

## Introduction



In the two generations following Cuba's independence from Spain, women's rights became part of the Cuban political consciousness. Nationalist sentiments stirred by José Martí's pronouncements for social justice gave all Cubans, including women, hope that liberty, equality, and social justice might extend to them. Between 1902 and 1940 feminist organizations formed and worked to influence the direction of legislative decisions made by politicians, all of whom were men. Feminists held congresses, petitioned politicians, formed coalitions with a variety of men's activist groups, demonstrated in the streets, addressed the public in newspapers and on radio, built childbirth clinics, organized night schools for women, developed women's health programs, and established links with international feminist groups. As a result, by 1940 feminists had helped pass a corpus of legislation that was, in terms of its provisions for women, one of the more progressive in the world.

The Cuban feminist movement emerged during a period marked by controversy and instability. A restive population eager to modernize attacked colonial institutions such as the Catholic Church, Spanish laws, patriarchal privilege, social ordering, and a plantation-centered economy. Nationalists responded to the U.S. occupation and hegemony over the island. U.S. principles of capitalist materialism and individual rights clashed with Spanish notions of corporate privilege and community interdependence. Few agreed about the direction the Cuban government should take, but most Cuban political leaders concurred that modernization implied public education, some individual freedoms, elections, and attention to social reform. To those ends, they set about altering Spanish law. But elected officials were corrupt and weak, which cast doubt on whether laws had meaningful jurisdiction. By 1910, when political leaders had proved themselves unable or unwilling to bring honest democratic government to Cuba, students, workers, and women took to the streets to demand reform, and discord and violence became a means of conducting politics.

In this atmosphere of violence feminists began to present their demands to Cuba's political leaders and the people. Political instability in the 1920s and 1930s might have discouraged a more timid group, but in

this case the chaos enhanced rather than inhibited their efforts. Disorder meant that no faction held control and feminists could act as effective power brokers during periods of instability. The majority of feminists were political reformers whose demands required legal changes but not economic and political restructuring that was being urged by radical students and workers. In a time of irresolution, politicians enacted reforms to amass a following and demonstrate their reformist intentions. Feminists both led and followed. They produced a political agenda, and they supported those officials who honored their demands. As a result, feminists attained more legal rights for women than they otherwise might have won.

Feminist leaders were privileged women, comfortable with their social and political advantages. By concentrating on legal reform as a means of correcting social inequities, they interacted with politicians in the name of marginalized women. Their personal resources went toward building health and educational institutions for poor women and children, and their purpose was to ensure that the state establish health, education, and welfare agencies. They believed that democracy was not only workable in Cuba, but that it was the ideal means by which all women could effect social change. Cuban feminists, in fact, viewed themselves as the matriarchs of Cuban society, with a guaranteed position equivalent in importance to that of the men who governed.

Cuban feminists did not directly attack the patriarchy as the source of women's oppression, nor did they wage a serious campaign for women's social equality. Instead, they used their femininity in pursuit of their goals, the most important of which was general recognition that motherhood was women's divine right and that it justified their exercising political authority in nationalist Cuba. In short, they hoped to create a space for women in national and state governments as the overseers of welfare without displacing men who managed business, international relations, and other matters of state. The Spanish adage *El hombre está hecho para la calle y la mujer para la casa* (Men are made for life in the streets, women for life within the home) was unacceptable to feminists who took to the street in protest of their legal disadvantages and brought the home into politics by making women's domain the administration of women's, children's, and family rights.

The feminists' success rested on their boldness and insightfulness, to be sure, but they could not have had the impact they did if Cuba were not undergoing a transition from a colony to a modern state. That period was reformist in nature, but it was a process that brought together in dynamic conflict revolutionary, moderate, and conservative forces. Social mili-

tancy, political instability, and revolutionary ideals provided the backdrop for feminist activism. Although the majority of feminists were progressives, preferring evolutionary reform to violent overthrow of government or the dictatorship of a proletariat, they nonetheless took their rhetoric from radical ideals. The connection between Cuban revolutionary ferment and the feminist movement was unmistakable.

The Cuban woman's movement (1902–40) is one of the most ignored phenomena in modern Cuban history. From the first moments of the struggle for independence through the writing of the progressive constitution of 1940, politically aware Cubans recognized women's contributions to national identity and the formulation of nationalist values. Many Cubans who lived in that era remember the feminists and still recall their names and actions. Popular journals and newspapers chronicled their activities and gave them space in regular columns. That the movement has been forgotten is in part due to a common tendency to devalue women's activities. But the loss of information is also due in part to the drama and division over the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which has drawn attention away from the earlier, and more moderate, efforts of a small group of women.

The success of the Cuban Revolution in redefining women's economic and political roles in no way diminishes the earlier movement. The Revolution built on the successes of earlier campaigns, extending to all women the rights that had been accorded to only a few. In the early years feminists identified many injustices in Cuban patriarchal society, but their efforts changed only the law. Cuban women today continue the struggle at the mass level, and they share with their more moderate predecessors a devotion to the concept and the experience of motherhood and a commitment to find power in femininity.

The Cuban feminist movement was dramatic and effective. It contrasted with feminist movements elsewhere because of its roots in national independence, its confrontation with U.S. hegemony, its cultural setting, and the individuals who led the movement. That the law and a public consciousness about women's rights changed rapidly over thirty-eight years caused one Peruvian ambassador to Cuba to describe the feminists as "those amazing women."

This book examines the motivations of the feminists and Cuban lawmakers as they strove to build a new state through legal reform. As such, it reconstructs and interprets the mentalité of the ruling elite during the formative years of the Cuban republic in order to explain why so many reforms occurred so quickly and to define the terms and actions the protagonists used to accomplish their goals.