

Cuban Revolutionary Women

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Resumen

Ché Guevara, Fidel y Raúl Castro y Camilo Cienfuegos son los nombres e imágenes asociados a la guerrilla cubana que derrocó la tiranía en Cuba. Celia Sánchez Manduley fue una clase de mujer cubana de clase media, bióloga de profesión, comprometida en el cambio de la situación social y económica de los campesinos bajo el régimen de Fulgencio Batista. Ella inició y se fomentó una guerra de guerrillas en la Sierra Maestra, pues estaba decidida a poner fin a la tiranía de Batista, la mafia y el gobierno de EE.UU., los cuales, ella creía, eran los responsables de la violación y del robo de la sociedad cubana. Refugiada en las

montañas de la Sierra, reclutó campesinos dispuestos a enfrentar la tiranía. Quienes fueron testigos de su plan, organización y elaboración de estrategias y lucha en la Sierras, creen que en su movimiento revolucionario estableció la base del éxito final de la “Revolución de Castro”. Este artículo enfoca la obra de las mujeres en el éxito de la revolución cubana, con frecuencia enfatizada en los libros de historia y en las discusiones historiográficas, sin atender a los eventos que, desde estas mujeres que participaron tempranamente en ella, dieron pie al éxito revolucionario

Palabras claves: Revolución cubana, Cecilia Sánchez Manduley, mujeres en la revolución, guerrilleras

Abstract

Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Raul Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, these are the men whose images have always been associated with the Cuban Guerilla group which brought an end to the tyrannical leadership in Cuba. Celia Sánchez Manduley a middle class Cuban



biologist woman, distressed about the social and economic position of the peasants under the Fulgencio Batista's regime, initiated and nurtured guerrilla warfare in Sierra Maestra, determined to bring an end to Batista, the Mafia and the US government, who, she believed was responsible for the rape and robbery of Cuban society. She took refuge in the Sierra Mountains where she recruited peasants who were willing to put an end to the Batista tyranny. Those who witnessed her plan, organize, strategize and fight in the Sierras, believe her established revolutionary movement was the foundation of the eventual success of "Castro's Revolution". The purpose of this paper is to highlight the work of women in the success of the Cuban Revolution, which is seldom emphasized in history books or historical discussions. The time period chosen accounts for the events that created a foundation for a successful revolution in which women were major pioneers.

Keywords: Cuban Revolution, Cecilia Sánchez Manduley, revolutionary women and guerrilla women.

INTRODUCTION

The Cuban Revolution officially began on July 26, 1953, when Fidel Castro and his group of middle class and working class revolutionaries attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Cuba, at this time under the governance of General

Fulgencio Batista, was supported by the United States government.

Batista implemented policies that profited US investors, as two-thirds of Cuban businesses were owned by Americans, including Cuba's sugar, coffee and mining industries and public utilities. By 1958, Cuba was the second largest investment in Latin America for US companies. Approximately 71% of US exports came from Cuba, while Cuba imported 64% of its goods from the US. Cubans lived in an under-developed society, especially in rural areas, as there was a shortage of jobs, food and poor infrastructure.

The wider society did not benefit, economically or socially from their relationship with the US, as profits were hoarded by the US capitalist who invested their profits abroad. The country faced social decay as it became the harbour for the Mafia who indulged in prostitution, drugs and gambling. Cubans were faced with discrimination in the work place as their US counterparts received higher wages and promotions in the business sector. Women were at a greater disadvantage since they were discriminated against based on their sex, class and race.



Castro and his group's attempts of initiating a revolution were futile since they were outnumbered. Approximately 100 men took part in the failed insurrection. From this number, 68 were killed and the others were captured and sentenced to prison on the Isle of Pines. Fidel Castro and his brother Raul were among those captured, along with the women who assisted and supported the revolutionaries. The group's aim was to return to the 1940 constitution. Influenced by all segments of political society, it was written during the de facto government of Fulgencio Batista. It made provisions for land reform, public education, minimum wage and other progressive ideas. In the 1950's, corruption was extensive and these ideas were not implemented.

Celia Sánchez Manduley a middle class Cuban biologist, who was distressed about the social and economic position of the peasants under the regime, initiated and nurtured guerrilla warfare in Sierra Maestra. The peasants were a group in the rural areas who worked and lived on the lands which were own by US businesses. They were paid low wages, exploited and discriminated against because of their inferior class position and race. They were mainly

indigenous or black. Celia's determination to help alleviate the peasants from their oppressed conditions intensified when a peasant girl, Maria Ochoa was kidnapped and raped in Havana by suspected Mafia men. The Mafia was the main suspect in the kidnaps and sexual exploitation of peasant woman from the rural area between Havana and Santiago.

Celia was determined to bring an end to Batista, the Mafia and the US government, who, she believed was responsible for the rape and robbery of Cuban society. She took refuge in the Sierra Mountains where she recruited peasants who were willing to put an end to the Batista tyranny. Celia gradually built a force of 143 young men and 47 young women, along with supplies of weapons and ammunition. She also formed communication links with the July 26th Movement in Havana. They were a group of Castro's supporters who continued to mobilize the public while he was in prison. They issued anti-Batista propaganda and organized public protest which drew international attention to the civil unrest that was growing because of the tyrannical government in Cuba. They also engaged in clandestine activities, which kept them familiar with Batista's military tactics, and



issued revolutionary speeches from Castro while he was in prison.

Celia established base camps throughout the Sierras whose communication links were maintained through runners and other established links in the area. She and her rebels started to ambush Batista's soldiers in the Sierra regions, in some cases soldiers were killed, while others were captured. Some of the soldiers who were captured changed sides and joined her rebel group hence increasing her numbers. By 1954, her military supplies at her base camps had increased to seventeen US jeeps, weapons, ammunition, medicine, gasoline, oil and food. Celia was seen as the creator and leader of the Cuban Revolution, during this crucial period of Fidel Castro's incarceration.

Those who witnessed her plan, organize, strategize and fight in the Sierras, believe her established revolutionary movement was the foundation of the eventual success of Castro's Revolution.

Upon their release in 1955, Castro and the other survivors of the 1953 Moncada attack, fled to Mexico. In Mexico City, he met the Argentine doctor Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who

was a pro-peasant revolutionary. Che, along with over 80 rebels who Castro recruited, traveled to Cuba aboard the *Granma*. Their plan was to meet Celia Sanchez on the coast of Niguero on November 30, 1956. From there Fidel and his band would join the planned uprising in Santiago de Cuba, organized by the July 26th Movement. The plan failed and they did not reach their original destination. On December 2, 1956, the boat reached the coast of Alegría de Pío, where they were spotted and attacked by Batista's soldiers. The rebels were defenseless, and the majority of them were killed. Only 12 survived including Fidel, Raul, Che and Camilo. The presence of Celia and her movement in the area, helped fight off Batista's soldiers as the survivors made their way to Sierra Maestra.

At this point the Revolutionary Group gained momentum, as the charismatic Fidel and the 12 surviving revolutionaries joined Celia in the Sierras, where Fidel and Celia continued to plan further attacks on the Batista Regime. By the end of 1958, Cuba was in political and civil turmoil as guerrilla attacks continued by supporters of the movement. Batista was also under heavy criticism by the United States



government for his inability to control the political crisis in Cuba.

Cubans were aware of the progress of the rebel activity in the Sierras through Radio Rebelde broadcasts, in the towns of eastern Cuba which the revolutionaries controlled. Cuban nationals were conscious of their inferior position to Americans working in Cuba who received better salaries and working conditions. They were ready for change as they searched for their own identity separate from the United States.

On November 30, 1958, Castro took Guisa near Bayamo. On December 28; Guevara captured an entire train of Batista's troops heading to Santa Clara. This place fell on December 30, and in the evening of December 31, Batista was told that Santiago was about to fall to Castro and his guerrillas (Staten, 2003:80). On January 1, 1959, Batista and his closest associates fled to the Dominican Republic. The domination of Cuba by United States ended and the transformation of Cuban society began through the policies of the Revolutionary Government led by Fidel Castro. The Cuban Revolution is in its forty-eight year, making it the only successful revolution in

the history of twentieth century Latin America.

Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Raul Castro and other male revolutionary figures have always been credited for their actions, which brought a successful revolution to Cuba and reformed a society that was plagued by the inequalities imposed by the US government through the Batista regime.

However we must consider and examine the role of Celia Sánchez who initiated the revolutionary movement in the Sierras while Fidel was in prison. Celia's revolutionary initiative was more along feminist lines because of the discrimination and violence peasant women experienced. She knew that the society was patriarchal and the revolution could not propel mass support which led to its survival with a female leader. Those who worked with her in the Sierras spoke about her humility and the way she discredited herself even though she started the foundation that supported Castro's increased popularity among the masses.

The revolution's success is also rooted in the achievements of Cuban women who risked their lives as soldiers in the guerrilla movement, protested



against the doctoral regime. They fought for women's rights, supported their fathers, brothers and husbands as they battled to reclaim Cuba as their own, for all races, classes and genders to enjoy.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the work of women in the success of the Cuban Revolution, which is seldom emphasized in history books or historical discussions. The time period chosen accounts for the events that created a foundation for a successful revolution in which women were major pioneers.

FEMALE GUERRILLA SOLDIERS

"We have proven that in Cuba it is not only men who fight. Women also fight."
Fidel Castro (January 1, 1959)¹

Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Raul Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, these are the men whose images have always been associated with the Cuban Guerilla group which brought an end to the tyrannical leadership in Cuba. However, their success at defeating Batista, the Mafia and US Imperialism would not have been possible without the powerful involvement of women

1 Smith Louis and Padula Alfred. *Sex and Revolution; Women in Socialist Cuba*. P. 26.

who fought with them from as early as Castro's failed attack on Moncada in 1953, to the successful defeat of Batista's military from Sierra Maestra in 1959.

Haydee Santamaría, Melba Hernández, Celia Sánchez, Ada Martínez, Tete Puebla, Danielle Ortiz, Lidia Doce, Clodomiro Acosta, Imelda Santos and the Giral sisters are the most eminent women who fought as guerrilla soldiers during the insurrection in Cuba from 1953 to 1959. They and other young Cuban women from the age of sixteen, sacrificed their lives and their relationship with their family in order to free Cuba from US Imperialism.

In the 1950's women worked in the underground as they collected supplies for the guerrillas, sewed uniforms, hid revolutionaries in their homes and provided medical aid.

They also served as spies and messengers and transported weapons under their clothes to the revolutionary centres. Women who became guerrilla fighters were placed in an all female group called the Mariana Grajales Platoon, named after the Black women who were active in Cuba's first war of independence. The female platoon arose out of the demand of women working with the guerrilla



movement to take up arms, instead of playing the same traditional role in the rebel group that they played in the society they were trying to change. (Shnookal: 31).

In a speech given by Fidel Castro on January 20, 1981, in the Granma Providence he described the resistance given by male combatants to women having such a role. "I remember that when I organized the Mariana Grajales Platoon-in fact, I took part in the combat training of those comrades-some of the rebel fighters were furious, because they didn't like the idea of a platoon made up of women. We had some spare M-1s, and the M-1 was considered a good light weapon and therefore, we thought it would be the right one for women. Some of our fighters wanted to know why they had Springfields while the women were going to get M-1s. On more than one occasion I got so annoyed that I answered, 'Because they are better fighters than you are'" (Stone: 8).

His statement about the women being better fighters was proven by the women themselves when they continued to fight a battle near Holguin after their leader was wounded. They attacked a truck load of soldiers which they obliterated and

apprehended their weapons. The norm with male platoons was to retreat after their leader was wounded. Hence the performance of the women was viewed as truly outstanding.

In her study *Cuban Women Now* Margaret Randall interviewed Isabela Rielo, who was a captain in the Mariana Grajales. She later became a captain in the Revolutionary Armed Forces and shared the experience of the women in the combatant group. The women who formed the battalion did not want to be treated any different from the men; they wanted to be seen as just one more soldier. Isabel Rielo expressed that the women had to make the men understand that they also faced the same privations and hardships.

The women also endured the attacks from airplanes as government soldiers fired at them with machine guns; they also hauled the wounded to safe positions and later to campaign hospitals so that they would not succumb to their wounds from bombs. "When it came to sharing the hardships, to talking about our dead, to talking about the next attack, we were just one more soldier on the ranks; of course the men always praised us in terms of how we assimilated the danger" (Randall:



141). According to Isabel, the constitution of the platoon made people more attentive to their performance in the movement. Some people had confidence in the Mariana Grajales, as they shared the opinion that could fight just like men and were seen as useful and as courageous as the male combatants. The participation of women as soldiers had historic significance as they showed the importance women would have in the process and development of the revolution.

The incorporation of women into the militia was chastised by some in society. They questioned the morals of these women who wore combatant uniforms and carried weapons, as they did not conform to their traditional role as wife, mother and care taker. Isabel Rielo in her interview with Margaret Randall, commented that scientific points of view were used to support arguments as the women's maternal instincts were questioned. "If we were really feminine and had this well developed instinct, they said we'd feel terrible when we saw blood, even if it was enemy blood. They said we'd be too moved if a man died, and even if it was the enemy we'd feel inclined to try to help him, to save him" (138). The spirit of their rebellion was not

to capture and kill government soldiers. If an enemy was wounded they would attend to their wounds when they were captured, however when they were faced with the situation where they had to kill the enemy, Isabel said she never knew of any woman who hesitated.

Haydee Santamaría, one of the leaders and heroes of the revolution commented, "My own mother was the kind of woman who thought that men were the only ones who had the right to make revolutions" (Stone: 18). Even supporters of the revolution questioned the woman's place in the militia. Eventually they accepted the incorporation of women in the militia since every capable person was needed to defend the country.

Haydee Santamaría and Melba Hernández joined Castro's rebellion against Batista's dictatorship in 1953 when they attacked the Moncada military barracks. They were initially responsible for transporting weapons, cleaning and setting up cots and ironing uniforms for the men who would attack Moncada. Castro initially refused the women to accompany them in Moncada but a deal was arranged that they would come as nurses to care for the wounded after Melba displayed her aggravation with Castro



who did not want the women to engage in combat.

I protested to Fidel that we were as revolutionary and that it was unjust to discriminate against us for being women. Fidel hesitated; we had made a sensible point... We couldn't believe that we would be left behind after we had considered ourselves an essential part of the group! (Padula: 24).

Melba Hernández and Haydee Santamaría were both arrested and condemned to seven months in prison after the failed Moncada attack. Haydee remembered:

The Supreme Court wanted to free us. It was not the custom for women of so-called decent families to go to jail. I belonged to a rural family of position and culture, not of the street. But... we were part of it (the rebellion), and what would I have done when I got out? I couldn't get a job. I would have had to go home. (p. 24)

Haydee was tortured by Batista's men. She was blindfolded and tied to a chair as she was forced to listen to Batista's men torture to death her fiancé, Reynaldo Boris Luis Santa Coloma. Her blindfolds were removed and Reynaldo's testicles which they

had cut off, was rubbed all over her face and chest. Upon their release, Haydee and Melba joined Celia Sánchez Manduley in Sierra Maestra, who had already started to build a force to battle the Batista Regime. Under the leadership of Celia in the Sierras, Melba and Haydee were given more leadership and combative roles, as they also fought alongside Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos in the last stages of the battles that defeated Batista.

Celia Sánchez continued the revolutionary fervour and indeed developed the resistance into a complete revolutionary movement without the assistance of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and other prominent male revolutionary figures.

While Castro was in prison, Celia Sánchez Manduley declared war on the Batista Regime after the gruesome death of a peasant girl. She recruited young men and women along with supplies as she travelled through the rural towns and farms of the Sierra Mountain range. She gradually built an army and planned detailed attacks on military camps stationed in the areas of Holguín, Bayamo, Santiago de Cuba, Nuevitas and Manzanillo.



As a planner, organizer, and strategist, Celia quickly became a guerrilla legend. As a front-line fighter with incomparable bravery and skill, she was soon worshipped, not only by the men and women she commanded, but also by the residents in the area who began hearing about her. This aided immensely in steadily increasing her rebel army and its supplies. (Haney: 28) By June of 1954, Celia was the proud owner of seventeen US jeeps and from her own procurements as well as captured Batista supplies, she had steady supplies of weapons, ammunition, medicine, gas, oil and food at her base camps. Her growing reputation resulted in steady streams of new peasant recruits. (Haney: 29)

She also had over seventy prisoners captured who were guarded and cared for by her group. In some cases they were set free while others choose to stay as they genuinely switched sides and became new recruits of Celia's guerrilla group. A bounty of \$75 000 was placed on her head which eventually became the CIA priority as they sent a US assassin to kill her. Celia Sánchez was the Cuban Revolution as stated by Ada Martínez her top lieutenant. She believed the Cuban Revolution would not exist without Celia who became the inspiration for the incarcerated young renegade Fidel Castro.

In a letter written to Nora Peters by Celia Sánchez in 1973, which Richard Haney published in his book *Celia Sánchez: The Legend of Cuba's Revolutionary Heart*, Celia said she was not a born guerrilla or revolutionary, but a Cuban who loved her country and people. She believed that she would have the support of Cuban peasants once they felt they had a chance to defeat Batista. She knew she had to out-fight and out-smart Batista's men in order to survive since she had no blueprint to follow since no dictator with US support was ever threatened by a peasant uprising.

Celia wrote:

As for guerrilla tactics and the revolutionary stuff, that was purely a step-by-step process. I improvised all the way, reacting to each threat from the enemy. I guess a guerrilla fights defensively to survive while inflicting as much damage as possible, with the goal of getting strong enough to one day go on the offensive. By the summer of 1957 we were on the offensive and by the summer of 1958 we were winning big battles. (Haney: 11)

Teté Puebla was a fifteen year old rebel, whose initial involvement in the revolution was in clandestine activities in the city. She carried guns



and other ammunition, sold bonds to help raise funds for the movement and her home was used to house revolutionary activists. In July 1957, she went to Sierra Maestra to serve. As a soldier she was prepared for battle despite injuries suffered. She was a key officer in the all female guerrilla unit, Mariana Grajaes Brigade. Teté went on to become a general in the Cuban army whose success she has been praised for.

Imelda Santos, Gloria Espinosa and Danielle Ortiz were excellent fighters who understood Celia's mission of making Cuba safe for all Cubans. Danielle Ortiz was the youngest female who participated in the search of "Modesto" the US assassin hired to kill Celia. During the ambush by the rebels of the army officials who assisted "Modesto", Danielle captured and shot the well trained assassin from The Army School of the Americas. Danielle Ortiz was seen as a Celia's heroine and she never left Celia's side throughout the revolutionary struggle. She would become Celia's main body guard after the triumph of the revolution.

Lidia Esther Doce Sánchez, Clodomira Ferrals Acosta and the Giral sisters were revolutionary messengers who carried messages to the various units

in the Sierra. The Giral sisters, twenty eight year old Cristina and twenty two year old Loudres, distributed propaganda, transport explosives and used their apartment to hold clandestine meetings. These women were captured and tortured to death by Batista's army. They are seen as the martyrs of the struggle and their courageous efforts has always been credited to the Revolution's success.

The women who worked in the revolutionary movement showed their loyalty to Cuba and the revolution through their risky and fatal activities in order to bring change to the society. They opposed the traditional roles assigned to them so that their role would be instrumental, creating changes that Cuban history has not forgotten

WOMEN IN POLITICS

The basic function of the Federation of Cuban Women is to incorporate women into the construction of, socialism, elevating the general political, cultural, and technical level of the nation. All of the FMC's activities are designed precisely to mobilize women, organize them, and improve their condition.
Vilma Espin (March, 1971)

Prior to the triumph of the revolution in 1959, there were a number of women's organizations that sought



the social and political interest of women. Some organized cultural events while others acted as pressure groups as they protested against the repressive measures of the government, and also support groups, who organized medicine, clothing and food for political prisoners. For example, *Mujeres Opositoristas Unidas*.

After Castro's first attempt to overthrow Batista in 1953, women's groups were formed from the female support of the revolution. One such group was the Revolutionary Women's Union, organized in 1959; dedicated to peace, democratic liberties and economic improvement. Its members tried to mobilize women into supporting the revolution and also help raise funds for the agrarian reform of May, 1959.

On August 23, 1960, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) was founded to incorporate women in the revolutionary process under the leadership of the Revolutionary Government. The government sought to organize the different women's groups into a single organization that would unify all sectors of women into the revolution to form an enthusiastic political feminine foundation for the success of the revolution. The leaders of the

Revolutionary government were conscious of the fact that they needed the support of the masses in order to make the revolution a complete success. Through the establishment of the Federation of Cuban Women, there would be movement of women from within the home, into the public arena where they would be fully involved in the political, social and economical transformation of Cuban society.

The FMC would also be used as the channel from the working class to the politicians, as women's opinions, ideas and problems could be presented to the party and state agencies for solutions. These solutions were to be material, legal, political or ideological. In essence, the revolution showed sensitivity to the energies and ideas of the fifty percent of the population which was female.

Vilma Espín was appointed president of the FMC by Fidel Castro. She met Castro in Mexico City in 1954, on her return from studying in the United States. She was a key figure in the coordination of clandestine activity for the July 26th Movement, in Santiago de Cuba and later had a number of responsibilities in the Rebel Army in Sierra Maestra, which she joined in 1957.



The FMC's main initiative was to achieve complete equality for women, which was one of the revolutions objectives. Equality for women in society meant that they would be participants in the politics and strategies of developing Cuba.

The first initiative in achieving an egalitarian society was the Literacy Campaign which was a drive to curb the disparity of illiteracy between Cuban men and women. The campaign organized brigades to teach reading and writing to peasant families in rural areas. The Ana Betancourt project was also established to teach women from the most remote areas of the Oriente vocational skills.

The FMC second concern was the inculcation of women in the workforce. The FMC in 1968, tried to make the labour market more attractive to women through Resolutions 47 and 48. These initiatives were the foundation of creating a skilled and educated workforce among women who would later take up leadership positions in the society. In Castro's address in The Fifth National Plenary of the FMC on December, 18, 1966, he stated that the plans of the revolution that were being carried out would not have been possible until the reservoir of human

resources in women was explored. The success of these plans was due to the extraordinary contributions to the economic development of the country with mass incorporation of women into the labour force.

In Cuba, before the triumph of the revolution, the female presence in leadership positions was uncommon. There were intermediate levels of society where women had leadership role. However they were seen as "decorations" as their ability to make decisions was monitored and limited by their male counterparts. The appointment of prominent women, who fought alongside Fidel Castro in the Revolution, brought new meaning to the presence of the woman in a leadership role. The appointment of Celia Sánchez as Secretary of State, gave her liberty to advice the Castro Regime on policies in the recreation of the Cuban society as she had envisioned it, when she started the Revolutionary process in the Sierras. One of her major concerns was the participation of all Cuban children in culture and sports. She mandated the establishment of the Cuban National Ballet, which gave dance scholarship to children across Cuba. She also worked on the organization of sport academies which provide



the average Cuban child with access to team sports. The FMC's focus on eradicating illiteracy among women from rural areas was the foundation for increase in the number of educated women in society.

Melba Hernández was arrested along with Castro and his rebel group after the failed Moncada attack. Upon her release she went to the Sierras where she joined Celia Sánchez and Haydee Santamaría to continue the mobilization of guerrilla movement in the peasant areas. After the success of the insurrection, she served as a founding member of the Federation of Cuban Women. She was also appointed the chairwoman of the Cuban committee of Solidarity with Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. She later became the Cuban Ambassador to Vietnam.

Haydee Santamaría founded *Casa de las Américas*, in 1959. A literary institute which has supported and funded Cuban writers and artists, as the Revolutionary Government sought to create a culture for the masses, a culture free from foreign imitation, that was structurally Cuban culture and Revolutionary based. In 1960, the organization launched their magazine *Casa de las Américas* which was open to the

creation and investigation of the vanguard school of thought, with special focus on Latin America and the Caribbean.

Isabel Rielo, who was a leader in the Mariana Grajales brigade, was promoted to lieutenant in 1960. In 1961, she founded the Lidia Doce School for Militias and later became a captain in the Revolutionary armed Forces. She also worked in the Medical Corp and the Military Technical Institute. She was later sent to head the Turibacoa Vegetable Plan, which focused on the exportation of vegetables and the provision of raw material for the canning industry in Cuba.

Elena Mederos was the first Minister of Welfare under the Castro Regime in 1959. Her devotion to the social development of Cubans was evident when she founded the School of Social Sciences of the University of Havana. She also established the Foundation of Social Sciences, a private organization devoted to developing standards and programs for children's institutions in Cuba. These were the credentials that awarded her such a post under the Castro Regime however, after five months she resigned her post and fled to Miami. She was in



opposition of the policies carried out by the regime which she believed was Communist.

Teresa Casuso met Fidel Castro in Mexico, in 1956. She supported Castro's Revolutionary ideas and allowed him to use her home to hide weapons and ammunition that he collected while in Mexico, for his expedition to Cuba later that year. She was later arrested and sentenced for her possession of ammunition in her apartment, when Mexican police became suspicious of Castro's activities. She later reconciled with him after the success of the Revolution and was appointed the Cuban Delegate of the United Nations Organizations. On October 13, 1960, she denounced the Castro Regime and took asylum in the United States.

The appointment of these key women from the Rebel Group in reputable position in society was the beginning of the inculcation of women in general in the political process by the Revolutionary government. The formation of the FMC and their objective to mobilize women to fully participate in the economic, political and social life reinforces the importance of women in the success of the Cuban Revolution.

WOMEN IN CUBAN SOCIETY

Many of the plans that the revolution is today . . . carrying out could not have been conceived until the great reservoir of human resources that our society possesses in its women was clearly recognized. These plans could not have been conceived without the mass incorporation of women into the workforce. Fidel Castro (1966)²

Women in Cuban society under the Batista Regime were subjected to prostitution, sexual violence, illiteracy, unemployment and sexism. In 1958, the unemployment rate in Cuba was twenty percent and one in every eight workers was a woman. It was the norm that the woman received lower wages than her male counterparts, no benefits, faced job limitations and she was not entitled to paid maternity leave. Almost one quarter of the Cuban population was illiterate, the figure being 23.95%. The illiteracy rate in the rural areas for the adult population was around forty-five percent, with the majority being peasant women. Schooling for peasant women was considered unnecessary since their futures were restricted to the home and children.

2 Cited by Padula, Alfred and Smith, Lois. (1966). *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*. p. 95.



Prostitution was prevalent in the streets of Havana since Cuba was the “playpen” for Mafia gangsters and rich American students who sought a sexual rendezvous while on vacation. In 1961, Law 993 was passed outlawing prostitution and identifying those who were associated with it as “socially dangerous”. Prostitutes were sent to schools for rehabilitation where they were taught vocational skills, basic etiquette and table manners.

The first initiative of the Revolutionary government to improve the life of peasant women was through the Literacy Campaign. The literacy campaign was launched in September 1960 when Castro declared 1961 as the “Year of Education”. The objective of the campaign was to recruit high school students as literacy volunteers. The campaign was designed to eradicate illiteracy in poor communities and to increase the awareness of middle-class youths to the difficulties their poorer countrymen faced. Despite the fears and prejudices of the families of middle class girls who believed their daughters would be easy prey in black rural areas, fifty six percent of the one hundred thousand volunteers were girls. Mónica Ramos, a Havana high school student, testified

that her mother was supportive of her decision to participate; however her aunts and uncles were terrified. She endured difficulties with illness, harassment and attacks from CIA-backed counter-revolutionary bandits. Nevertheless she persisted and by the end of her eight month period she had taught all the illiterates in her section to read and write. She later said “We hauled up our pink flag, declaring the area free of illiteracy” (Padula: 84).

The literacy campaign marked the beginning of men and women sharing the same work and the difficult circumstances of rural Cuba. The young female *brigadistas* were liberating themselves from a culture that did not allow them to leave their homes un-chaperoned. Years later one former literacy teacher expressed it this way: “The literacy drive was the first time in my life, and I believe the first time in our history as well, that women were given an equal role with men in bringing about a monumental change” (Stone: 10).

In 1961 the Ana Betancourt School for Peasant Girls, was established and accommodated in mansions abandoned by the upper classes. It was named after the



female fighter for equal rights for women in Cuba's first struggle for independence in 1869.

The entry requirements were: 1. a female peasant who did not have access to adequate schooling in her area, 2. must be at least eight years old since in rural Cuba, females at this age were considered to be "women" and 3. must be willing to undertake the new experience. Upon graduating from the institute the women were given sewing machines and instructed to teach at least ten women in their community what they had learnt. The course was geared at balancing work and study, as the women were taught to sew, along with classes in reading, writing, physical education, dancing and singing, hygiene, history and the goals of the revolution.

Additional educational programs were established to help domestic servants of the bourgeois class. Schools were established to teach them new skills and professions like accounting, secretarial skills, translating and interpreting. Rehabilitation programs were established for prostitutes where they were taught other means of making a livelihood. These programs were facilitated by other Cuban women who had also

benefited previously from educational programs. Almost anyone who knew a bit more than his or her neighbour was encouraged to make up for the giant deficit of teachers. "Those who don't know, learn; those who know, teach," became the slogan which continues to have meaning (Randall: 55).

The oppression of women stems from being confined to the roles of housewife and mother as they are isolated from society since they are economically dependent on their husbands. The Cuban Revolutionary government understood these Marxist ideologies as they tried to free women from economic dependency and fully incorporate them in the social, cultural economic and political life of the country.

The main interest of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which was established August 23, 1960, was to get women involved in the construction of socialism which would elevate the political, technical and cultural level of the nation. The FMC created a forum where women could address issues of sexual discrimination along with other problems women faced and seek changes to eliminate these problems.



The housing of FMC units in regional, municipal and provincial areas facilitated the involvement of housewives who took the opportunity to socialize without their husbands as they participated in educational programs and neighbourhood projects.

In 1968, the Federation of Cuban women (FMC) started the initiative to bring 100 000 new women into fulltime workforce. The FMC visited the homes of over 600 000 women in an effort to encourage them to go to work or enrol in educational classes. To facilitate the increase of women in the Cuban labour force, Resolutions 47 and 48 were passed in March 1968. Resolution 47 stipulated that women were to be given first preference in the 437 identified job categories. These jobs were determined by the limited danger they posed to a woman's reproductive health, based on a 1965 study authorized by Fidel Castro. The categorizing of jobs based on gender was in accordance with the traditional and cultural Latin American view that the woman's principal role is reproduction, which must be protected. Therefore, women should not be involved in strenuous physical labour like cane cutting and construction. Thus gender still played a critical role in occupation determinant.

In 1964, an article was published in the newspaper *Trabajo* which expressed these concerns: In offices, teaching, and stores, women are better situated than men, who should be doing labour where there is greater necessity of physical force" (Padula: 122). Resolution 48 reserved certain jobs for men only since they were considered physically harmful to women. The study carried out in 1965, also identified 498 jobs that would supposedly endanger the reproductive capacity of the woman. Some of the jobs identified were subterranean work, work in quarries, work in high or low temperatures, work at heights and work with equipment that produces heavy vibrations. The Resolution also facilitated the temporary transfer without any deduction in salary of pregnant women from jobs that threatened their health.

The FMC discussed the country's production needs with men in an effort to coax them to relinquish their positions in light industries or less physically strenuous tasks. Approximately 25000 men switched jobs as they took up heavier physical labour, as more women were attracted to the work force in jobs considered compatible for their sex. Despite the positive response from men, few women applied for these special jobs



as identified under Resolution 47, while others were unaware of the passed law so they continued working in those banned jobs or “masculine” jobs. In the 1970 interviews conducted by Margaret Randall in her study *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later*, she questioned professional women, peasants and workers about resolutions 47 and 48. The general response was that they were unaware of the new labour laws protecting women from physically dangerous jobs. “Cane-cutters laughed when told their specialty was on the prohibited list!” (Randall: 28). These women and their ancestors were very productive in their duties of cutting cane and loading heavy sacks, deemed by them as normal work that they would be paid for under the Revolutionary government.

In 1962 a Cuban journalist expressed the grounds for true exemption from housework for women: “There will not be true liberation (for women) until there is a network of cafeterias, laundromats, day care centres and, schools that help alleviate...domestic tasks” (Randall: 131) .

This statement proved to be true as the campaign faced objections by working class men who demanded that their wives stayed at home and

refused to share household responsibilities. The government also faced the challenge of inadequate infrastructure to facilitate day-care centres, school lunchrooms, laundries and workers’ dining halls which were needed to abate the burden of housework. The administrators of some establishments did not give their support as they resented the time off given to women to care for children or fulfil other responsibilities.

In the revolutionary government’s fervour to incorporate public production in Cuba by increasing women in the labour force, they eroded the value of domestic labour and the imperative incentives to ebb women’s double shift. The FMC pursued the establishment of day care centres by raising funds to alleviate the economic support needed from the government. In 1969, the organization selected approximately 1000 domestic servants to day care teacher-training institutes, who had previously attended teacher-training institutes to staff schools. The centres were established in abandoned mansions where the children were supplied with meals, baths, snacks and periodic medical care.

A fee based on parental income was initially established but was later



removed making day-care free to all full-time working mothers. One of the first day care programmes established by the FMC was in the Ministry of Foreign Relations, which reduced absenteeism among women. The FMC's continued effort to alleviate the dual role of all working women led to The Family Code of 1975. Cuban law placed economic value on domestic tasks which men were required to share and the working spouse must provide financial support for the stay at home partner.

The literary works that evolved after the revolution fused cultural expression and political consciousness to create a new revolutionary culture. Some of the themes focused on the contribution of the woman in the progress. *Maestra Voluntaria* by Daura Olema, who participated in the literacy campaign, writes in first person the experience of a female protagonist in the literacy campaign. *Gestos* (1963) by Severo Sarduy, shows the participation of women in clandestine activity, in pre-revolutionary Cuba. The protagonist is a black

singer and actress in the night and servant during the day. She is heavily involved in clandestine activity and she uses her job as an entertainer to conceal her intentions. These two books are examples of the new culture formed, which gives recognition to the woman's contribution to the success of the Cuban revolution.

The result of government efforts to eradicate illiteracy and economic dependency among women was the increase in females attaining a university level education. In the mid 1960's female students were pursuing many new fields of disciplines at university level, for example, geology. By the 1970's women were seen in professional positions as doctors, engineers, scientists, architects and university professors.

“This revolution has really been two revolutions for women; it has meant a double liberation: as part of the exploited sector of the country, and second, as women, who were discriminated against not only as workers but as women.” Fidel Castro (December 6, 1966)³

3 Stone, Elizabeth. *Women and the Cuban Revolution*. p. 12.



BIOGRAPHIES OF PROMINENT CUBAN WOMEN

CELIA SÁNCHEZ



Celia Sánchez Manduley was not only the creator and the leader of the Cuban Revolution; she was the Cuban Revolution. As the insightful witness Ada Martínez stated, the Cuban Revolution “would cease to exist” without Celia. As the eager but safely incarcerated young rebel stated, she was Fidel Castro’s inspiration (Haney: 32).

Celia Sanchez was born on May 9, 1920, in the town of Media Luna.

Her father was Dr. Manuel Sánchez, the head of the Cuban Medical Association and the owner of three farms. Her mother, Acacia Manduley, died in 1926 from a tropical fever related to childbirth, leaving Celia and her eight siblings to be cared for by their aunt.

Celia attained her degree in biology and was trained as a nurse at home. She regularly assisted her father when he visited patients in the rural areas. Celia’s love and attachment to country people grew out of her trips with her father and her interaction with the workers on her father’s farms.

In May 1953, as true Cuban patriots, Celia and her father along with students of El Seminario Martiano went to the Turquino Peak to install a bust of Jose Martí. Celia’s anti-Batista sentiments were first influenced by her father, who was troubled by the treatment of peasants under the Batista regime. Celia assisted underground meetings but she knew that a peasant revolution could not overthrow the United States and Mafia backed dictator. This was further reinforced when Fidel Castro and his rebel group failed to take over the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953.



Her fate in igniting a successful peasant revolution came when Maria Ochoa, a peasant girl who she cared for at birth, was murdered in Havana. Celia went into the Sierra Mountains, where she recruited young men and women, to start a peasant revolution. She had meticulously planned detailed attacks on military camps stationed in the areas of Holguin, Bayamo, Santiago de Cuba, Nuevitas and Manzanillo. Celia's popularity grew in the Sierras as young peasants voluntarily decided to join her. Celia established links with the July 26th Movement in Havana. Through them, the incarcerated Castro became aware of her revolutionary movement and he organized contact with her via letters delivered by messengers from July 26th Movement.

On December 2 1956, she and her rebel group fought off Batista's soldiers, as Fidel Castro and his group's plans to invade Cuba from the Niquero coast failed. Castro and his group joined Celia in the Sierras, where they planned and strategized attacks on Batista's army camps through the Sierra region. On January 1st, 1959, the revolution was successful as Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba after the successful invasions of army camps by Celia's Rebel Group.

Those who were in the Sierra, said that she was a very humble woman who, despite her accomplishments, spent most of the time diverting all the publicity from herself to others. She allowed Castro to lead the guerrilla movement with the confidence that he would fulfil the revolutionary ideas that would free the Cuban people from the inequities and injustices they faced by US Imperialism. Her discipline and total devotion to the leadership of Fidel along with her discretion and intelligence earned her the respect of the Revolutionary Army and the rural people during the insurrection and after the triumph of the Revolution.

After the triumph of the revolution in 1959, Celia was the Executive Secretary to the Commander in Chief until her death in 1980. On October 1st, 1965, she became a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba and in 1976 she was chosen as a diplomat to the National Assembly of Popular Power. She had the authority to advise the regime on policy and issues in Cuba's relationship with the world. On May 4, 1964, she founded the Office of Historical Affairs (*Oficina de Asuntos*), to preserve the historical documents and testimonies of the revolutionary process. She also used her capacity as



a government official to create public institutions and tourist centers like the Palace of the Revolution (Palacio de la Revolución), Havana's 1900 acre Lenin Park and the renowned "Coppelia" ice cream parlour. She also mandated the ballet scholarship program for Cuban children also government funded sports academies, which gave children across the island access to team sports.

On January 11th, 1980, Celia died after her battle with cancer. She continues to live in the hearts of the Cuban people as a representation of the true Cuban revolutionary and female ideal because of her dedication to the construction of a true Cuban society. One year after her death, Fidel Castro established the Celia Sánchez Manduley Hospital in her hometown of Manzanillo. The facility is seen as a symbol of the caretaking role Celia performed in life.

VILMA ESPÍN



Vilma Espín Guillois is described as sensitive, precise with the capacity to judge and criticize, to inspire and encourage. These are the traits that defined her and allowed her to become the most multifaceted female presence in Cuba (Shnookal: 35).

Vilma Espín was born on April 13th, 1930, in Santiago de Cuba in the Oriente province. She belonged to the petit bourgeois class since her father was the vice director of the



House of Barcardi and her mother was the daughter of the French consul in Santiago.

She was one of the first women to graduate with a degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Oriente. In 1952, she joined the student struggles against Fulgencio Batista when she became a member of the Revolutionary National Movement, Oriente National Action and the Revolutionary National Action. She supported the 1953 revolt led by Fidel Castro at the Moncada barracks and became a member of the July 26th Movement, where she organized and planned clandestine activities in the Oriente Province.

In 1954 she went to the United States to pursue post graduate study at the Massachusetts Technological Institute in Boston. One year later on her return to Cuba she went to Mexico where she met Fidel Castro for the first time. In Mexico she received instructions and materials to take back to Cuba, as the rebel group was preparing to invade Cuba on November 30, 1956. Her main job was to prepare First Aid Brigades, doctors and nurses; in areas where the wounded would be sent during the battle. She also transported rebels to target practice

which she practiced in herself. After an uprising in Santiago in November 30, 1956 which Castro and the rebel group failed to join, she went underground in April 1957, and was named the July 26th Movement coordinator in Oriente Province.

Vilma's parents were supportive and understood the struggle of the rebel group. Her father identified with it since he was a member of the civic resistance. Her mother, who was afraid that Vilma would be killed, insisted that she go to the mountains because of her popularity in the small city of Santiago. In 1957 she went to the Sierra to join the rebel group there. In 1958 she organized and coordinated the support needed for the clandestine movement in Oriente towns.

In 1959 after the success of the Revolution, she married Raul Castro, the brother of Fidel Castro, who became Cuba's second highest leader. Later that year she led a delegation of Cuban women to the Congress of Latin American Women in Santiago, Chile. In this congress Cuban women carried the voice of the Revolution and reaffirmed the idea of constructing in Cuba a strong movement that favours social progress of the Cuban woman. In her address to



the Congress, Vilma stated that the enemies of the Cuban revolution were the enemies of Latin America (Smith, L. & Padula, A.: 35).

On August 23, 1960, she was chosen by the Commander in Chief, Fidel Castro, to head the Federation of Cuban Women. The Federation was designed to mobilize, organize and train women by uniting them and building a conscious force on behalf of the revolution. She also served as the chair of the Commission for Social Prevention (1967-1971), director of industrial development in the food industry (1969-1973), president of the Infancy Institute since 1971 and vice president of the International Federation of Democratic Women since 1973 (Shnookal, 1991).

In 1975 she participated and presided over the Cuban delegation that assisted the United Nations Organization, on the theme of Woman in Mexico. Also, she participated in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995.

Vilma continues to work with the Federation of Cuban Women and is known as the First Lady of the Revolutionary Government.

HAYDEE SANTAMARÍA



Haydee Santamaría Cuadrado is described by Roberto Fernández Retamar, the Cuban poet, as an exceptional woman, organizer and builder of the Cuban Revolution and activist of Latin American and Caribbean cultural development.

Haydee Santamaría was born on December 30, 1922 in Encrucijada, the sugar mill centre of Las Villas province. Her father was a carpentry teacher and her mother, a housewife. Haydee, from a very young age identified with social problems around her. She and her brother Abel felt compassion for the workers who suffered unemployment between sugar harvests (Smith, L. & Padula, A.: 23).



She and her brother moved to Havana to escape their “very reactionary” family (Smith, L. & Padula, A.: 23). In Havana, she identified with the revolutionary ideas of her brother who followed the ideologies of Fidel Castro. She participated in the failed Moncada attack in 1953, and was sentenced to seven months in prison. Upon her release she joined the July 26th Movement as she continued in clandestine activity in Havana, as the Movement spread their revolutionary ideas, along with speeches written by Castro while in prison, like his famous justification of the Moncada attack: “History Will absolve Me”.

In 1956 she participated in the Santiago uprising which was supposed to coincide with Castro’s arrival at the coastal town of Niguero, from Mexico to invade the military barracks in that area. After the failed attack she joined Castro and the rebel group in the Sierras, where she fought and organized along with other female rebels the insurrection that successfully ended on January 1st, 1959.

After the triumph of the revolution she married Armando Hart, a fellow member of the July 26th Movement. He became the Minister of Education and then the Minister

of Culture. They had two children, Abel who was born in 1960 and Celia who was born in 1963. Her education exceeded the sixth grade education she attained as a child. Her natural intelligence, profound intuition and sensibility converted her into a workaholic and the need to manifest genuine art found in literature and paintings.

On July 4th, 1959, she founded La Casa de las Américas of which she was the director until her death in 1980. Through the institute she developed and supported Cuban artist and writers who were offered scholarships and won prizes for their contribution to Cuban culture and by extension Latin American and Caribbean culture. On October 3rd, 1965, she was chosen to be a member of the United Socialist Party of the Revolution (El Partido Unido de la Revolucion Socialista). In the second conference of the Federation of Cuban women she was chosen as a committee member because of her continuous defense of women’s rights.

On July 28th, 1980, six months after the death of Celia Sánchez and on the twenty seventh anniversary of the Moncada attack, she committed suicide at her home in Havana.



MELBA HERNÁNDEZ



Melba Hernández was born on July 28th, 1921. Her father and Corina Rodríguez, who was a messenger for the mambi general, Higinio Esquer-
ra, influenced her decision to join the revolutionary movement.

In 1953, she was arrested along with Haydee Santamaría for their participation in the failed Moncada attack. She wanted to participate in the actual attack as a rebel soldier but Fidel Castro demanded that she and Haydee remained in hideout. She

prepared the uniforms for the rebels and served as a nurse to the wounded.

As a trained lawyer she was used by Castro as his defence during the Moncada trials. Her role as the legal representative for Castro continued after her seven months sentence. She maintained contact with Castro through secret correspondences and eventually received and published the full content of his famous speech, "History Will Absolve Me".

She was a member of the National Directorate of the July 26th Movement as she revived Fidel's movement through meetings with radio stations and propaganda. During Fidel's exile after his release, she went to Mexico to help direct the Movement, while Fidel visited the United States.

After the triumph of the revolution she served as a founding member of the Federation of Cuban Women. She was a member of the Cuban Organization of Solidarity of Towns of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In 1986 she was the chairwoman of the Cuban Committee of Solidarity with Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In 2001 she became the Vice President of the Cuban Association of the United States.



CONCLUSION

The Cuban Revolution is in its forty eight year, making it the only successful revolution in the history of twentieth century Latin America. Its survival has been accredited to Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and other male revolutionary figures. The facts presented in this study prove that the success of the revolution also relied on the foundation constructed by Celia Sánchez in the Sierra; a foundation which allowed Castro to successfully overthrow the Batista regime in 1959 after his failed attempt in 1953.

The partnership formed by Celia and Castro in 1955 created a forum that allowed women to be more integral in the revolutionary process. Women who were under Castro's leadership prior to 1955 portrayed more traditional roles in the rebel group, as stated in the testimony of Haydee Santamaría in chapter one. However, Celia Sánchez started her peasant rebel group with women actively involved in all aspects of the process, from guerrilla rebels to messengers. The integral role portrayed by women during the insurrection years lead to the continued role of women in leadership positions and the continued mobilization of the

female population which the Regime needed to survive.

Because of the role played by women in the first decade of the Revolution, women are now poised to play a greater role in Cuban society. Women are actively involved in the political decision making process allowing them to lobby for policies that benefit the woman as a social being. Women are substantially represented in education, the armed forces and the general work force, whose doors were once closed to women especially, those from the lower classes.

The female pioneers of the revolution, Celia Sánchez, Vilma Espín, Haydee Santamaría and Melba Hernández, have provided the Castro regime with the groundwork from Moncada to the Sierra to Havana for a successful forty eight year reign over US Imperialism.

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