscal and demand restraint. To these the FMC's response has been muted, although having participated in the many regional and international conferences on public policy – including, most recently, that which took place in Beijing in 1995 – its upper echelons at least are well versed in the debate on the gendered effects of adjustment.

Analyses of the social effects of adjustment from a gender perspective have indicated that women have tended to bear the brunt of macro-economic policy changes for three reasons: they constitute a greater proportion of the vulnerable groups – the elderly and infirm, single parent households, and low paid workers; their employment is most likely to be threatened; and their domestic and caring responsibilities tend to expand, exposing them to increased workloads as they attempt to survive in conditions of scarcity, cuts in public welfare and declining standards of living.

Cuba's process of restructuring was, in early 1996, still in its initial stages and the measures adopted had so far been of a partial, tentative character. The entry of private capital, mainly in the form of joint ventures, had not been accompanied by large scale sell-offs and privatisation, something which has been criticised both in Cuba and beyond for delaying Cuban prospects of recovery.⁷⁶ Yet the severity of the balance of payments crisis in 1991-93 brought many factories to a standstill for lack of inputs and, while some have resumed production, many are still closed or on part-time schedules. On some calculations, 50% of existing enterprises may be destined for permanent closure.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ See interviews in NACLA (1995), and Pastor (1995).

⁷⁷ Author's interviews with Cuban economists, 1996.

The pressure on the social sector comes at a time when the policy commitment in favour of full employment has also been revised. The government has announced its intention of reducing employment by half a million, and this is expected to rise to a million over the course of 1996-7. Guaranteed, full-time employment has been a main plank in the centrally planned economies' (CPEs) system of entitlements, and the ending of this policy represents a radical break with the past as far as Cuban citizens are concerned. The commitment to high levels of employment not only aimed to guarantee a full-time job for life, but also represented a plank in the universal system of social security, in which work and the workplace itself formed the basis of a range of entitlements to healthcare, subsidised food, scarce commodities, childcare and sometimes even holidays. Employment was, in both ideological and practical terms, the basis of membership in the socialist community.⁷⁸

As noted above, one of the ways in which programmes of adjustment take effect, and with particular impact on women, is through reducing the wage bill, i.e. through cuts in employment. Until 1994 Cuba was able to maintain high levels of employment, and even sustained rises in some areas such as in the health sector⁷⁹ and in the sectors undergoing expansion, through joint ventures with foreign investment – notably in tourism. The FMC has painted an optimistic picture of the situation of female workers in the 'special period', arguing on the basis of 1994 data that there had occurred no decline in female participation rates. A full 44% of Cuban women were in employment in 1993, constituting a female labour force of 3,203,904. One FMC study argued that, far from women's participation falling, in the areas designated 'priority sectors' (tourism, agrosience and technology and health) women represented 'a respectable force'. Overall, while men's employment in the civilian state sector declined from 62.5% of the total in 1985 to 59.3% in 1994, women's employment rose from 37.5% to 40.6%. The authors were able to conclude that 'Cuban women have become a vital force in the country's economy, ...' they have been and continue to be 'a vital factor in development'.⁸⁰ This, if sustained, could cushion other more negative trends which affect women's employment adversely, but it still avoids the problem of the future role of women in the economy and takes little account of how employment is defined. Bengelsdorf, for example, notes that many women

⁷⁸ Initially workers in non-functioning enterprises continued to receive their wages, but this was followed by the institution of unemployment benefits, amounting to 60% of previous pay for three months. Industrial redundancies were also dealt with through attrition, early retirement and where possible, relocation.

⁷⁹ The expansion of employment in healthcare has been steep since 1975, with a notable rise in the period 1985-94.

⁸⁰ Aguilar et al. (1994).

have taken extended 'leaves' from work to devote themselves to the daily tasks of survival for their families.⁸¹

Women's work, generally lower paid and less skilled, tends to be concentrated in areas of employment which are targeted for closure or rationalisation – in Cuba's case in the 'traditional' sectors of the economy such as food production and in white collar work.⁸² Social attitudes also play their part, and, as experience elsewhere has shown, there occurs a growth in discrimination against women workers on the grounds that enterprises can no longer afford to bear the burden of the 'social costs' – costs arising from parenting responsibilities and entitlements.

There is no available breakdown of job loss by sex in Cuba, but there is visible evidence of female unemployment in Havana; in early 1996 more than one stallholder in the craft market in Vedado was a young woman professional either out of work or unable to manage on what she earned; one nurse was supplementing her wage which she could no longer live on; another 23 year-old engineer reported that she had been sacked from her job. Those who are made redundant are given up to three offers of alternatives, but these need not be commensurate with their skills or former remuneration. Half a dozen women interviewed in Havana complained that they had been sacked and then offered inappropriate or distant alternatives, which they declined – usually for family reasons. Young professionals expressed considerable discontent at a situation where they could not find jobs commensurate with their skills and expectations. Significantly, the FMC was not seen as able to offer any solution or valuable advice to these women, beyond referring them to voluntary work and putting them on a register, a process which they regarded with scepticism and few seemed willing to try.

It is clear that under such circumstances the state cannot be looked to, as in the past, to provide the solution, either to unemployment or to the declining standards of living which many have either already faced or will do in the near future. Other means of support and of satisfying expectations of social mobility have had to be found: chief among these ranks the opportunities afforded by the expansion of the informal sector and petty trade. The legalisation of the dollar and of petty trade provided the central support for much of the population in 1995-6, and this permitted some tolerance of the decline in the state's capacity to provide.

The re-opening of markets and the legalisation of certain categories of self-employment has led to a burgeoning of entrepreneurial activity in the main

⁸¹ Bengelsdorf (1995).

⁸² Safa (1993).

urban centres. By January 1996 there were more than 160,000 people registered as self-employed, and markets of various kinds were doing a brisk trade in agricultural produce, meat and crafts. Small shops selling snacks and drinks had also appeared outside people's houses, mostly run by women, as were the ubiquitous *paladares*, officially permitted so long as they do not exceed 12 dining places. Highly variable in quality and setting, these small restaurants can be successful both in attracting local peso customers for snacks and take-away pizzas, and, if the venue is attractive enough, well-situated, and the food well-cooked, they can make a respectable dollar income from tourists.

Informal sector activity of various kinds has a longer history in post-revolutionary Cuba than the 'special period'.⁸³ The need to legalise petty trade was acknowledged in the first half of the 1980s but this trade was closed down again in 1985. However, in the mid-1990s it had expanded, according to some estimates, to account for as much as half of the value of output.⁸⁴ In a trend that is comparable to what occurred in some eastern European CPEs,⁸⁵ it has, since 1990, become an accepted part of survival, and in Cuba has acquired a more self-confident character. The harsh conditions of 1991-94 turned the population into one that survived by '*inventando*' (inventing), with everyone understood to need extra resources.⁸⁶ The official line on these activities remains ambivalent.⁸⁷ Castro has himself attacked 'those who get rich at the expense of others', while the FMC cadres worried about the 'social consequences' of such trade, and considered that those who engaged in it should not enjoy the social wage others had worked so hard to provide. Despite its seemingly greater tolerance, the CCP has evidently not shaken off its socialist prejudices about petty capitalism,⁸⁸ although as in the

⁸³ A hairdresser in a quiet street in Vedado has been working from home for fifteen years. She has a large clientele and survived the worst periods of shortage by obtaining her equipment and supplies from abroad via relatives. The daughter of a salon owner in downtown Havana at the time of the revolution, her dream as she grew up was to follow her mother's path and open her own shop.

⁸⁴ Mesa Lago, quoted in Morris (1994).

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the role of the informal sector in Hungary see Szálai (1994).

⁸⁶ Author's interviews, January 1996.

⁸⁷ There are negative effects of the informal economy especially in CPEs because of the illegal diversion of resources including labour, from the formal economy; there are also greater opportunities and incentives for corruption.

⁸⁸ There are striking parallels between Cuban official attitudes to markets and those of the FSLN when in power in Nicaragua. The latter succeeded in alienating a substantial number of its supporters, many women traders, because

case of Hungary under Kádár it seems to recognise how vital it is to the survival of its population in conditions of declining welfare.

A less benign aspect of the expansion in informal sector activity is the growth of prostitution. This became a strategy for many women in the tourist areas of the island with the onset of the crisis. While illegal under the terms of the Criminal Code, it is officially tolerated as 'the social price we pay for development'⁸⁹ and subject to some regulation by the authorities for reasons of public health. For the women involved, it represents not only a means of obtaining dollars, but for some, the hope that it will provide a husband and a life abroad. For the older revolutionary generation prostitution represents a return to a shameful past and the unsound attitudes of 'the youth' are routinely invoked to explain it. Yet for many *habaneros*, men and women, while it is certainly regretted, it is seen as resulting from economic necessity, thus gaining a degree of tacit support from family members who are themselves dependent on the income generated. Some FMC functionaries do acknowledge the complexity of the issue of prostitution, but ultimately it is explained as an inevitable effect of the blockade and consequent economic difficulties faced by Cuba. At the same time, they deplore the practice, insisting that many *jinoteras* were not pushed into it by poverty but by bad attitudes and sometimes greed, and they lobbied the government at the end of 1995 to pass legislation banning sex workers from hotels. They also made representation to hoteliers 'explaining to them why this had to be'.⁹⁰ While this may reassure the promoters of family tourism in Cuba, it did little to address the problems of prostitution – let alone of the women engaged in it.⁹¹ Social analyses of tourism have suggested that it tends to excite local appetites for scarce foreign consumer goods through demonstration effects, but this is unlikely to be the sole reason for such an appetite in Cuba, given the shortage of even basic items that much of the population has endured.

The mixed results of these various government policies notwithstanding, there was evidence in early 1996 of some improvement in the overall economic situation as well as at the household level, but there could be little

of policies designed to bring market activities under state control. Chamorro (1995).

⁸⁹ Carlos Lage, in 1993, quoted in Bengelsdorf (1995). Castro too is reported to have said that women who prostitute themselves 'do so on their own, voluntarily and without any need for it'. Same source.

⁹⁰ Interview with senior members of the FMC, January 1996

⁹¹ Apart from its other costs, prostitution represents a de-skilling of a highly trained and educated female population, especially since the evidence is that in the worst phase of the recession qualified professionals engaged in it along with other groups.

doubt that this was taking place in a context of considerable hardship and insecurity. While the social wage and the safety net provided some protection, the removal of subsidies on most basic commodities hit those on the lowest incomes hardest since these expenditures form a larger proportion of their consumption.

With social sector expenditure destined for cuts, if only on grounds of greater efficiency, in the medium-term the difficulty that has to be faced lies in preventing the emergence of a situation of general insecurity in a context where old (i.e. state) supports are being withdrawn, but new mechanisms of support are not yet functioning well enough to absorb the new demand. The informal sector and the possibility of establishing micro-enterprises certainly constitute a vital means of support for populations hit by declining state provision, but there are two other supports which have been key to survival in such contexts: the family or household, viewed as a network of kin support, and NGOs. We will return to the issue of NGOs later, but the question of the significance of the household in the transition process is one which condenses a number of central questions regarding women's place, both present and future, in Cuban society.

The Household

The direction of the process in train in Cuba signifies changes in the relationship between state and society, changes which are premised on a redefinition of the boundaries between the public and private realms. This is a shift which has major gender implications. Households are typically seen as important supports in times of restructuring, and are assumed to be capable of adapting to the effects of economic shortage by restricting consumption. Barr expresses this view succinctly: 'Households adjust most quickly. They react swiftly to price increases, and adjust work effort in the light of changes in real wages and the emergence of unemployment.'⁹² But as has been repeatedly emphasised in the gender literature, 'households' need disaggregating. They are not natural units, but are constituted through social relations which are premised on considerable inequalities. It is, therefore, not so much 'households' that have to adapt as the individuals within them, and the implications for individuals of the process of adaptation vary according to their place in the division of labour both in the household and outside it.

Since much of the increased effort expended to absorb the effects of the transition is in the form of reproductive labour,⁹³ it tends to be women

⁹² Barr (1994).

⁹³ See Pearson (1996) for an analysis of Cuba's 'crisis in reproduction'.

whose invisible and unpaid labour on behalf of the household expands to enable its members to escape destitution. The strains on households attempting to survive in a context of great scarcity and rising costs involve cuts in consumption and an extension of work in the home to substitute for goods or services previously purchased on the market or made available through social provision. With regard to consumption, evidence from similar contexts elsewhere⁹⁴ shows that it is women who tend to restrict their consumption more than men, including consumption of subsistence goods, while men's expenditure on non-essentials remains to some degree protected.

Women also bear the greater burden of work in the home. Cuban surveys show that 'the traditional sexual division of labour in domestic work', remains virtually unchallenged by years of FMC efforts to raise awareness of the problem, or by the 1975 Family Code, with 'women bearing the main burden, whether or not they are in employment'.⁹⁵ It is women who also have the main responsibility for their children's education and socialisation,⁹⁶ again something which the FMC has expressed concern about in campaigning for more responsible paternity. In periods of scarcity and adjustment, women's responsibilities for reproductive work involve an extension of their work time in the home. Most common of the adjustments made is that more food is prepared at home than bought ready-made, as 'convenience foods' are too expensive to buy, while services of various kinds (cleaning, childcare, laundry and gardening) that might previously have been paid for, are absorbed by the female kin of the household.⁹⁷ Under normal conditions, as we have noted, domestic provisioning in socialist states already

⁹⁴ See Folbre (1986) and Dwyer and Bruce (1988) for a comprehensive discussion of the evidence on this issue.

⁹⁵ Alvarez and Catasús, in FMC (1994). There are considerable disparities in the available data on social indicators of all kinds. Data for this section have been taken where possible from sources originating from the Centro de Estudios Demográficos at the Universidad de La Habana, and from INIE (1995).

⁹⁶ The father's role is described as 'poco activo que se relaciona menos con sus hijos y delega gran parte de su responsabilidad paterna en la compañera'. Alvarez and Catasús (1994), p. 7. Meanwhile 'entre los hombres el mayor tiempo se invierte en "otras tareas y compras" aunque el tiempo dedicado a compras en ambos sexos es similar'. *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ This had, in effect, occurred in the household where I was staying in Vedado, Havana. The wife had given up her job because it was too far away and underpaid, and because she was looking after a sick relative. She still had a cleaner who came every day (informal domestic service is widespread in Cuba), but now did the gardening herself and spent a considerable amount of her time in household activities, shopping, and in negotiating for scarce resources and services.

imposed a heavy toll on women due to shortages and lack of services. While the return of the farmers' markets in Cuba has brought prices down and has made more products available, prices are still high and time has to be spent hunting out bargains and products which are still scarce.

Household management is not just a matter of increasing the amount of time expended on substituting women's labour for what was previously purchased on the market; as numerous studies attest, it is generally also women who are involved in negotiating exchanges of goods and services and short term loans through local networks and kin ties. The ability to obtain certain basic necessities often depends upon developing such networks, and can constitute an important lifeline. In other words, given this social and gendered distribution of responsibilities, it cannot be assumed that households are either labour pooling or income sharing units if this is meant to imply symmetrical relations between the sexes.

The intensification of women's work and responsibilities also extends beyond household provisioning to absorbing greater responsibility for caring for others. The declining quality and accessibility of public services involves a shift to unpaid services in the household. Restructuring thus creates a redefinition of the boundaries between the public and private realms with greater responsibility being devolved from state to family. In a context where the availability of good quality childcare is threatened, and one where there is a growing population of elderly whose overall security is diminishing, female kin will in all likelihood be seen as those who will step in to fill the gaps in public provision. The granting of special leave to women workers for 'family reasons' is one indicator that this is already occurring; it is their earnings and career patterns that are on the line and will be affected in the short as well as in the longer run by such practices. It is evident that even the limited restructuring that has taken place had already involved a re-negotiation of reproductive responsibilities, and an absorption into the private sphere of some which were previously administered by the state. This has placed particular pressures on employed women with children. As the pace, demands and discipline of paid employment have risen, as in the restructured enterprises,⁹⁸ so too have women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Data from other contexts of restructuring show high levels of stress and mental illness among working women. These issues are given little consideration in the current context: indeed it is the *absence* of public debate and public policy on these issues which is striking.

The record of adjustment processes in a wide variety of contexts indicates

⁹⁸ See Gunn (1993) for an account of the effects of enterprise restructuring. In one Cuban-owned plant, for example, discipline over the workforce was considerably tightened resulting in a 'doubling of efficiency'.

that the assumption that families or households (i.e. women) can absorb the burden of adjustment is therefore doubly misplaced – first, because this burden is imposing considerable costs on those who bear it disproportionately, and second, because these units are themselves likely to be at their limit. The effects of these multiple pressures are ultimately reflected in data on morbidity and mortality rates, but they are also sometimes revealed in patterns of household formation and reproductive behaviour.⁹⁹ It may be too early for the effects of restructuring to have registered in Cuban data, and in any event, without more detailed, micro-level and qualitative research no conclusions can be drawn either as to the weight of the many factors involved in changing patterns of household composition, or as to the specificity of the Cuban case. What is pertinent to note is that Cuban sources for the last few decades have revealed significant changes in family size and composition. Most notable among these are the continuing fall in family size, rising incidence of female-headed households and rising divorce rates.¹⁰⁰

In the latter case there has been a particularly steep rise. The crude divorce rate rose from 0.6 (per thousand inhabitants) in 1961 to 3.6 in 1989. It rose again between 1989 and 1991 to reach 4.1, and by 1993 it was 6.0, one of the highest divorce rates in the world.¹⁰¹ If separations are taken into account the number of failed unions is considerably higher. Following international trends, a substantial majority of those suing for divorce are women, something which the FMC sees as a sign of women's greater economic independence. However true this might be, studies of divorce reveal women to be less well off economically than before, so there is a considerable price to be paid for such independence.¹⁰² Whether high divorce rates can be interpreted as a sign of the stress on households is a matter for further research. In Cuba's case it must be remembered that the practicalities of divorce, in a context where housing stock is limited and where mutual dependency for survival is high, might otherwise discourage separation. These negative trends find confirmation in the steady decline in the Cuban fertility rate to well below replacement level, from an already low 1.8 in

⁹⁹ A UNICEF study of the former communist states shows that in all countries except Poland and former Czechoslovakia, there has occurred a net natural decrease in population. All countries show rising morbidity and death rates, and falling marriage and birth rates. UNICEF (1993).

¹⁰⁰ Demographic data also reveal a puzzling inverse sex ratio, at variance with the demographic norm: instead of being the majority, the female population constituted only 49.8% compared to 50.2% male in 1995. There is no adequate explanation of this.

¹⁰¹ Alvarez and Catasús, in FMC (1994).

¹⁰² Weitzman (1985) shows that while women are typically worse off after divorce, men's economic situation often improves.

1985 to 1.6 in 1991, to 1.3 in both 1993 and 1994, the latter a year in which only 147,265 live births were recorded in the island. This syndrome, evident in all the CPEs, has been termed a 'mothers' strike' by some analysts in recognition of the strains that the female population of reproductive age faces in such systems. Some Cuban social scientists have suggested that both the high divorce rate and low birth rates over the last decade are indicative of a lack of confidence within the population resulting from the crisis which Cuba has faced since the late 1980s.¹⁰³ Demographic trends in Cuba raise interesting questions of comparability, showing parallels with Latin American and Caribbean data on the one hand, and with the former communist states on the other. This is an issue that awaits further exploration.

Despite normative policy assumptions which favour nuclear families, these account for less than half of all households in Cuba, and, as elsewhere, households are diverse in composition and income levels. With most married women in work, the two-income household is still commonplace, but alongside it there has emerged a growing proportion of divorced or widowed single person and single parent households, the majority of which are female-headed and constitute a rapidly growing high risk poverty clientele. One dramatic, if unacknowledged and peculiarly Cuban aspect of this gender burden relates to migration: in both the Mariel exodus of 1980 and in the flow of *balseiros* of the early 1990s, the overwhelming majority of those who fled were men. Women were left behind to cope with family and other responsibilities, at best receiving dollar remittances but otherwise cut off from their male kin, at worst either abandoned or not knowing even if the men had survived the voyage to the USA.¹⁰⁴

Women are typically over-represented among the poor, and it is unlikely that Cuba will be able to avoid the feminisation of poverty evident in all the countries undergoing economic restructuring. Studies of Eastern European transitions have found that much of the burden of poverty falls on women, who, in the words of one analyst 'heavily outnumber men in groups which experience disproportionate poverty',¹⁰⁵ with female poverty rates rising faster than female unemployment, even in conditions where the welfare state has not been entirely dismantled. The conditions for most women in poverty tend to deteriorate as a result of the restructuring process. We have already noted that women's wages are lower than men's and, in Cuba as elsewhere,

¹⁰³ Author's interviews, January 1996.

¹⁰⁴ A graphic example of this problem was the case of a former woman health operative, now working as a butcher in a market, who approached me with a request to post letters and photographs of her new baby to her *balseiro* husband in the USA: she had not heard anything from him for three months.

¹⁰⁵ Barr (1994).

women form the majority of the poorly paid. With regard to pensions, women's earnings are also less, since women's working lives, with a retirement age of 55, are on average five years shorter than men's. Moreover, women's dependency on state benefits is overall greater not only because they live longer, but because they are often the sole providers because of the death or departure of their spouse, and they constitute a sizeable proportion of the handicapped; thus, as state benefits contract, their vulnerability to poverty increases.

These are some of the ways in which gender asymmetries have acquired a new salience in the multiple processes of economic and social restructuring under way in Cuba. At the broadest level this novelty is given by the gradual re-definition of state-society relations which has begun to create new social divisions, new economic agents and new vulnerabilities for much of the female population. The processes set in train in the move towards marketisation have contradictory effects on women, acting to the detriment of many of those in employment and especially those who constitute the working poor, but providing others with the means to become new economic agents. It will be some time before the longer term trends are more clearly visible, but in the meantime the issue is whether the significance of these gender asymmetries has been absorbed into public policy arenas, and responded to with appropriate policies, ones which succeed in reaching the most vulnerable groups. The FMC has so far shown that it is unlikely to offer an adequate response to these processes: as a government organisation its capacity to operate as an effective advocate of particular group interests is severely constrained and as we shall see, its work is not supported by other, independent, NGOs. Moreover, the very growth of market relations that is under way is establishing a system of reward different to the previous bureaucratic and state channels which have diminished incentives to join official organisations. The FMC has shown itself so far to be unwilling to include these new economic agents in its project, and runs the risk of paying a further political price for its failure to do so.

Non-Governmental Organisations

If the FMC's ability to respond to the crisis was limited, as was that of the household with its declining capacity to absorb the tensions and pressures generated by the restructuring process, the other source of possible support for women lay in the expanding domain of the new NGO sector in Cuba. In other contexts NGOs have often provided a vital means of support and activism through specific women's projects, and in Cuba it is clear that NGOs could perform an equally important and necessary role in this regard.

NGO activity was slow to develop in Cuba, but after 1990 it began to

acquire some momentum, a product born both of reformist efforts to modernise the system, but also of sheer necessity, as a way to generate funds to support the welfare and other needs of the population. In 1993 a 'Meeting of Co-operation with Cuba' was held in Havana at which over 100 international NGOs were represented together with more than 70 Cuban organisations.¹⁰⁶ Some sources claim that by 1995 there were around two thousand organisations which would be designated NGOs in Cuba.¹⁰⁷

While this is seen as positive in both social and political terms, indicating that the state has ceded some control over areas of social life, this is a development that should be treated with caution, insofar as in Cuba, in common with many other third world countries, many supposedly independent NGOs are, in fact, offshoots of the state, set up to attract foreign funds or act as conductors for state policy. But some of the NGO activity in Cuba is not of this kind: since the crisis years of 1991-94 some genuinely independent NGOs, subsidiaries of groups from Canada, Mexico, Spain and elsewhere, have been granted permission to work, while a number of indigenous Cuban groups, some active at community level and working with the system of Popular Power, have also been able to develop in new directions, and with more imaginative strategies. Some have also begun to address issues, such as the environment, and constituencies such as AfroCubans, which were previously given little official recognition.¹⁰⁸ In some cases existing mass organisations (acting as NGOs) such as the institutions of *poder popular* have acquired a new vitality in this process, working on projects with international organisations which have new ideas and different experiences to share.¹⁰⁹

With regard to women's NGOs there had been little progress by 1996 in that the FMC continued to monopolise the realm of activities in which NGOs are normally involved, and sought where possible to maintain control over

¹⁰⁶ Pearson and Lewis (1995).

¹⁰⁷ Puerta (1995).

¹⁰⁸ The Martin Luther King Centre focuses on AfroCubans with an agenda which prioritises issues of culture and development. There are a number of environmental NGOs, including the Naturaleza y El Hombre (sic). See Pearson and Lewis (1995) for a useful discussion of the role of NGOs in Cuba and for the need to have realistic expectations of their role in the transitional process.

¹⁰⁹ Author's interviews with managers of projects in the NGO sector, January 1996.

funds and resources which were directed to women's projects.¹¹⁰ This concentration of power once again threatened to act as a brake on the capacity of the system to respond to the needs of its female population, for given the heterogeneity of the female population, and the diversity of problems and conditions it faced, no one organisation could adequately meet the challenge. The FMC was, in 1996, still the only women's organisation legally permitted on the island and, particularly pertinent here, it was still the only NGO licensed to deal specifically with women's issues. NGO activists who wanted to work with women tended to do so as a part of larger non-specific projects; one woman said 'we avoid the FMC, it is better to work without them. They are still stuck in old ways of 'macro-thinking', they need a new perspective'.¹¹¹ This situation brings to mind the tensions which existed in Nicaragua between the FSLN's organisation of women, AMNLAE, and the independent activities and women's movements which mushroomed after the UNO victory in 1990.¹¹² As far as many women activists and NGO workers were concerned, AMNLAE was a problem; it was perceived as rivalrous and uncooperative, and unwilling to accept principles of autonomy, internal democracy and commitment to an appreciation of the diversity that characterised its constituency, issues that had acquired considerable importance in the Nicaraguan context. These very principles had enabled the independent organisations to develop a new vitality and momentum even in the difficult circumstances of adjustment and economic crisis in the early 1990s.¹¹³ In time, AMNLAE, too, had to adapt by abandoning its earlier pretensions to 'hegemonise' the women's movement, and as a result became a more effective organisation. The FMC would do well to learn from this experience if it is to have a future as an organisation in Cuba, and if women are to get what they need in terms of a more diverse and more independent set of supportive institutions.

¹¹⁰ For example, the environmental group, Green Team, had been training FMC staff to administer a project designed to stimulate urban gardening. Given the overloading most women are subject to, it is doubly problematic that the FMC was given responsibility for this project, one which would once again call for the mobilisation of women into further commitments of time and energy.

¹¹¹ Author's interview, January 1996.

¹¹² AMNLAE is the Nicaraguan Women's Association 'Luisa Amanda Espinosa'; UNO is the Union of National Opposition, the Centre-Right coalition led by Violeta Chamorro.

¹¹³ For an account of this process see Criquillon (1995).

Conclusions

Throughout the special period, the leadership's rhetoric has remained committed to the socialist path, with Castro holding up the examples of China and Vietnam as those which Cuba will follow, even if some specialists think differently.¹¹⁴ The future envisaged is a gradual evolution towards some variant of a mixed economy model under the control of the Communist Party. Yet this hope of a managed transition under the direction of the party was also the defining policy, and illusion, of the Gorbachev administration that came to power in the USSR in 1985; this presided over a short-lived reform process, aimed at first 'accelerating' and then 'restructuring' the Soviet system, but it quickly proceeded in the direction of economic decentralisation and a policy of cautious political liberalisation, *glasnost*, before culminating in the collapse of the system as a whole.

In the Soviet case the experiment in revitalising the system under Communist Party control lasted only four years. It was brought to an abrupt end in the period 1989-91 by a lethal combination of economic crisis, popular exhaustion, international pressure and the centrifugal forces that led to the breakup of the Soviet Union. It might be argued that the Castro regime has not faced the same difficulties either in range or degree as those which confronted the CPSU in the late 1980s; the fact that it has survived the collapse of its former partners in the East by seven years, and seems to have weathered the worst of the recent economic shock, is seen as a testimony of sorts. The exodus of many thousands of *balseros*, 'rafters', also acted as a pressure valve, allowing some of the most discontented to leave, and open discontent has been confined so far to one riot in Havana in August 1994. Most observers assume that there remains some degree of critical support for the leadership, and some hope among the population that the reform process will deliver new freedoms, greater prosperity, and a rapprochement with the USA.

Whether the Cuban strategy of a managed transition in these terms can succeed is, at least, an open question. Leaving aside the political problems posed by the unresolved exile issue, there is on the negative side the fact that Cuba faces serious economic problems which cannot be resolved in the short- or medium-term. The long delay in bringing in the necessary reforms has added to these problems. While a distinguishing feature of Cuba's reform

¹¹⁴ The comparison with China and Vietnam may reflect a political hope, but it ignores some major differences, not least the contrasted attitudes of the East Asian and Cuban diasporas towards investment in the home country and cooperation with the regime. This has had obvious consequences for the policy of the USA. See Carranza (1995) for a Cuban critique of this view.

process so far has been its commitment to maintaining high levels of social expenditure,¹¹⁵ this cannot continue indefinitely and has already come under considerable pressure. Meanwhile, the limited trend to market relations that has so far occurred, together with the spread of the dollar economy, while indeed alleviating some of the worst hardship, has also led to rising expectations and whetted appetites for a greater relaxation of government controls.

The introduction of policies geared towards achieving some restructuring and allowing some movement in the direction of a market economy may therefore have yielded tangible, short-term benefits, but they have subjected Cuban society to new strains – not just of growing social inequality but also of forces within society which inevitably cannot be contained or controlled by the state. There is official recognition of the need to allow some development of civil society, and economic liberalisation has been accompanied by a modicum of *glasnost* and the appearance of quasi-independent associations of various kinds. But more intractable, and the acid test of the regime's legitimacy, is the question of democratisation. So far there have been few indications of a positive kind beyond promises of limited reforms to the political system some time in the future with the Party reluctant to cede its overall control.

The course which the leadership is set on is not one it has chosen, and while it seeks to minimise its effects, social processes will be unleashed which are likely to have political consequences of a destabilising kind. The costs of adjustment, and of necessary economic reform, will be borne by a population already exhausted by surviving the economic downturn and which will, in all likelihood, see their gains of the 1995-96 period cancelled by inflation and rising costs. Appeals by the government to 'defend the gains of the revolution' would, in such a situation, run the risk of being seen as little more than defending the party in power, as those real gains in health and education suffer rapid erosion.

The crisis of the Cuban revolution is, not surprisingly, one which has placed its governing institutions under considerable pressure to reform and to adapt to the new context. Yet here too there is a similar pattern of delay, of reluctant and limited concessions, which reveal more than a little ambivalence towards political liberalisation. Beyond factors of personality and ideology are the structural rigidities of communist systems, which slow the pace of institutional change. If one of the problems faced by all ideologi-

¹¹⁵ The 1996 budget plan envisages a 4.4% increase in spending on education, a 7.1% rise in health expenditure, and 3.1% growth in social security spending. Of the Ps. 10,472 million of current expenditure, Ps. 7,057 million has been allocated to the social sector.

cally driven states is that of path dependency, this is nowhere more evident than in the case of the Communist Parties, tied as they are in a myriad of ways, juridical and institutional, to their past commitments and styles of governance. These bonds can be broken, but at the risk of placing in question the very legitimacy of the regime itself, rooted as it is in the revolutionary process it brought about. Such is the dilemma facing the future of Cuban political institutions, for just as economic reform requires the retreat of the state, institutional reform requires surrendering the claim to monolithic party control, and accepting the need not just for modernisation but also for pluralism, and being prepared to live with the consequences. Ultimately it means, as it did for the FSLN in Nicaragua, a willingness to be voted out of power.

The prolonged delay in responding to the reality of the crisis which affects Cuban socialism is seen by some as evidence of Cuban exceptionalism, and an indication that it is not destined to go the way of its counterparts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The assumption is that the leadership still enjoys considerable popular support and that this will buy it time to get the economy right.¹¹⁶ Yet this view fails to take account of the institutional crisis that the regime has been suffering from for some time and which has intensified. It fails, too, to consider the extra strains that will be placed on these institutions in the difficult years which inevitably lie ahead. The extensive apparatus of government control that is currently in place in Cuba has remained largely unreformed in its character and style since it was established in the early decades of communist party rule; as such it not only represents a major obstacle to any future process of democratisation that might come about, but it runs the further risk that without reform it jeopardises whatever hope, however slender, remains for a peaceful transition. There are many Cubans, within the island and without, who would like to see such a transition, to a regime politically democratic and socially just, and embodying the positive legacy of the revolution, but a combination of intransigence on the part of the CCP leadership and external hostility may prevent this from being attained.

One point of departure for discussing the options for change is that of civil society. The argument with which this paper began, drawing on discussions now taking place within Cuba itself, is that the current crisis of the communist model is, at the same time, an opportunity – for a political change within the island that would build on the positive inheritance of the revolution while

¹¹⁶ A survey conducted in February 1995 showed that 28% of Cubans blamed the embargo entirely for the failure to achieve economic stability, while 49% saw it as a principal cause; and in response to a question about their priorities, 50% declared that social and economic equality was primary, while 38% said individual freedom. Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Económicas (1995).

moving away from the statist control of economy, society and politics that has been the hallmark of the past thirty-seven years. The argument for this being an opportunity, as well as a crisis, is strengthened by the very manner in which Cuban society itself has been altered as a result of the revolution and its consequences: far from being blocked from a democratisation and evolution by the communist period, and its upheavals, the contrary could equally be the case. Cuba possesses the social, educational and political preconditions for the democratisation of the country, a process unavoidable in the context of economic change, and one that opens the possibility of completing an evolution which a century of violent oscillations since independence from Spain has to date precluded.

A central condition of such a change, an evolution rather than a systemic collapse, is the development of civil society, understood as a network of associations and activities present within social and political life but separate from the state. The existence of a flourishing civil society is a necessary part of any democracy and complements the space occupied by other institutions and practices intrinsic to the democratic model: political parties on the one hand, and independent economic actors, and a predominantly market system, on the other.

In regard to gender issues, the role of civil society is, as the experience of many societies shows, particularly important. While not absent from either the formal political realm or that of the economy, gender relations do not in the main form the explicit basis for activity in either of these. There are neither women's parties, nor are there economic groupings of an exclusively female character. In civil society on the other hand, be it in the form of NGOs, publications, neighbourhood associations or other unofficial groupings, gender can and does provide a basis for organisation and activity, and, more broadly, for the flourishing of a democratic order. It was for this reason that the feminist movements have for so long insisted on the need for *autonomous* women's organisations and movements: only in this way can women's interests find a separate, distinct and recognised articulation, and respond to the wishes and concerns of a female constituency. The crowding out of gender concerns in formal party politics, and in the economy, can be countered by an explicit gender-based activity within civil society as such. If the failure of capitalist society has been the refusal of the political and the economic spheres adequately to attend to gendered inequalities and issues, raised by women's groups within civil society, that of the socialist model has been the refusal to permit civil society, including that based on gender, to function. The domination of social activity by mass organisations subjugated to state concerns, in organisation and policy, has precluded such organisations from playing a role consonant with the needs of women. The fate of the FMC, for all its idiosyncrasies a standard 'transmission belt' of the Leninist kind, has illustrated this all too clearly.

Cuba in the 'special period', illustrates a contradictory pattern as far as such an evolution is concerned, but one which it would appear, on any comparative or theoretical basis, cannot be indefinitely sustained. On the one hand, the economy has been partially liberalised, both through the entry of foreign capital, and through the growth of internal market relations, particularly that involving small businesses and farmers, and cooperatives. On the other hand, the leadership has prevented, and indefinitely ruled out, any move to an explicit political pluralism, allowing the formation of opposition parties or any form of contested elections. Between these two poles has lain the area of civil society itself, and here the record is mixed. In two areas traditionally associated with civil society, the family and religion, there has been considerable change, not least because the former institution is seen by the regime itself, in the classic communist formulation, as 'the basic cell' of Cuban society. Of considerable importance, because not confined to areas traditionally designated as personal or private, has been the emergence of a more critical atmosphere in the arts, a process of limited *glasnost* most evident in such films as *Strawberries and Chocolate* and *Guantanamera*, which satirise official rhetoric, and criticise bureaucratic intolerance and the lack of civil liberties. At the same time, there has been the emergence of NGOs. The extent of this opening should not be exaggerated, most evidently in the fact that NGOs wishing to pursue independent activities with regard to human rights and censorship have been squeezed almost to extinction. But it would be equally mistaken not to recognise that a space has been opened up, and allowed to remain open, in a way that was impossible during the first three decades of the revolution.

This opening up has considerable potential for women, and some signs of this are already evident. One has been the creation of thirteen centres of research on gender issues, named *Cátedras de la Mujer*. These not only reflect a recognition of the importance of researching gender issues for policy reasons, but they are also a sign of the re-birth of Cuba's stifled social sciences as a whole. The research capacity of academics working on gender issues has been encouraged by the gradual re-opening to intellectual influences broader than those offered by Soviet Marxism, long the dominant form of permitted academic work. There have been a number of international workshops and conferences in Cuba as well as ties of co-operation on research and publication projects between Cuban gender specialists and those from countries such as Spain and Canada.¹¹⁷

Another element in this cautious opening was the appearance in 1993 of *MAGIN*, an independent women's association, which was aimed primarily at

¹¹⁷ Author's interviews with academics at the Universidad de La Habana, January 1996.

women in the media and communications.¹¹⁸ It was originated by Mirta Rodríguez Calderón, a journalist and author of many of the more interesting articles on gender issues in Cuba which appeared in the magazine *Bohemia*. The report on *MAGIN*'s founding conference in November 1994 explains that the organising committee initially came together to exchange views about trends in Cuban society that they were concerned about, and to discuss issues which were receiving inadequate attention and reflection. Among those mentioned were discrimination against women, the falling percentages of women represented in political life, and the re-appearance of stereotypical attitudes and behavioural patterns with regard to women. The committee pledged itself to respond to these and other issues through raising awareness in the media of these problems and gender issues more generally, and by developing a programme of study aimed at empowering women and enhancing their capacity for advocacy; in the words of one collaborator, 'these issues are simply not being taken up in Cuba, we need to develop a gender perspective of social reality'.¹¹⁹ *MAGIN* has since received some international NGO support for its activities, notably its series of seminars on Gender in Social Communication, Personal Growth, Sexism and Language, Structuring Research Projects – some of which events counted on the participation of women from other Latin American Women's Centres such as 'Flora Tristán' in Peru. It has also supported the production of materials (dossiers, videos) for a wider diffusion, and at the end of 1994 the first issue of a periodical, also called *MAGIN*, appeared, containing reports on the activities of the association as well as articles on feminism, women in agriculture, and women's participation in decision-making.¹²⁰ *MAGIN* thus represents a kind of analysis and practice that was hitherto invisible, in public form, in Cuba. Yet it is perhaps an index of the problematic status of independent initiatives, that while it was able to publish its magazine, it did not have permission to do so, and the first issue therefore bore the number signifying non-appearance, '0'.

The fate of such new developments, and indeed the fate of gender issues as a whole, will inevitably depend on far more than the growth of civil society itself. As long as the Cuban state continues to dominate economy, polity and society in the established manner there is little that the institutions

¹¹⁸ '*MAGIN* es una simbiosis de los conceptos de *imagen e imaginación*, vinculados estrechamente con el quehacer de sus integrantes como creadoras y difusoras de mensajes y con la reconocida capacidad de las mujeres para sentir que "hay un cielo sobre nuestras cabezas".' *MAGIN* (1994a), p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Author's interview. January 1996.

¹²⁰ *MAGIN*, No. 0 (1994b). The Editorial Board consisted of Irene Esther Ruiz, Pilar Sa, Mirta Rodríguez Calderón, Xiomara Blanco, Nora Quintana, Georgina Herrera, Carmen María Acosta, Orieta Cordeiro, and María Carvajal.

of a civil society, even if tolerated, can achieve. On the other hand, a major crisis of the regime, accompanied by a breakdown of law and order, and exacerbated by the entry of armed groups from the USA, would create a violent chaos in which civil society would be drowned in a much more uncontrolled, and terrifying, confrontation. What can be asserted with some confidence, however, is that both at the level of social preconditions, and at the level of what people within the island are themselves aware of and willing to encourage, the opportunity for another path, one of growth towards democratisation, consonant with a preservation of Cuba's independence and the social values of the revolution, is possible. Within such a process, the interests of Cuba's women, long rhetorically 'represented' by a largely powerless bureaucratic body, and continuously depleted by the costs of revolutionary excess, need to achieve much greater and more independent articulation. In the years since the revolutionary triumph of 1959, Cuba has been the object of much rhetorical obfuscation and benevolent wishful thinking: there is little that such approaches can contribute to-day. Instead what is needed, in policy within the island and in discussion without, is a realistic assessment of the need and possibility of change, consonant with the requirements and wishes of Cuban society. It may still not be too late for this to occur.

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