**Cuban Development Strategies and Gender Relations**

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Over the past 50 years Cuban society has radically transformed its institutions and openly encouraged women to become independent, educated, and empowered. As a result, Cuban women revolutionized gender relations and made much more progress than men.

This article appraises Cuban development practices since 1959 and their influence on the integration of women into the labor force as a way of fighting poverty and inequality while empowering women.

This contrasts with models prevailing elsewhere in Latin America, which have identified progress with economic growth. Cuba, unlike the rest of the region, rejected neoliberal strategies to confront the crisis it faced during the 1990s.1

A country need not be rich in order to develop its society, advance women's roles, and promote female leadership. What is needed is the political will to administer such a process in a comprehensive manner.

Cuba's economic and social policies between 1959 and 1989, including the integration of women into the workforce, laid the basis for this response.

Economic and social policies affecting female employment (1959–1989)2

Cuban concepts of development implied that economic transformation should provide material well-being to all and should contribute to changing ideological and cultural patterns of inequality and discrimination. Women were disproportionately represented among the poorest, and they immediately benefited from the strategies implemented to change the social relationships that characterized poverty.

Cuba's economic structure allowed increases in the gross domestic product (GDP) to be fed directly into universal social programs of education, health, social security, social welfare, culture and sports – areas defined by sociologist Mayra Espina as "venues for equality."3 These "venues" were designed by the state to give the entire population equal access to basic necessities; they became effective channels for breaking the cycle of inequality both in society and at home, and were "feminized" almost immediately. The gender equality that emerged benefited women more than men because, historically, women had been the victims of discrimination.

Early on, the country's leadership declared that it could not postpone women's advancement by making it depend on economic growth. That political goal led to the implementation of economic laws, social policies and other measures specifically geared towards women's equality that were predominantly ideological in nature. A strictly economic calculus would have delayed these decisions, diminished the importance of women's participation, and destroyed the possibility for women to be the agents of change right from the start.

Since women were more socially disadvantaged than men, full employment policies implied differential treatment for women in order to provide them a salary that would allow them to

be economically independent. Efforts to promote female employment were accompanied by legislation, social policies and other actions aimed at transforming patriarchal ideology and breaking the cycles that reproduced the material and spiritual hardship of Cuban women.

By the early 1970s, however, the female labor force was still unstable, due to the pressure of household chores, lack of economic incentives, and lack of amenities for women at workplaces – such as lavatories, showers, break rooms, first aid kits, appropriate clothing and footwear. Among the most successful measures were those which provided incentives to train and re-train female workers, which led to more women becoming professionals and technicians toward the end of the 1970s. The burden of a "second shift" of homemaking remained heavy. Adequate amenities for women were gradually introduced, but they frequently reflected the perceptions of the men who designed them rather than the actual needs of the women. The issue was eventually solved as women gained access to senior administrative positions in the unions, the party, and workplaces around the mid-1980s.

Working women have reached higher educational levels than working men since 1978.4 They were able to overcome their initial disadvantage thanks to the literacy campaign and adult education programs. Better training allowed women to pursue more complex and higher paying occupations. The nationalized education system provided them with a sense of security by guaranteeing their children education from primary school through university. It also gave them the freedom and support to hold a job. Childcare was implemented in 1961. The first day-care centers were followed by schools to train the necessary staff. Half-days were expanded to full school days, and lunch rooms were opened in primary schools. Scholarships were provided for needy students in all grades.

Before 1959, there was no national social security system in Cuba. During the 1960s and 1970s legislation was passed to make social security and social welfare universal, benefiting working women and single mothers. Working women had a guarantee of retirement and disability benefits, and pensions upon the death their husband. Men's pensions also contributed to family income. A Maternity Law was included in the Labor Code of 1974. Single mothers received

modest stipends to aid them in providing for their children until they returned to work. The legislation required fathers to pay child support if divorced or separated from their wives or partners.

Together with policies supporting full employment, the state guaranteed more equitable conditions by legislating equal pay for equal work. This led to the establishment of set salaries that resulted in very small differences in wage levels. For example, in 1983 the General Salary Reform allowed a 4.5 to 1 ratio between the highest and the lowest salaries. In 1988, according to studies by the Institute for Studies of Labor, for 93% of the jobs the difference was only 2.3

to 1.5 This salary system contributed to the homogenization of social structures, as it minimized the disparity among the various social strata.

These measures coincided with the massive influx of women into the work force.6 Women became salaried workers under the same labor laws as men, but they earned less than men as they typically held lower-paying jobs. They were also absent more because of their responsibility for tending to children, the sick and the elderly, and because they themselves were ill more often than men. This behavior continued in those first 30 years, although Cuban women steadily demanded that both sexes participate equally in all facets of the economy, in all occupational categories – especially senior administrative positions – and in domestic work.

Gender distribution in each of the occupational categories improved: in 1981 there was one woman for every six workers, while in 1986 there was one woman for every four workers. For every two technicians there was one woman; five years later in 1981, 56% of the technicians were women. The proportion of women in the category of senior administrators improved but less rapidly than in the categories of workers and technicians (highly trained workers): in 1981 for every five administrators there was one woman, and in 1986 this ratio changed to four to one.7

Although the glass ceiling persisted, there were signs of improvement by the end of the 1980s. There was female employment in all the sectors of the economy, even those considered traditionally male, and in all occupational categories, including management. Women made

up more than half the technicians in the country, creating a pool of well-educated individuals for future administrative positions. In addition, fulfilling both their work and home responsibilities prepared them for making important decisions.

Cuban social policies in the 1960s-1980s considered rationed consumption of necessities to be a way of life, rather than just a means for solving the problem of poverty.8 This notion led to an egalitarian and homogenized system of distribution and consumption which gave women access to consumer goods they did not have before. In the family context this meant improvements in nutrition, hygiene, clothing and even access to domestic appliances. Women, following the patriarchal tradition, were the homemakers, regardless of whether they were heads of households, second-income providers, or housewives. In addition, they were responsible for managing the goods distributed by the state, and thus for creating new patterns of consumption. An unforeseen and somewhat paradoxical result was to give women new decision-making power. Altering consumption patterns was part of the struggle against poverty – of which women were at the forefront.9

In the first 30 years of the revolution, women were the driving force for transformations in gender relationships. They had to dismantle cultural patterns of patriarchal ideology that existed not only in society but in themselves. And they had to develop new non-sexist ideological patterns. In this endeavor they advanced more than men. Contrary to what has happened in other countries – including the United States – where women have modernized but society has remained stagnant regarding gender relationships, in Cuba both the women and society were changed, because women participated in making those changes from the very beginning.

Without trying to create a stereotype of the Cuban working woman at the beginning of the 1990s, the following could be said of the cohort between the ages of 22 and 55 and who had completed at least the ninth grade. This group had between nine and 17 years of schooling; they had one or perhaps two children; their knowledge of health included the use of contraceptives and prenatal care; they enjoyed medical care for themselves and their families; and they had a work ethic that allowed them to understand, among other things, the independence that comes with earning a salary. They also had a sense of discipline from their experience in classrooms and at work; they shouldered home chores and understood that men should also participate; they began to care for family elders who could no longer contribute to home chores; and they were capable of making decisions in their jobs and at home.

Crisis, readjustments and women's employment: 1990–2008

The upward social mobility experienced by Cubans in the first 30 years of the Revolution stopped for at least three reasons. First, the younger generation could not experience the dramatic increase in living standards that their parents had enjoyed in the Revolution's

initial phase. Second, from 1985 to 1989, Cuba engaged in rectifying mistakes – mainly in economic policy – committed during the preceding ten years. This "rectification process" was aborted by the crisis of the 1990s. Lastly, Cuba entered an overall crisis because the USSR disappeared, the Eastern European socialist bloc disintegrated, the rectification process halted, and the US economic blockade tightened.

From 1989 to 1993, Cuba's GDP fell more than 33%, leading to a devastating decrease in social consumption.10 According to Cuban economist Everleny Pe´rez, this decline diminished the supply of rationed basic goods and services subsidized by the state, while non-rationed products practically disappeared. The black market expanded, resulting in high prices and a sharp decline in purchasing power. This affected more than 90% of the country's labor force.11 Cubans felt the impact of the crisis much more acutely than did the poorest of other Latin American and Caribbean countries. One reason for this is that Cubans entered the crisis with relatively high living standards and with their basic needs covered. In an extremely short period they witnessed these standards – which had steadily improved for 30 years – plummet. Women suffered the most, especially working women with their dual burden of salaried work and homemaking.

Cuba began to emerge from the crisis in 1994. By 2004, GDP had reached 99% of its 1989 level, in constant prices.12 This steady recovery is reflected in an overall 42.5% increase of GDP from 2004 to 2007. In 2007 the economy grew 7.5%.13 The economic recovery measures implemented in the 1990s included:

. Reform of state enterprises

. Reinsertion of the economy into the world market in cooperation with various foreign counterparts

. Decentralization of the economy

. Expansion of the private sector

. Increased importance of tourism, telecommunications and mining,

with tourism boosting other economic sectors

. Stable valuation of the Cuban peso and free circulation of the US

dollar. Stores selling in hard currency were opened to collect flows

of hard currency coming through remittances

. Efficient use of a well-trained labor force

These were not neoliberal measures. They were the result of adapting previously valid development strategies in order to incorporate the country into the global economy. The transition to socialism continued, and, as Pedro Monreal has pointed out, the measures were flexible and practical and designed under enormous pressure, in a short period of

time.14

Throughout the readjustment process the policies promoting women's full incorporation into the labor force persisted, adapting to the new circumstances. Two examples may be cited. First, in 1997 the Council of State passed the "National Action Plan of the Republic of Cuba in compliance with the Beijing Conference." It included 90

measures to be enacted by state institutions to facilitate the advancement of Cuban women. Its implementation was managed through workshops organized by the Federation of Cuban Women.15 Second, paid maternity leave was increased in 1993 from three to six months and later to one year. Beginning in 2000, paternity leave of up to one year was also instituted. However, very few Cuban men have ever used this right.

Women's participation in the labor force during even the worst years of the crisis and readjustment fluctuated little. In 1989, on the threshold of the crisis, the proportion of working-age women in the total workforce was 38.7%.16 Until that point women's participation had steadily increased, but since then it has leveled off and even slightly declined, going from 38% in 1996 to 37% by 2006, while men's participation rose from 62% to 63%.17 Therefore, although the difference was small, the crisis hurt women more than men in terms of labor-force participation.

Looking at occupations, we find that among working women from 1996 to 2006 there was an increase in the proportion who became technicians (39% in 1996 to 44% in 2006), while only 13% of all employed men worked as technicians in 1996 and only 17% ten years later.18

Women's predominance among technical workers is explained by the fact that they have reached higher levels of education than working men since 1978. Following this trend – explained in the first part of this essay – in 2006, 18% of all women workers were university graduates compared to 11% of all working men. Furthermore, 56% of all women workers had finished high school in contrast to 44% of men.19

Women were consistently least represented in senior administrative positions. In 1996 and in 2006 6% of all working women were senior administrators, compared to 8% of all working men. Participation by gender among senior administrators showed little change from 1996 to 2006: 71% and 70% for men and 29% and 30% for women respectively.

Women served as managers in traditional as well as nontraditional sectors such as steel, sugar, sciences, telecommunication, and information technology. We can thus infer that upon emerging from the crisis, women kept the "quality" of their job structure. However if we compare the proportion of women among technicians we will see that there has been a drop: in 1996 women represented 64% of all technicians and by 2006 the number had slightly dipped to 60%.20 It remains to be seen, however, if the decline in percentage of women technicians has continued. If so, it will warrant an explanation.

During the 1990s Cuba did not abandon industrialization as a way to reduce imports and to advance in its long-range development plans. Changes in Cuba's global economic relations were the result of its export goods having to compete under different conditions than those delineated by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), the 10-member organization of former socialist countries created in 1949 that dissolved in 1990. Cuba had been a member since 1972. The purpose now "was to maintain the industrial structures existing prior to the crisis and to modernize them partially in order to wait for the moment when new investments appeared. Tourism, nickel and pharmaceutical industries received the highest investments."21

The goal was to intensively exploit natural resources, advanced technologies, and the highly trained labor force in order to reinsert Cuba into the world market offering high-value goods such as pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, computer programming, and other specialized services. Tourism grew at an annual rate of 20% during the 1990s,22 driving forward the rest of the economy and sustaining basic social services for the population. Cuban researcher Jesuss M. Garcia Molina wrote that this tertiary activity directly and indirectly created 300,000 jobs and stimulated the recovery of other sectors such as agriculture, construction, telecommunications, transportation, and the food, beverage and liquor industries. In addition it supported credits that revived several branches of national production, and after 1994 it replaced the sugar industry as the main source of hard currency.

Tourism increased the demand for specialized training that took place in the field of business administration – including marketing and advertising – and in job-training and retraining. In the latter half of the 1990s this specialized training also benefited the aviation, pharmaceutical, medical equipment, and telecommunications industries. Women were present in all these branches, accounting for the majority of technicians and professionals.

Part of the industrial sector, which under the CMEA was highly dependent on member countries and not competitive on the world market, was redirected to producing for the Cuban domestic hard-currency market. The idea was to recover hard currency inside Cuba and

use it to restore the economy and invest in basic needs. The potential consumers of these goods were state enterprises, joint ventures, and Cubans with access to hard currency (those employed in tourism, in joint ventures, and in state enterprises that gave hard currency

bonuses; the self-employed; small landowners; and remittance receivers). These “inside-the-border innovations” helped reactivate and modernize those industries that were producing for domestic markets and selling their goods in Cuban national currency. In the beginning these products were not of export quality, but some improved with time and were eventually purchased by tourist enterprises.

While tourism played, and continues to play, a critical role in boosting the economy, the country’s main exports still are products of the mining, tobacco and fisheries industries, where men have higher rates of employment. But in industries that produce advanced technology exports, which will most likely dominate Cuba’s exports in the future, women are highly represented. Therefore, today women are fundamental components of Cuba’s principal economic asset: a skilled and up-to-date labor force.

As mentioned above, consumption plunged with the decline in GDP and the purchasing power of wages in the 1990s. Although nominal salaries started increasing in 2005, they have not fully recovered in real terms because prices are still high. This leads to disadvantages for those who are dependent on social security and social welfare. At the onset of the crisis, 95% of the country’s labor force worked in the public sector. During the crisis years, part of it

was reoriented toward private enterprise, joint ventures and cooperative sectors as well as to state companies that offered workers bonuses in hard currency. This led to a restructuring of the work force between the public and private sectors, with the former currently employing 75% of the total labor force. Most public sector workers are paid in Cuban national currency. Public employees, along with persons depending on social security pensions and welfare, have been the hardest hit since the crisis started.

Based on the scarce information available comparing incomes by gender, which includes several case studies, it can be inferred that women have been more affected than men by the decrease in real salary values and pensions in recent years, as they represent only 11.9% of the self-employed and 35.4% of joint venture personnel (the two main sources of hard currency income), and make up the majority of social program beneficiaries.24

Who has been receiving hard currency in Cuba for the last 18 years? Persons receiving remittances; the self-employed who charge for their work in hard currency (men represent 88% of this category); tourist industry employees; and joint venture personnel (66% male). Some state enterprises pay workers partially in hard currency. Also, small landowners, who are among the most affluent, convert their incomes to hard currency (almost exclusively men). According to official calculations, in 1997, 50% of all citizens had access to hard currency. That figure grew to 62% in 2001.25 Unfortunately, there are no data regarding gender distribution. As for those receiving foreign remittances (the fundamental source of hard currency), case studies show that women account for the majority of persons

managing these incomes. The phenomenon of receiving and administering remittances merits further study from a gender perspective.

The crisis and reform process of the 1990s thwarted efforts to ensure social equality among all Cubans. The extremely complex circumstances forced the State to rethink the measures

devised in the early 1990s. Social policies remained intact, but incomes and consumption deteriorated critically, with a disproportionate effect on women.26 Diminishing real wages strained family budgets. Additionally, when goods that used to be part of the subsidized family provisions started to be sold in hard currency, access to them became limited for many people. These events affected all who worked in the public sector. It more acutely affected families headed by women, which were 32% of all families in 2002.27 Women had to devise strategies to overcome their limited purchasing power while still caring for their families.

An excellent study by the Research Institute of Cuba's Ministry of Labor analyzed wage-differences by gender among public sector workers. Defined by its authors as a "pilot" study, it concluded, "Differences in incomes, although small, were unfavorable to women, who received wages 2% lower than men."28 It also found that on average women worked fewer days per month than men and, consequently, earned less. The main reasons were: sickness 60%; caring for children and other family members 22%; and maternity leave 18%. Of all registered work absences, women accounted for 77%.

Men rarely took leave from their jobs for reasons other than their own illness. Only 4% of men categorized as technicians or blue-collar workers took leave to care for children or other family members, while 27% of men working in service categories, where salaries are lower, did so.29

Several articles about the effects of the crisis observed that incomes and standards of living became disconnected from jobs, as people began earning money in side activities. For women these included renting rooms, sewing clothes, street-vending, typing, etc. This secondary economic activity did not exist before the crisis.

The decline of incomes from social security and social programs caused pensioners' contributions to the family budget to shrink precisely when these individuals needed extra care that their incomes could not cover. This was a new phenomenon. The mothers of this first generation of female workers were usually homemakers who took care of their grandchildren. However, as they got older, their daughters would need to take care of them – without abandoning their jobs. The daughters had to devise strategies to fulfill these additional duties. Coincidentally, the economic crisis hit at the same time that this new situation was emerging, affecting women more than men. Women workers took non-paid work leave or simply abandoned their jobs to look after elderly family members, further decreasing family incomes.

The poverty level rose. In 1985 people with very low incomes represented 6% of the population. Ten years later, in 1995, they amounted to 15%, and at present 20% of the population in urban areas falls into this category.30 Although these national statistics are not broken down by gender, recent case studies indicate that the highest incomes were 24 times the lowest. This is very different from 1978 when the highest were only four times the owest.31

In order to continue the struggle against poverty and inequality, what role should women play in the country's employment strategies and policies? In the context of a market-driven global economy, how should this be done without using a neoliberal approach? Varying proposals exist but all agree that the Cuban people themselves are the principal asset for overcoming the crisis because they are highly educated and are likely to continue their education.

Since 1978, women have constituted more than half of the country's professionals and technicians – the most highly skilled members of the labor force – and since 1993 they have represented over 60%. Women workers are present in all economic sectors, including those that will lead the way in producing valuable new exports such as pharmaceuticals and computer programming (where they outnumber men). In the sugar, aviation, and tourism industries they are also strongly represented among technicians and professionals.

Women account for 57% of all faculty members in Cuban universities and make up 52% of the labor force employed in the sciences.32

Women in fields such as education, science and public health are instrumental in educating future and present workers. They also make up the majority of teachers and professors at all levels of education – from preschool to graduate studies. In Cuba 99.8% of children graduate from primary school, 98.4% from junior high, and 78.4% from high school.33 The fact that almost all Cubans graduate from the 9th grade, almost 80% finish the 12th grade, and a high proportion of them continue on to university, shows that Cubans typically spend 12–17 years in educational institutions. This helps to instill an ethic of discipline that will likely be reflected on the job.

Working women continue to attain higher educational levels than their male counterparts. In 2006, 19% of all employed women had completed university, compared to 11% of all employed men. 56% of all employed women had completed high school compared to 44% of men.

Women working in the healthcare sector help promote healthy habits, which is one means of upgrading the public well-being. They have also been serving as health professionals and technicians in underdeveloped countries for several decades.

Participating in technologically advanced economic activities requires the ability to lead and make decisions. Over the last half century in Cuba, one of the most important changes in terms of gender ideology to result from women's increased employment has been their enhanced ability to make decisions. Working women have used their advanced education to cope with simultaneously performing several tasks at work and at home, while living in a society that has been fundamentally transformed and where they have been more deeply affected by the changes than men. More in-depth studies are needed in order to understand how Cuban working women developed their decision-making strategies. One interesting question here is the effect of generational differences, as younger women tend to be able to "persuade" the men in their families to perform domestic duties.

Through decision-making, women not only developed a sense of empowerment as human beings, but also confirmed their right to act independently. That is a basic civil right that not all Cuban women fully exercised prior to 1959. Nevertheless, not only do more women need to be assigned to leadership positions, but the concept of women as leaders needs to be promoted in order to boost women's willingness to take on such roles. 35 In 2006–07, 65% of all university graduates were women, accounting for 74% of the graduates in medical sciences, 71% in economics, 48% in natural sciences and mathematics, 37% in engineering and architecture, and 34% in agricultural sciences – traditionally male-dominated fields.36 This is

another reason to underline the importance of women in the creation of a highly skilled labor force. Women also are more likely to continue their education. Case studies and statistics show that more women than men have doctorates or master's degrees, enroll in graduate courses, and study languages.

Over the last 25 years, my research on women and employment in Cuba has tried to show that changes in gender ideology have given women, especially working women, decision-making abilities that are used in all aspects of their everyday lives. In more recent studies comparing professional men and women, I found that attitudes about leadership differ by gender. The majority of men interviewed in my case studies occupied senior administrative positions either at the time or in the past. All of them were willing to assume leading roles in their occupations. On the other hand only one-fifth of the women had held a senior administrative position and/or were willing to do so.

As I stated above, in Cuba in 2006 less than one third of all senior administrators were women. Of all women workers only 6% were managers. These figures, which have been fairly consistent for the last 15 years, are disproportionately low considering that women comprise the majority of professionals and technicians and should therefore be the natural source of senior administrators. In 2006 men filled 70% of all top jobs at the work place, while their representation among professionals and technicians rose only slightly.

Men in my case studies who have held leadership positions at their jobs or who are willing to become senior administrators felt that they were qualified for or were capable of being trained to handle these responsibilities. They were "seeking" these posts. Women in the sample explained why they did not want to become senior administrators. Almost all of them said that they were not sufficiently trained; others answered that it would take too much of their time, while paying very little; others felt that it would be an extra burden on top of their homemaking responsibilities; some said that they preferred to continue upgrading their professional knowledge instead of being trained as managers. All of them felt that they were already making decisions at their jobs.37 It is a mistake to conclude from their answers that these professional women lack self-confidence. Instead, they know what they want to achieve in their fields of employment, and they think that becoming a manager would deter them from reaching their goals.

The few women in the sample who held senior administrative posts at the time of my study or who had occupied them in the past said that they had not been pursuing these positions. They had been assigned to them. Some of the women had been grassroots union leaders. They acknowledged that their co-workers respected their authority, that they were capable of solving problems, and that although they were not completely satisfied performing managerial duties, they carried them out responsibly. The fact that most Cuban women who are capable of becoming senior administrators do not want to do so, illustrates that the transformation of gender ideology is unfinished. However, the necessary conditions are present to advance this process.

Broad access for women to leadership positions cannot wait until patriarchal cultural patterns in Cuba are completely transformed.

Women's promotion to managerial posts should contribute to such changes, as happened with the incorporation of women into the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s.

Cuban women are judges, engineers, doctors, scientists and professors, but they also carry the burden of homemaking. Studies show that they spend three more hours per week doing household chores than working men. A recent example illustrates this. Since 2004 Cuba has engaged in an "energy revolution," which has totally and urgently changed the country's energy production and consumption structures.

As part of this effort, more energy-efficient electrical appliances were sold to the public at subsidized prices and with long-term credits. The plan was to replace energy-inefficient appliances from the former socialist bloc or from before the 1959 Revolution. This replacement process took place over one year under the guidance and control of female professionals, technicians and departmental heads of the Ministry of Basic Industry, one of the key ministries led by a woman.

Nevertheless, recent studies show that, although younger male family members tend to share household chores made easier by these new appliances, women continue to perform the majority of household tasks. Women argue that men do not know how to use the appliances and they fear that the men would break them.

The age composition of today's Cuban families reflects the fact that 70% of the current population was born after 1959. They have been exposed to the struggle against gender discrimination for 50 years.

Nevertheless, patriarchal ideologies "run in their veins." And patriarchal ideology, which perpetuates discrimination against women, is as important a problem as the shortages in housing, electrical appliances, consumer goods, or production-related supplies.

There are examples of non-patriarchal approaches to policy in regard to gender. The way in which the new social security law was introduced demonstrates this.

Cuba's population has decreased in the last two years due to multiple socio-demographic factors. Cuba also has an aging population (17% of Cubans are over 60 and it is estimated that by 2025 that number will rise to 26%; life expectancy is 77 years). Birth rates have been low since 1978 (1.43 children – 0.69 daughters – per woman). This reflects the incorporation of women into the labor force since the early 1970s and the availability of family-planning and sex-education programs since 1964. It is predicted that by 2025 the absolute number of working-age Cubans will decrease and there will be a 25% decline in women of reproductive age. The new social security law passed in 2008 postpones retirement for women from 55 to 60 years of age and for men from 60 to 65. It also includes pension increases that go into effect in 2009.38

None of the arguments used to modify the law "blamed" the decreases in fertility rates on women for remaining in the labor force On the contrary, the causes of low birth rates have to do with issues concerning men and women alike. Changes in the law benefit both men and

women. For example, previously a widow had to decide which pension to keep: hers or her late husband's. According to the new law widowers will also have the right to decide between their late spouse's pension and their own.

Closing remarks and ideas for future research Since 1959, policies promoting women's equality in Cuba have shared the concept that the quest to eradicate discrimination of all kinds is tied to the struggle against poverty, inequity and underdevelopment. In a country such as Cuba this mission can only be achieved if it departs from merely offering "assistance" programs and understands that solving these problems entails transforming social relations.

For the last half-century, in order to make progress, women in Cuba had to fight against social relations that fostered discrimination. They had become their own agents of change and participated in the process of ending the conditions that produced inequalities. This was understood to be an ongoing process in which women would receive differential treatment.

The policies that are the foundation for the sustainable advancement of women are the same as those employed to fight poverty, inequity and underdevelopment. To stay on track it has been necessary to be flexible, to continually make necessary changes in the economy, "to revive production and stimulate public services, to finance social policies that ensure the public's well being, and to legitimize the state as responsible for this dynamic process."39

Espina writes that it is also important to "reach a new understanding of equality as an essential characteristic of social relations and, basically, of distribution procedures and actions to satisfy material and spiritual needs, based on the understanding of diversity."40 This means incorporating differential criteria into production and distribution policies. According to Karl Marx, socialism must be governed by the principle "from each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her work." This allows for inequalities depending on each person's contribution to society. It also eschews "egalitarian" criteria that favor those who do not contribute.

Taking a gender approach to the study of Cuban development overall – with the methodological richness that it will add to all fields of social sciences – as opposed to looking at gender only in terms of promoting women in the work force and the impact that has on gender relations, will provide social scientists with gender-specific information that is currently lacking. The stability resulting from women's employment policies has been the result of the continual adaptation of those policies to fit each moment's specific conditions. This flexibility takes into account that as women and their roles continue to change, policies that promote those changes must adapt to the new woman and to the new social conditions. This was the case with female employment in the 1960s, with the maternity law in the mid-1970s, and currently with the social security law.

Scholars and political leaders have changed their approach to women's equality over the past 50 years, viewing the matter as involving both men and women. This is reflected in laws passed ensuring

equal pay for equal jobs and in challenges to patriarchal decision-making patterns at work and at home. It continues to be evident in the way society struggles to eliminate remaining

inequalities in economic production and homemaking and in the approach taken toward addressing the issue of low fertility rates.

The new perspectives on women and gender relations have not been followed by the necessary changes in patriarchal attitudes. Many traditional, discriminatory standards persist in the attitudes of both women and men. For example, traditional ideology depicts men as the main breadwinners. This may contribute to preventing them from attending university because they are expected to work to provide for their family (or save for a future family). In fact, much research on women's employment in Cuba has shown that men are no longer the main breadwinners.41

One of the most important contributions to gender ideology has been the development of working women's decision-making capabilities. However, the concept of women as leaders still needs to be brought into society's imagination or consciousness.

The massive and permanent incorporation of women into the labor force began in 1970. These have been years of joy and grief caused by changes affecting almost three generations of female workers – changes in relationships at home, at work, and in the community. As

a result men and women have become better human beings.

I hope this essay will help show the importance of a gender perspective in studying Cuba's development and transition to socialism. I hope it has also shown how Cuba has eschewed neoliberal policies in its effort to eradicate poverty and inequality and to promote women's leadership.

The female-centered approach of this study provides new ways of evaluating the gains and losses of Cuban women at the intersection of economic production and homemaking over the past 50 years. However, there is also a need to pursue studies on the male role in

gender relations in order to facilitate the transformation of patriarchal patterns. This would give scholars the opportunity to produce new knowledge by constantly questioning the status quo, resulting in a better understanding of gender issues and enhancing our comprehension of society as a whole.

1. The term "neoliberalism" refers to the policies promoted by the Washington Consensus since the end of the 1980s, which opened all national frontiers to the free flow of

goods and capital while blocking the free flow of labor. On a global level it reduced

wages, cut costs, erased environmental restrictions, and cut taxes that subsidized

social benefits.

2. This section is based on my paper "Cuban Alternatives to Market Driven Economies:

a Gendered Case Study on Women´s Employment," presented at the UNDP

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3. Mayra Espina, “Efectos sociales del reajuste econo´mico: igualdad, desigualdad y procesos de complejizacio´n en la sociedad cubana,” in Jorge I. Domi´nguez, Omar Everleny Pe´rez, and Lorena Barberi´a (eds), La economi´a cubana a principios del siglo XXI (Mexico and Cambridge: El Colegio de Me´xico and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2007), p. 247.
Colloquium “Assessing and Rebuilding Progress through Women´s Knowledge” in Rabat, October 2008.

4. In 1978, 5% of working women were university graduates, compared to 3.5% of working men. That same year 23% of working women had a 12th-grade education in comparison with 13% of working men. In 1986 the figures for university graduates were 12% of working women and 7% of working men, while for high school graduates, they were 35% of the women and 27% of the men. Calculations made by the author from Anuario Estadi´stico de Cuba 1988 (Havana: Comite´ Estatal de Estadi´sticas, 1988), Table IV.16, p. 202.

5. Boris Nerey and Nivia Brismart, “Estructura social y estructura salarial en Cuba: encuentros y desencuentros,” Master’s thesis, cited in Espina, “Efectos sociales” (note 3), p. 250. Data from the Instituto de Investigaciones y Estudios del Trabajo.

6. The proportion of women in the country’s total work force increased steadily from 13% in 1959 to 19% in 1970. Between 1970 and 1989, growth was much steeper, going from 19% to 38.7%. Marta Núñez Sarmiento, Equipo Internacional de investigaciones comparadas sobre la mujer, La mujer cubana y el empleo en la Revolucio´n (Havana: Editora de la Mujer, October 1988).

7. Calculations by the author, based on Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 1988 (note 4), Table IV.16, p. 202.

8. Espina, “Efectos sociales” (note 3), p. 245.

9. D. Elson, S. Chacko, and D. Jain, “Interrogating and Rebuilding Progress through Feminist Knowledge.” Notes prepared for the UNDP project “Assessing and Rebuilding Progress Through Women’s Knowledge,” June 2008, p. 6.

10. Omar Everleny Pe´rez, “La situacio´n actual e la economi´a cubana y sus retos futuros,” in Jorge I. Domi´nguez, Omar Everleny Pe´rez, and Lorena Barberi´a (eds), La economi´a cubana a principios del siglo XXI (Mexico and Cambridge: El Colegio de Me´xico and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2007), p. 71.

11. Ibid., p. 77. Two developments illustrate the impact the crisis had on food consumption. The first is described by Cuban economist Angela Ferriol: “The most evident manifestation of the crisis was the presence of epidemic neuropathy, which had its high point during the first quarter of 1993. ... Studies proved that the main cause of this disease was toxic-nutritional, due to a deficient and unbalanced diet.” Second, the proportion of underweight newborns rose to 9%. Starting in 1994, nutritional conditions improved, but deficiencies continued for several years. The havoc caused by these two health problems is still felt and is still being treated. Elena Alvarez and Jorge Mattar, eds, Poli´tica social y reformas estructurales: Cuba a principios del siglo XXI. (Mexico: United Nations Comisio´n Econo´mica para

Ame´rica Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Econo´micas (INIE) in Havana, 2004), p. 138f.

12. Pe´rez, "La situacio´n actual" (note 10), p. 71.

13. Jose´ Luis Rodriguez, Minister of Economy and Planning, "Report on 2007 Economic Results, National Assembly of the People's Power," Granma, December 29, 2007, p. 6.

14. Pedro Monreal, "La globalización y los dilemas de las trayectorias econo´micas de Cuba", in Jorge I. Domi´nguez, Omar Everleny Perez, and Lorena Barbería (eds), La economi´a cubana a principios del siglo XXI (Mexico and Cambridge: El Colegio de Me´xico and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2007), p. 137.

15. Plan de Acción Nacional de Seguimiento a la Conferencia de Beijing de la República de Cuba (Havana: Editorial de la Mujer, 1999), pp. 9–23.

16. Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 1996, p. 116.

17. Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (hereafter ONE), Perfil estadi´stico de la mujer cubana en el umbral del siglo XXI, February 1999, p. 144; ONE, Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2006, Table VI.9.

18. ONE, Perfil estadístico (note 17), Chart VI.9.

19. ONE, Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2006 (note 17), Table VI.6.

20. ONE, Perfil estadístico (note 17), Chart VI.9, and Anuario Estadi´stico de Cuba 2006, Chart VI.8 (note 17).

21. Monreal, "La globalización de los dilemas" (note 14), p. 130.

22. Ibid., p. 131.

23. Álvarez and Mattar, Política social y reformas estructurales (note 11), p. 23.

24. Instituto de Investigaciones y Estudios del Trabajo, "La presencia femenina en el

mercado de trabajo, en las diferentes categorías ocupacionales y sectores de la economía, la segregacio´n horizontal y vertical, los salarios e ingresos en general,"

Havana, November 2007.

25. Everleny Pérez, "La situación actual" (note 10), p. 79.

26. Espina, "Efectos sociales" (note 3), p. 251f.

27. ONE, Censo de Población y Viviendas de la República de Cuba, 2002.

28. Instituto de Investigaciones del Trabajo, "La presencia femenina" (note 24).

29. Ibid. In the 1990s there were other methods to calculate differences in salaries by gender, but none of them was as precise as the methodology used in this study. In 1996 the authors of "Investigación del desarrollo humano en Cuba" [Research on Human Development in Cuba] pointed out in a note that "the ratio of female to male salaries should equal 1.00 instead of 0.75."

30. Espina, "Efectos sociales" (note 3), p. 255.

31. Ibid.

32. Prontuario Estadístico Educación Superior, Curso 2007-2008, Havana, January 2008, p. 7; Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2006 (note 17), Table XXII.1.

33. Dirección de Estudios Sociales, Inicio del curso escolar 2007-2008 y Resumen del curso escolar 2006-2007, March 2008, ONE. 34 High female enrollment suggests that this trend will persist in the near future: in 2007–08 63% of all students enrolled at universities were women.

34. ONE, Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2006 (note 17), Table VI.7.

35. Prontuario Estadístico Educación Superior (note 32), p. 4.

36. Ibid., p. 27; Dirección de Estudios Sociales, Inicio del curso escolar (note 33).

37. Marta Nu´n˜ez Sarmiento, "Cuban Strategies for Women's Employment in the 1990s: A Case Study of Professional Women," Socialism and Democracy, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring-Summer 2001, pp. 41–64; "Changes in Gender Ideology Among Professional Women and Men in Cuba Today," Cleveland State Law Review, Vol. 52, Nos. 1/2, 2005, pp. 173–187; "Un modelo 'desde arriba' y 'desde abajo' : el empleo femenino

y la ideología de género en Cuba en los últimos treinta años," in Nathalie Lebon & Elizabeth Maier, eds, De lo Privado a lo Público. 30 años de lucha ciudadana de las mujeres en América Latina (LASA, UNIFEM, Siglo XXI, 2006), pp. 74–91.

38. Information extracted from the Social Security Law, tabloid, Editora Política, 2008.

39. Espina, "Efectos sociales" (note 3), p. 273.

40. Ibid.

41. In 1986 and 1987 the Federation of Cuban Women led a study at the textile factory Celia Sanchez Manduley in Santiago de Cuba and collaborated extensively with Helen Safa in the research presented in her book Myth of the Male Breadwinner (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).