

## Book Reviews

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Vilma Espín, Asela de los Santos, and Yolanda Ferrer (Mary-Alice Waters, Ed.) *Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution Within the Revolution* Atlanta, GA: Pathfinder Press, 2012. 346 pp. \$20.00 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-60488-036-6

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*Women in Cuba: The Making of a Revolution Within the Revolution* is a collection of interviews with Vilma Espín, president of the Federation of Cuban Women, or, in Spanish, La Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), from its founding in 1960 until her death in 2007; Asela de los Santos, a cofounder of the FMC; and Yolanda Ferrer, the FMC's current general secretary. The interviews are accompanied by editor Mary-Alice Waters's introductory notes and photographs that bring alive women's considerable participation in the revolution. The book, brought out by Pathfinder Press, the publishing wing of the Socialist Workers Party, stands unabashedly in support of the Cuban revolution. Having been fed a constant diet of anti-Castro rhetoric for the past 50 years, we in the United States may feel challenged by *Women in Cuba*, but for social workers and feminists alike, the challenge is one worth taking on.

The interviews serve principally to document women's contributions during the period of armed struggle leading up to the defeat of the Batista dictatorship on January 1, 1959, and the early, heady days of the Cuban revolution. The interviewees all attribute Cuba's early attention to the well-being of women to Castro's leadership. In fact, the title of the book is from a 1966 speech in which Castro said, "The phenomenon of women's participation in the revolution is a revolution within another revolution. If I were asked what is the most revolutionary thing the revolution is doing, I would answer that it is precisely this—the revolution that is occurring among the women of our country" (p. 231).

What I found most engaging were the women's accounts of how Cuban women came to play such critical roles in the development of the new society. Espín explained the philosophy that underlay these organizers' work:

I always emphasize that at the time we didn't talk about women's liberation. We didn't talk about women's emancipation, or the struggle for equality . . . What we did talk about was participation . . . There was real proof, every day, that the revolution wasn't just hot air, it wasn't empty phrases of the kind people were used to hearing from politicians in the past. This was the genuine thing. And women wanted to be part of it. (pp. 29–30)

This is a considerably different perspective from that of feminists in capitalist countries, but it is a useful one to consider, especially given the successes of the Cuban revolution in relation to poor women and in the areas of health and education. (Cuba has the largest numbers of doctors per capita of any country in the world, free education and health care are guaranteed to all citizens, literacy exceeds 99%, and Cubans enjoy a 79-year life expectancy).

The participation of which Espín spoke, though, was neither automatic nor easy. As Ferrer explained, “In those days, women were greatly limited by social norms. They were expected to restrict their interests to the confines of the home and to subordinate themselves to the males in the family. But there was enormous political ferment, and women . . . wanted to volunteer to work wherever needed. These feelings were so strong they led women to break with traditions going back thousands of years” (p. 199).

It was the FMC, founded in 1960, that opened the doors to women’s participation and changed the way women—and the entire population—thought about women’s role in society. As Espín explained, “The federation began by focusing on simple tasks that motivated women to reach beyond the home, that made them aware of their own possibilities, capacities, self-worth, and rights . . . . Women learned they were capable of the most diverse kinds of activities. As they demonstrated what they could do, they increasingly won social respect. Prejudices began to lose ground” (pp. 202–203).

FMC activities—the mobilizing of literacy and the public health brigade, the retraining of domestic workers, the building of child care centers—are described in loving detail by the three women. One initiative was the Ana Betancourt Schools for Campesinas. Begun in 1961, the schools invited peasant families to send their daughters to Havana to learn to sew. The response was enthusiastic, and eventually more than 21,000 young women enrolled. They learned to make clothes for their families; received medical and dental care; and, critically, became a part of the national discussions. “The young women hadn’t just learned to read and write,” Espín said later of the “Anitas.” “They hadn’t just learned to sew. They had also learned about the revolution . . . . They’d learned about the programs for health care, for education, how schools were being built . . . . They’d become aware of what the revolution meant” (p. 240). Upon graduation, each young woman received her own sewing machine with the instruction to return home and teach 10 others to sew; many, according to Espín went on to become doctors, teachers, technicians, and political leaders.

The challenge that books like *Women in Cuba* bring to social work education is 2-fold. The first and easier challenge is that of bringing a range of global perspectives to the classroom. Cuba’s unique experience should be part of that. The second, more difficult task is related to questions of capitalism. Corporate globalization has bequeathed us a wildly unequal world, and while I have no answers, it is clear that we need to consider what it means to be feminist, justice-oriented social workers in a world bent to the interests of the “1%.” These are questions that Cubans have considered for many years, and it is possible that there is a thing or two that we can learn from them.

The past decade has witnessed a rising interest in Cuba within social work. Several small, well-conceived studies have been published (see Backwith & Mantle, 2009; Strug, 2006) and in 2011, the National Association of Social Workers sponsored two professional research trips to Cuba. Cuba, for its part, is newly committed to “community-based social work.” In Cuba, the 1990s—the “Special Period”—were characterized by extraordinary hardship as Cuba’s economy reeled from the fall of the Soviet Union and the breakup of the Eastern Bloc. Overnight, Cuba, which had relied on a monocrop economy and favorable trade agreements with the socialist nations (Cuba’s sugar for machinery, pesticides, parts, and food), was forced to reshape and diversify its economy and open itself to tourism. To ensure that its hard-hit population minimally had access to food, health care, and basic services, Cuba turned to community-based social work. A social work concentration in sociology was developed at the University of Havana, and a paraprofessional social work program for youths was organized for unemployed young people from Cuba’s poorest neighborhoods. These young “*emergentes*,” enthusiastically praised by Castro, addressed emergent social problems, such as child malnutrition, school absenteeism, and the needs of the elderly (Strug, 2006).

I wrote part of this review in Cuba, which I visited in the summer of 2012. Cuba feels well past the fervor and idealism of its youth, and I do, too. Still, commitments live on. As one Cuban said to me, “I think the United States always thought that if they made things really difficult, the Cuban people

would revolt. But we don't want to be like the United States. We like our medical system and our education system—and our tradition of thinking about the well-being of everyone.” Books like *Women in Cuba*, in concert with new studies and, most important, the lifting of the embargo, are all part of opening the doors between our nations and provide the basis for free and respectful exchanges between the United States and Cuban feminists and social workers.

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