

## ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTION

*“A people whose women fight alongside men – that people is invincible.” - Fidel Castro*

For many women in Cuba the revolution was the first glimpse of a life outside of the realm of home and domesticity

At the beginning of the revolution, most women (with notable exceptions such as **Vilma Espín** and **Celia Sánchez**) volunteered in the revolutionary struggle in traditional support roles.



*Celia Sanchez*

Despite the important work women were doing already, they wanted the chance to contribute in the same way as men – through active combat. Women were barred from combat, however, because many prejudices still existed among men about the capabilities of women in war. Until women were able to fight (1958), they continued to aid the revolution in other ways, often working, like Espín did, to transport goods throughout the country.

The importance of women’s contributions to the Cuban Revolution is reflected in the very accomplishments that allowed the revolution to be successful, from the participation in the Moncada Barracks, to the **Mariana Grajales all-women's platoon** that served as Fidel Castro's personal security detail.

There were, of course, women who immediately took on more authoritative roles within the M-26-7. Espín was not the only woman in leadership - there were also women such as Celia Sánchez, who became a mixture of administrator/confidante for Fidel Castro, helping him to put his plans into action. Puebla describes how in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Sánchez “was in charge of just about everything, not only the hospitals and schools, but the general command post.” Tete Puebla, founding member and second in command of the Mariana Grajales Platoon, said of Celia Sanchez, “When you speak of Celia, you’ve got to speak of Fidel, and vice versa. Celia’s ideas touched almost everything in the Sierra.

Because there was no widespread women’s movement before the revolution, it can be reasonably argued that the women’s movement was made possible by the revolution (or at the very least laid the foundations for it), because it encouraged women to step outside of their traditional roles. The women’s movement, that would later become the FMC, began because women did not want to give up the level of social and political consciousness and freedom that they had gained during the revolutionary period.

## IMPACT OF THE REVOLUTION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

In 1959, the 26th of July Movement (lead by Fidel Castro) successfully overthrew the American-sponsored Batista regime. Although the ‘woman question’ was never central to their revolutionary struggle, their accomplishments regarding gender equality are amongst their most impressive. Under Fidel and Raúl Castro, women finally achieved the right to an education, a job, paid maternity leave, and abortion on demand. However, progress concerning the culture of ***machismo*** and the burden of

domesticity has been less than convincing. Despite the sincere endeavours of Castro, oppression pervades 'in almost every aspect of a Cuban woman's life'. The distinction between the *casa* (home) and the *calle* (street) persists, with the home considered the woman's sphere, where she is responsible for nurturing her children and caring for her husband.

In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, Fidel pledged that Cuba would become free of illiteracy. This campaign was a triumph for women, who constituted over half of the volunteers and '55 percent of those who learned to read and write'. It successfully challenged the prevailing gender norm that women "belonged" in their home. In 1953, one in five women could neither read nor write, and of all those over the age of twenty-five, only one in 100 had a university-level education. As the most marginalised in pre-revolutionary society, women were the principal beneficiaries of the expansion of education. The transformation of the educational system was remarkable in scope, as well as content. The Cuban Revolution was determined to remove any underlying discrimination from the curriculum. For example, courses in woodwork and home economics were unified, with children taught identical skills regardless of gender expectations. A highly skilled workforce emerged of 'previously home-bound women'. Alongside the education overhaul, the Cuban Revolution initiated a transformation of healthcare and social services. Amendments to healthcare contributed to 'improvements in women's reproductive health', including rural maternal facilities and a program of pap smears. In control of their reproduction, Cuban women have the freedom to enter the labour force, defying expectations of motherhood and domesticity. Furthermore, services were implemented catering to the working mother, to encourage the pursuit of external employment. These included straightforward daycare centres and laundries, and the innovative Plan Jaba whereby working women were given 'preferential treatment in grocery stores'. The Revolution was committed to incorporating women into production, and as a result of Castro's far-reaching policies, the female workforce more than doubled between 1960 and 1980.

However, the entrance of women into the workforce alone 'cannot give her equality'. A broader transformation of society is required to combat gender discrimination and *machismo*. It is more complicated than merely implementing legislation, for it 'stems from the deepest part of Cuban culture'. While the Cuban Revolution successfully encouraged women's participation in the workforce and the public sphere, it manifestly failed to tackle such divisions within the home. Conscious of widespread gender discrimination, Castro introduced legislation to rebalance the pre-1959 tension between the *casa* and the *calle*. **The Código de la Familia (Family Code) was implemented in 1975** and appealed for equal participation in domestic chores. However, the **Family Code** was interpreted as a 'set of desirable objectives' rather than 'enforceable laws', and it failed to improve family dynamics. Women continue to bear the responsibilities of home; after finishing an eight-hour shift in formal employment, women are expected to fulfill the *sobrecargo* (second shift), consisting of domestic chores and child-rearing. As in many developed and industrial countries, the integration of women into the workforce has not been accompanied with a 'paradigm shift in the way men perceive their household responsibilities'. A "triple-day" is all-too familiar for Cuban women, who are expected to participate in community and party activities atop their paid employment and domestic labour.

The Cuban Revolution's accomplishments regarding women's equality have been noteworthy; women can finally enjoy an education and training, reproductive rights, and employment opportunities. However, they have not been fully liberated from the constraints of household management and the perseverance of *machismo*. More must be done to confront the continuing belief that women "belong" in the home.

**Task:**

1. List the basic points relating to the role of women in the Cuban Revolution.

2. Who was/were...

<b>CELIA SANCHEZ</b>	<b>VILMA ESPIN</b>	<b>MARIANA GRAJALES</b>

3. List some positive and negative impacts of the revolution on women

<b>POSITIVE IMPACTS</b>	<b>NEGATIVE IMPACTS</b>