

# **Vilma Espin, Asela de los Santos and Yolanda Ferrer, *Women in Cuba. The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution***

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Vilma Espin, Asela de los Santos and Yolanda Ferrer, *Women in Cuba. The Making of a Revolution within the Revolution*, Ed. Mary Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2012) pb 364pp. ISBN 9781604880366

Far too often, for a variety of reasons that have their roots in patriarchy, women are written out of history. *Women in Cuba: the making of a revolution within the revolution* tells the story of the Cuban revolution through the words and memories of three of the women that led it.

Mary Alice Waters, President of Pathfinder Press, introduces the women whose testimonies are presented and outlines the book's aims and arguments. The book's thesis, as stated by Waters, is that the Cuban revolution brought about changes in women's social, economic and political position. This revolution in women's condition, Waters argues, was organic and unplanned. It came about as a natural product of the wider national revolution led by Fidel Castro, emerging from the grassroots and not imposed from above.

The testimonies are opened by that of Asela de los Santos, who in 1956 left her job as a teacher to join the July 26 Movement

against the Batista regime. First acting as a Courier for the Movement, transporting weapons, ammunition, money and messages, de los Santos later headed up the Rebel Army's Department of Education as well as playing important roles in other areas of health and social infrastructure. After the Movement's victory in 1959, de los Santos held various important posts, including Minister for Education from 1979 to 1981. Her testimony leaves the reader with an understanding of how the Movement worked to eliminate illiteracy as well as greatly improving health infrastructure and childcare facilities. It highlights and celebrates the fact that these achievements were realised and led by women.

Vilma Espin offers us two testimonies. The first of these details her role during the July 26 Movement. Espin assumed major responsibilities including coordinating military actions in the Oriente province where, for a time, her family home was used as the centre of the Movement's leadership. Her testimony paints a picture of life as an underground revolutionary in Santiago: being forced to use pseudonyms; constantly on the move for fear of capture and desiring the life of the guerrillas stationed in the mountains, where one felt able to take part in open combat and less 'hunted' by the Batista forces.

Following the triumph over the Batista dictatorship on New Year's Day 1959, Espin became President of the newly formed Federation of Cuban Women in 1960, staying in that post until her death in 2007. Her second testimony is placed alongside that of Yolanda Ferrer, and both attempt to explain how the Federation of Cuban Women emerged. Both Ferrer and Espin emphasise that this was an organic development, growing naturally out of the desire of Cuban women to be a part of the wider revolutionary movement, and encouraged, but not imposed, by Castro.

Although it gives a detailed picture of the inspirational and varied roles played by Espin, de los Santos and Ferrer during, and post, the revolution, the book fails to convince the reader that changes in women's status brought about by the Rebel Army and, subsequently, Castro's government, were revolutionary. This is in part because there is no basis for comparison: the book does not paint a clear image of how women's lives (in the wider sense,

beyond the experiences of our three narrators) were before, during and after the overthrow of Batista, so, based on what is presented in the book, it is not possible to understand how women's status changed. If she was excited by what is promised in Waters' introduction (an exploration of how Cuban women's social, economic and political status underwent a change of revolutionary proportions during the Cuban revolution), the reader is left disappointed. Furthermore, one cannot help but feel that the testimonies are self-censored. Any problems or contradictions in women's position are overlooked. With references to, and quotes from, Castro throughout, and plentiful comments on Castro's brilliance, at times the book feels like government propaganda. In some ways, this is not surprising since all three women have been leaders of the regime and perhaps this is a selling point for the book: it is a useful document for those who wish to see how images of women are constructed in hegemonic Cuban nationalist discourses. Yet it also leaves the critical reader with the sense that she must take all that is recounted about the 'revolution within the revolution' with a proverbial pinch of salt. The book's title and introduction are deceiving. It is more a selective account of the roles played by three women in the Cuban revolution than an analysis of how women's status was revolutionised.

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