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The New Role for Women in Cuban Society

by Fidel Castro

(From the May Day Speech)

If there's something that really catches one's attention in these May Day parades, and especially in this one, it is the process of integration of women into the labor force.

In the past the possibilities of work for women were extremely limited. In this sense, discrimination certainly existed. But aside from this, it was logical that in a country where there were hundreds of thousands of men without work there would be little or no work opportunities for women.

We already know what kind of work was reserved for women in the capitalist society. We know how prevalent was the custom among the bourgeoisie of hiring working class women, pressed by necessity, to work in amusements in bars, as just one more kind of commercial attraction.

We know of the considerable numbers of women in our country who were forced into that most lamentable form of survival that is prostitution. We know that our bourgeoisie had established many brothels in this country: brothels in every Cuban city, brothels for the Yankee tourists, for the Yankee Marines, in Havana, in Guantanamo.

We know also that the bourgeoisie of the region of Guantanamo were so ingratiating that they not only supplied the Marines with

brothels but also, on many occasions, with their own daughters. In Guantanamo many stories are known about all this and about the parties that went on at the naval base.

Many of those people sent their daughters to those parties. In any event, it can be concluded that this type of work is one of the types that capitalist society — all capitalist societies — reserves for women.

It was not possible, of course, to eradicate this evil from our country in one day. But we can say with pride and with satisfaction that just as the Revolution has eradicated other vices, such as gambling, for example, just as the Revolution has rid the country of beggars, just as there are no longer poverty-stricken children roaming the streets (and there is no capitalist society in which there are no beggars, homeless children, brothels, gambling, vice and corruption of all kinds), the Revolution has also eradicated practically all prostitution from our country.

Today a tremendous number of dignified and decent activities are accessible to Cuban women.

Many thousands of Cuban women have gone into public health work during these years of the Revolution. Many thousands of young women have become nurses and nurses' aides, assistants in the

field of medicine in general. Thousands of women work in the scholarship students' centers.

Other thousands of women, tens of thousands, are teaching. Today the number of women who go into technological institutes and technical training centers is incomparably greater. The fact that the number of women studying in the school of medicine almost equals the number of men, will serve to illustrate the idea.

Thousands of women are working in day nurseries and thousands are working not only in these public service jobs, but also in the production of material goods.

Women are working, for example, in the planting of seedlings in tree nurseries, or planting coffee seedlings.

The whole poultry plan of four million — now we have somewhat over four million laying hens, and by the end of this year we will have 5,800,000 hens in order to cover our needs all year round — this entire important branch of our nation's food production is manned by women workers. Hundreds of poultry centers are managed by women.

Women have joined agricultural production in other activities, such as vegetable production, the raising of calves, and rabbit breeding. In sum, new job opportunities are constantly opening up, in which an extraordinary number of women have found decent, remunerative and satisfying employment.

Because that was the agonizing worry of the immense majority of our people. How to get a job? How to earn a living? It is really incredible how men suffer in capitalist society over this vital question, this elemental matter of how to assure oneself of a job in order to earn a decent living.

Therefore, on a day like today, this phenomenon of which I am

speaking can be understood directly as we see the composition of our labor force. But there is something more: The women of our country are not only entering production work en masse, but are turning out to be workers of high efficiency, and we have heard many commentaries in praise of the work of our women, their sense of responsibility and their lack of absenteeism.

For this reason the Revolution is making efforts to create more day nurseries, more schools, to establish more school cafeterias, to make it constantly easier for women to work. But when we speak of making it easier for women to work in production, this does not mean simply that society wishes to help women, not only that.

Society has a duty to help women, but at the same time society helps itself considerably by helping women because it means more and more hands joining in the production of goods and services for all the people.

As it is known, one of the means to make it possible for women to work is the creation of day nurseries. The women workers themselves pay certain amounts, in accordance with their income, for their children's care in the nurseries. But the women who have entered agricultural production have the added benefit that they do not have to pay for the day nursery.

And it is the intention of the revolutionary government that by the end of this year, that is to say by next year, no woman worker will have to pay for her children's day nursery. We believe that this will contribute in encouraging Cuban women to work, and we also believe that this is just. Society profits from the work of every woman.

Women's Liberation:

"The Revolution Within a Revolution"

by Fidel Castro

(From the Santa Clara Speech)

Arriving here this evening, I commented to a comrade that this phenomenon of women's participation in the Revolution was a revolution within a Revolution. And if we were asked what the most revolutionary thing is that the Revolution is doing, we would answer that it is precisely this — the revolution that is occurring among the women of our country!

If we were asked what things in the Revolution have been most instructive for us, we would answer that one of the most interesting lessons for revolutionaries is that being offered by our women.

You all know perfectly well that, in saying this, we are not uttering given words with intent to please the compañeras who are here tonight, but that we say it because it is what we firmly believe and feel.

But why is this one of the most interesting lessons? You yourselves may ask why. In reality, the most honest answer that we could give — and I assure you that the person who offers this answer is precisely one who has always believed himself free from prejudice — the answer is, I believe, that in reality all of us were prejudiced in regard to women.

And if anyone had ever asked me if I considered myself prejudiced in regard to women, I would have said absolutely not, because

I believed myself to be quite the opposite. I believed that an enormous potential force and extraordinary human resources for the Revolution existed in our women.

But what has happened? What has occurred, or rather, what is occurring? We are finding that, in reality, this potential force is superior to anything that the most optimistic of us ever dreamed of. We say that perhaps at heart, unconsciously, something of bias or underestimation existed.

For events are demonstrating, even now, the possibilities of women and the role that women can play in a revolutionary process in which society is liberating itself, above all, from exploitation, and from prejudices and a whole series of circumstances in which women were doubly exploited, doubly humiliated.

What have we found, for example, in regard to the work of women? I have been talking with several comrades and, following my visit to the Banao Plan, I told Comrade Millán: "I have the impression that the women working in this Plan are more responsible and more disciplined than the men. I have the impression that they will dedicate themselves to the work with more enthusiasm, more passion, more dedication."

And Millán — although I certainly don't want to give this comrade a bad name with the

women of Las Villas — argued with me, "Well, but . . . really . . . the case of the young men who are in the Juraguá Plan of the Young Communists . . ."

I told him that finding a spirit of discipline and enthusiasm, for work in a program involving selected Young Communists was not as extraordinary as finding the same spirit of discipline and enthusiasm in a program carried out by women who had not been specially chosen for this program, who had not been chosen by any organization, but had simply volunteered to do this work.

What have we found? What is being found everywhere in this revolutionary program, as far as the Cuban women are concerned? Well, we are finding a whole series of things such as those I mentioned before: a great sense of responsibility, great seriousness, great discipline and enthusiasm.

What have we found right here in the province of Las Villas? Well, let us take the Banao Plan, for example. This program was growing and needed a cadre. Comrade Milián sought a cadre from the Party; Comrade Santiago Acosta, from the Santo Domingo zone, I believe, and sent him to the Banao Plan as administrator.

But one day, Comrades Santiago Acosta and René Acosta — the specialist on technical matters — had to go abroad. They were the men holding the positions of greatest responsibility in the plan. Someone had to be appointed to take their place and we decided to appoint Comrade Osoria, who was representing the Federation of Cuban Women on the directing board of the plan.

We firmly believe that this even may some day have historic significance, for it was the first time

that a woman had been assigned to such a task, not for political reasons or to impress anyone, but simply because she had, objectively speaking, proved herself capable of heading such a program.

And from that moment on, we thought it would be reasonable and an excellent thing, indeed, to have a woman directing a plan involving thousands of women workers.

Moreover, when it became necessary to organize the work brigades, a number of women who had distinguished themselves for their great spirit of work were chosen as brigade leaders.

This gave us an idea:

We had to train a group of technicians for this type of work and, at first, 10 comrades from the Technological Institute had been sent here to specialize in this branch of agriculture. We decided that 20 additional students who were to be sent here to specialize in this field should be chosen from among the girl students at the Technological Institute.

Thus, the workers, the brigade leaders, and the technicians — that is, the technical and administrative staff — is going to be made up almost entirely of women. Yes, women!

This is one of the great lessons we spoke about before: one of the great lessons and perhaps one of the greatest victories over prejudices that have existed, not for decades or centuries, but for thousands of years. We refer to the belief that all a woman could do was wash dishes, wash and iron clothes, cook, keep house, and bear children, age-old prejudices, that placed women in an inferior position in society. In effect, she did not have a productive place in society.

Such prejudices are thousands

of years old and have survived through various social systems. If we consider capitalism, women — that is, lower-class women — were doubly exploited or doubly humiliated. A poor woman, part of the working class or of a working-class family, was exploited simply because she was poor, because she was a member of the working class.

But in addition, although she was a woman of the working class, even her own class looked down on and underrated her. Not only was she underestimated, exploited and looked down upon by the exploiting classes but, even within her own class, she was the object of numerous prejudices.

So all these events have been a great lesson to all of us, to every revolutionary. Naturally, a considerable amount of prejudice still persists. If women were to believe that they have totally fulfilled their role as revolutionaries in society, they would be making a mistake. It seems to us that women must still fight and exert great efforts to attain the place that they should really hold in society.

If women in our country were doubly exploited, doubly humiliated in the past, then this simply means that women in a social revolution should be doubly revolutionary.

And perhaps this is the explanation, or at least the social basis for the resolute, enthusiastic, firm and loyal support given by Cuban women to this Revolution.

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 not only as workers but also as women, in that society of exploitation.

The attitude of Cuban women

toward the Revolution corresponds to this reality; it corresponds to what the Revolution has meant to them.

And the support of the popular masses for the Revolution is directly proportionate to what the revolution has meant to them in terms of their liberation.

There are two sectors in this country, two sectors of society which, aside from economic reasons, have had other motives for sympathizing and feeling enthusiasm for the Revolution. These two sectors are the Negro population of Cuba and the female population.

I suppose you recall that in Cuba's old bourgeois Constitution, there was an article which declared illegal any discrimination for reasons of race or sex. Now the problem of such discrimination has disappeared from our country, because the basis for these two types of discrimination which is, quite simply the exploitation of man by man, has disappeared.

Much news reaches us from the United States, for example, about the civil-rights struggle for Negroes. Nevertheless, racial discrimination in the United States will not disappear until capitalist society has disappeared.

That is, discrimination will never be wiped out within the framework of capitalist society. Discrimination with respect to race and sex can only be wiped out through a socialist revolution, which eradicates the exploitation of man by man.

Now, does the disappearance of the exploitation of man by man mean that all the conditions are immediately created whereby woman may elevate her position in society? No. The conditions for

the liberation of women, for the full development of women in society, for an authentic equality of rights, or for authentic equality of women with men in society, require a material base; they require the material foundations of economic and social development.

I described before the opinion held by many men concerning the functions of women, and I said that among the functions considered to belong to women was — almost exclusively — that of having children. Naturally, reproduction is one of the most important of women's functions in human society, in any kind of human society.

But it is precisely this function, relegated by nature to women, which has enslaved them to a series of chores within the home.

There is a sign here in front of us, for example, which says, "One million women working in production by 1970." Unfortunately, it will not be possible to have one million working in production by 1970. We feel that this goal may be reached, perhaps, within 10 years but not within four.

We could propose it as a goal to be reached by 1975. Why can't this goal be reached in four years? Because in order to have one million women working in production, we must have thousands of children's day nurseries, thousands of primary boarding schools, thousands of school dining halls, thousands of workers' dining halls, thousands of centers of social services of this type must be set up, because if not, who is going to cook for the second- or third-grade child when he comes home for lunch?

Who is going to care for unweaned infants, or babies of two, three and four years of age? Who is going to prepare dinner for the

man when he comes home from work? Who is going to wash, clean, all of those things?

In other words, in order to reach the social goal of liberating woman from all these activities that enslave her and impede her from full incorporation into work outside the home and all these activities she can engage in society, it is necessary to create the necessary material base, to attain the necessary social development.

It is impossible to construct the required thousands of children's day nurseries, school dining halls, laundries, workers' dining halls, boarding schools, in four years. In fact, merely to meet present needs, great effort is necessary on all fronts.

Everywhere women are working it has been necessary to make a special effort to establish day nurseries, set up boarding schools and all of the necessary institutions so that these women could be free to work . . .

At this stage, of scarcity of cement, machinery and construction equipment, the problem can be solved only through maximum efforts on all fronts: sometimes at a regional level, other times at a provincial or national level, using the resources we have at hand.

Nor can we expect that the day nurseries be perfect, that the constructions be perfect, nor the service. They must be as good as possible, but they cannot be perfect.

These problems will have to be solved in many areas of the country, little by little. One million women cannot be employed in one day. A whole series of economic steps must be taken, and agricultural plans set in motion.

It would be interesting to know how many women have already started to work in the production of consumer's goods as well as in

services since the triumph of the Revolution, how many are working as nurses' aides, technicians, industrial and agricultural workers. If a statistical study were made as to how many women have begun to work since the triumph of the Revolution, the number would probably be close to 150,000, and certainly no less than that!

This figure, of course, is not based on exact statistics, and it seems to us that a study should be made in order to learn precisely how many women have found work in newly created jobs, in jobs created by the Revolution.

Next year the number of women working will be considerably greater. Why? Because a whole series of plans will get underway, mainly in agriculture. Several thousand women are to be incorporated into the Banao Plan and when that plan reaches its maximum development, it will require six or seven thousand women.

In Pinares de Mayari, some eight thousand women will be working by springtime. In the coffee-plant nurseries set up for the 1967-68 coffee-growing plan, 30,000 women will be needed and many thousands will work in the reforestation plans, in vegetable cultivation, and other thousands are being

incorporated into jobs in the cities.

This means that more than 50,000 women will be involved in tasks related to production by next year, and this will require an enormous and simultaneous effort to be made so that all of the problems related to dining halls, schools, and children's day nurseries may be worked out.

I am going to tell you something. Without the incorporation of women, the Banao Plan could never have gotten off the ground, nor could the plans for microclimate vegetable cultivation in Oriente Province have been carried out. Without the incorporation of women, the plans for coffee growing could not even have been considered.

Many of the plans that the Revolution is today drawing up and beginning to carry out could not have been conceived until the great reservoir of human resources that our society possesses in its women was clearly seen for what it was.

These plans, which stand for extraordinary contributions to the economic development of our country, to the increased well-being of our people, could not have been conceived without the mass incorporation of women into work.

The Successful Battle Against Discrimination

by Linda Jenness

Before the Cuban revolution, Cuban women suffered the same indignities that millions of women throughout Latin America still undergo today. As a predominantly Catholic country, Cuban women were not only victims of unjust social and property relations but of the stifling moral and chauvinistic attitudes of Catholicism as well.

I have lived in Mexico, Bolivia, and Spain and have seen the repressed status of women in these societies. I have an idea of what it must have been like in Cuba before 1959. To visit Cuba today, however, is like visiting a fresh, new world. In 10 short years, and against tremendous odds, Cuba has integrated and advanced the development of women in the life of Cuba immeasurably. Before the revolution, unemployment was rampant, wages were on a subsistence level or lower and one-fourth of the population could neither read nor write. Women played a tiny role in the labor force and were economically dependent on the ill-paid, insecure, and poverty-stricken male population.

Freed of American domination and with a nationalized economy, the role of the working class today is reversed. Instead of chronic un-

employment, there is now more work to do than hands to do it. Labor is put to socially constructive use—and this involves the maximum participation of women in the labor force. There is no longer a need to divide the working class through racism and chauvinism. Everyone can work, and everyone does.

The Cuban government is working feverishly to establish nurseries throughout the island. Women can take their children there from the time they are 45 days old, and they are clothed, fed, given medical attention, and educated—all of which is free!

In addition to the nurseries, feeding facilities are being set up in the schools and factories. These two measures are basic necessities which allow women to participate in the building of the Cuban economy while taking the burden of domestic chores off their backs.

An example of the conscious effort of the government to deinstitutionalize discrimination against women is its preferential hiring policy. Any available job that can be performed by either men or women must be given to a woman if she applies. The result of these policies is that more and more women are

playing leading roles throughout the island. In the Sierra Maestra I visited the Hospital of Chivirico, and the director was a middle-aged, black woman doctor. The Antonio Rojas School in the Sierra Maestra is directed by a 22-year-old woman, and the staff consists of six women and four men. The director of the Moncada Barracks School is a black woman in her mid-thirties, and a veterinary hospital on the Isle of Youth is almost completely staffed by women. There are female tractor brigades and women brigades that run calf farms—and the list goes on.

Perhaps one of the most significant new roles that women play in Cuba is in the Committees to Defend the Revolution (CDR). These are voluntary block committees that perform a multitude of functions. They are in essence the basic organ of self-government on the local level, involving the people in each block in the problems of the community. The CDR are not armed, but they patrol their areas and guard against terrorist acts by counterrevolutionaries.

The militia is a voluntary civilian army, and large numbers of women participate. It is based on work centers and universities, and the militia units guard their own factories and universities. It was certainly a pleasant contrast to the United States to see black women students with guns slung over their shoulders guarding their universities.

Women may belong to the rebel army if they choose, but they are not drafted into it. Military training in the schools, however, will be made obligatory for both men and women next year. Up until

now it has been obligatory only for men. So the Cuban woman is well integrated into the defense of her country.

Nearly 50 percent of the students in the universities are female. (I can compare this to the University of Guanajuato in Mexico where I studied for six months a few years ago. Out of 5,000 students, only 250 were women!) At the University of Oriente in Santiago women make up 90 percent of the students in education, 50 percent in medical science, and 30 percent in engineering.

The Cuban woman is also taking her place in the political life of the country. Perhaps a graphic example of the changes taking place is the fact that while there is only one woman on the central committee of the Cuban Communist Party, over half the members of the Union of Young Communists (UJC) are women! Women are accepted political spokesmen in many of the villages I visited, and their numbers in the UJC clearly indicate that in the next 10 years this will become even more common.

The Cuban revolution is still in transition and so are the processes going on within it. Although much progress has been made, complete equality still does not exist. Marriage and divorce laws have been changed so that simply by mutual consent and a very small fee people may marry and divorce as they choose. Abortions are generally available to women who have had more than five children (I was told in one place) or more than two (I was told in another). I also was told this restriction is not due to "moral" considerations, but to a shortage of doctors; while I am

sure it is not considered a "moral" question, I had no way of checking on the doctor-shortage explanation, about which I was dubious. The intrauterine device is available to any woman desiring it, with the guarantee that if it doesn't work, she can have an abortion. (Compare that to the hassle that goes on in the United States!)

Many women in rural areas are still reluctant to take advantage of the nurseries, hospitals and schools that are now available to them. Campaigns are carried out by the Federation of Cuban Women, the Red Cross and the UJC to educate and explain the advantages to these women. No one in Cuba is forced to take advantage of these facilities!

In many factories the percentage of women is still low, and chauvinistic attitudes still exist in personal relations.

Countering this personal chauvinism is a very popular movie

named *Lucia* that I was able to see while I was there. It is lively and dynamic with a clear anti-male-chauvinist theme. It has created much discussion and controversy in Cuba. The movie ends with the present-day Cuban woman fighting back and holding her own and the next generation of women looking on and laughing. The movie is an indication that no one claims male chauvinism has been completely done away with—yet.

The important thing is that real progress has been made that can be seen and felt everywhere in Cuba. A conscious effort is still being made to have women take their rightful place in society, and any resistance to this process is fought. Male chauvinism has been deinstitutionalized. In the new Cuban society, where the economic need for racism and chauvinism no longer exists, they can be effectively fought and eventually conquered.