

From the House
to the Streets

The Cuban Woman's

Movement for

Legal Reform,

1898–1940

K. LYNN STONER



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For my parents
Henry H. and Frances P. Stoner



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Although many people have helped with this book, the final responsibility for its contents is my own.

Preface



This is a study of feminists and a feminist movement in Cuba between 1902 and 1940. It explains how a small group of women helped to shape broad legal reforms in only thirty-five years. At the same time it describes the version of feminism that these women adopted, with all its internal contradictions, and contrasts it to the model of feminism North Americans were transporting to Cuba. It emphasizes the mentalité of Cuban protagonists in the struggle for women's rights as well as the surrounding events that enhanced their power to mold national values. In short, this study attempts to portray the Cuban feminist movement in its nationalist context and in its own words. It also demonstrates how feminism, emerging in Cuban society during the formative years of the republican period, drew from traditional notions of femininity and a rejection of gender equality to advance a cause that assumed that women's roles were necessary for social progress.

Histories of feminism have progressed from those that concentrated only on declared feminists and their campaigns to those that acknowledge the reformist efforts of women outside feminist circles. Breaking down the woman's movement into its components and constituents, or deconstructing feminism, has preoccupied North American women's historians for the last decade. As a result, we know that there are many interpretations of feminism and many women activists who did not call themselves feminists who nevertheless promoted women's causes and rebelled against social injustice.¹

Nancy Cott and Paula Baker demonstrate how North American women, motivated among other things by domestic values, were consistently active in political and community life. That is, women's orientations in the home fed their sense of social action. By the nineteenth century women were involving themselves in slave emancipation and temperance, both moral issues appropriate for domestic, feminine involvement. The woman's movement that emerged at Seneca Falls in 1848 drew from the struggle to emancipate slaves because in that struggle women saw the parallel between their own conditions and the noncitizenship of slaves and because they had learned to organize a popular movement. The politics of domesticity were central to the woman's

movement until the beginning of the twentieth century when for reasons of political efficacy the National Women's Party narrowed feminist objectives to suffrage and omitted earlier interests in family issues, labor inequities, education, social welfare, and prostitution. This complex development of feminism in the United State raises the question for all scholars about who feminists were: women in a narrowly focused woman's movement and/or women in broader movements, such as the antislavery movement, who promoted other kinds of change that per force had to address women's issues.

All feminist movements by definition rejected conditions of gender bias. The means and the definition of struggle, however, differed from society to society. Reactions to oppression and submission depended upon the nature of gender inequality, culturally based prejudices, as well as conventions of female empowerment within a cultural group. Hence, Cuban feminism, while sharing some objectives with other national feminist movements, also was culturally centered. Karen Offen's work on the comparison of French and U.S. feminism supports the argument for the cultural relativity of feminism.² She posits that nationalist sentiments and regional cultures shaped the language, sources of empowerment, and final objectives of French feminism. She counterposes French feminism with feminism in the United States where prevailing values rested on individual rights and social equality, inspiring feminists to seek individual freedom. Conversely, in France, Offen chooses to term feminism "relational feminism," because feminists viewed themselves in community with others. They sought a power in gender difference and not equality, in womanliness, and in shared authority with men. Offen's conclusions more nearly match my own, and, more importantly, explain why many Cuban feminists were uncomfortable with the North American model. The Cubans went to some trouble to explain shared aspirations and important distinctions with North American activists such as Doris Stevens and Carrie Chapman Catt, the two North American feminists best known in Cuba.³

Too much could be made of a comparative analysis of Cuban and U.S. feminism except that the United States dominated Cuba between 1898 and 1940. Four military occupations, amounting to ten of Cuba's forty-two years of independence from Spain, placed in question the meaning of Cuban sovereignty. Land fell increasingly to foreign landholders who generated profits for themselves by underpaying Cuban laborers and buying up foundering estates. The United States, England, and Spain controlled banking; the United States owned the nickel mines; sugar, Cuba's main export, was controlled by U.S. interests; and Cuban citizens and the country became cheap labor and debtors.

U.S. domination went beyond the obvious political, military, and economic dimensions of foreign rule. Prolonged contact between Cuban and U.S. societies insured cultural associations. Cubans increasingly adopted U.S. standards of beauty and dress, baseball and boxing arenas brought together athletes from both countries in hotly contested championships, and Hollywood movies dazzled Cuban audiences and challenged their standards of morality and romance. U.S. feminists took an interest in the liberation of Cuban women and attempted to impose U.S. standards for feminism. More than any other Latin American feminist movement, Cuba's had to contend with delegations from the north attending their conventions, insisting on winning the vote, and working to put women in public office, while deemphasizing the importance of motherhood. Cuban reaction to U.S. feminism was mixed. Some activists agreed that electoral rights were central to liberating women. Others believed plebiscites failed to resolve problems of poverty, male domination, and an egalitarian society, and that accepting the U.S. model was another form of acquiescing to imperialism. Although divided on some issues, nearly all Cuban feminists insisted upon a reverence for motherhood and a desire to complement men's lives. Rightly or wrongly, many Cubans believed that by conserving femininity and making it central to feminism, they distinguished themselves from their North American counterparts.

Class and race divisions set Cuban feminists apart from poor women and women of color. Lower-class women, mulattas, and black women had always lived and worked on the streets. Poverty, ill health, sexual exploitation, and disrespect for people of their class and race all hampered their living prosperous lives. Gender discrimination was only a part of their misery. Social complexities did not, however, deter white, middle- and upper-class women from assuming power in the name of all women. Cuban women who called themselves feminists generally came from the privileged classes, and they basically sought power for themselves. They were nonetheless aware of racial and class issues, and they encumbered themselves with the responsibility of speaking for the lower classes. Women of the lower classes organized but rarely under the banner of feminism. This is not to say that female trade unionists, for example, should not be called feminists. Anyone with a program for fair and egalitarian gender relations could claim that label. But while women were labor organizers, strike leaders, heads of opposition groups, and combatants against dictatorship, many refused to give gender issues top priority. I have chosen to examine the activities and identities of women who called themselves feminists and who belonged to feminist organizations.

Deliberately, then, I have chosen to study self-avowed feminists, who specifically adopted the terms *feminismo*, *feminista*, and *la revolución femenina*, or they advocated *la liberación de la mujer* and *el sufragio femenino*. They belonged to women's organizations whose main purpose was to pursue women's rights and improve their chances for self-determination. As a result, I have ignored many other women who certainly contributed to the struggle for expanded women's rights. I do not pretend to portray feminists as the only people interested in women's rights, but only one of several groups. Women's historians are now showing how complex women's movements were, and Cuban society has never been wanting for complexities. But I could not, on the basis of my evidence, give equal attention to all these groups. Women participants in the student movements, women who led labor guilds, black women who participated momentarily in the Independent Colored Party in 1912—all of these need to be studied to give a fuller view of the vitality and fervor of women during the prerevolutionary period. At best, I have shown how some of the groups influenced and, at times, participated in the feminist movement. I have only done what my sources will bear, which is to describe, in detail, the values and visions of a small group of women and men who were powerful beyond their numbers and who put Cuba well ahead of other nations in its legal regard for women.

I began this study with the intention of explaining how women won so many legal rights within so short a period of time. I ended with that explanation and more. This book is about the mentalité of privileged women within the feminist movement, the values of the men who supported them, and a broad definition of Cuban feminism articulated by this particular group. Mentalité, perhaps the most immeasurable but important motivation behind human action, is that composite of values, beliefs, mores, superstitions, and behaviors that direct a group of people to act. Information about mentalité cannot be gleaned from a particular source or a single methodology. My most reliable sources are texts (speeches, personal letters, journal essays, radio broadcasts, and memoirs from women's congresses) that record in their own words feminists' senses of what they wanted, who they opposed, and how they would act. I also have records of what men believed they were doing when they supported reforms for women. More indirect, anthropological studies discuss Cuban gender values and provide a background for feminist responses. Census data and sociological studies measure the circumstances in which the feminists lived. Thus, this is an interdisciplinary examination of the feminist movement.

Ascertaining a clear, linear definition of Cuban feminism was unfeasi-

ble, but describing the complex, often self-contradictory ideals contained in the movement is possible. Women joined the movement to force agendas that often differed from those of their colleagues. Conservative feminists wanted the vote, beautification of Havana, and improved health standards for women and children. Moderates advocated women holding public office and pushed state welfare along with a broad commitment to human rights, good employment for women, and an equitable distribution of wealth. Radicals rejected U.S. domination and advocated an overthrow of the capitalist state and the installation of a socialist system that would treat women and men equally. Factionalization occurred between groups of feminists, but it also existed within the life of a single individual. Ofelia Dominguez Navarro, for example, the leader of the social feminists, changed from a woman willing to imitate the North American model to the harshest critic of U.S. feminism.

To understand Cuban feminism in all its forms, it is important to bear in mind that Cubans have always been able to assimilate dualities such as the sacred and profane (Roman Catholicism and *santeria*), *machismo* and *marianismo*, and equality and separateness without the attendant blow to linear logic. These dualities allowed certain advances that have yet to occur in the United States, such as protective labor legislation and an equal rights law. The North American reader should not see these dualisms as a fault in my reasoning or irrational Cuban behavior. Duality simply is a fact of life and certainly a reality for most people. It happens to be overt in Cuba.

Any study of social and political movements in twentieth-century Cuba requires a careful definition of terms. *Feminist* and *feminism*, *woman's movement*, *conservative*, *moderate*, *reformer*, *progressive*, *Marxist*, *radical*, and *revolutionary* are false cognates in North American English. Feminism in general is an ideology that assumes the importance and centrality of women in their society. It is a movement that intends to claim for women the rights and power due them as members of a community. It is also a reaction to unique cultural and historical circumstances and, therefore, is not monolithic.

Cuban feminists claimed new authority for women, but they did so within their social and historical context. After independence, colonial institutions such as the Catholic Church and authoritarian government became targets for change. Modern state and social formations created new roles for women and raised questions about women's rights. Feminists organized to empower women in an emerging nation, and they took on the role of state builders. They concentrated as much on tearing down Spanish colonial structures as progressing along the same

lines as other feminist movements. Patriotic sentiments, still passionate after the wars of independence, reverberated in feminist speeches, and José Martí's calls for social justice prepared feminists and Cuban politicians for a women's movement.

Modern political philosophies informed Cuban feminism, but traditional images became its symbols. Democratic principles initiated demands for the vote. Marxism gave direction to the rights of women workers, and the advent of the welfare state promised protection for poor women. Along with these modern philosophical ideas, feminists evoked the image of the Mother Mary, even as they attacked the Church, and used her attributes of purity and morality to define their cause. Feminists were also slow to identify the patriarchy or a class society as the root of women's oppression.

The term *feminism* was troublesome even for Cubans who defined themselves as feminists, because North Americans, the French, and the English had given it meanings that Cubans could not accept. Some elements in the Cuban movement rejected U.S. leadership in an international suffrage campaign because they viewed it as another instance of U.S. imperialism. Cuban feminism emphasized the importance of motherhood, as did many North Americans, but Cuban feminists demanded a reverence for motherhood and viewed it as the only stepping stone to power. Thus, Cuban feminism was pro women, pro family, pro motherhood, and pro children.

Feminist studies in the United States separate the woman's movement there into at least two political groups: feminists and suffragists. The feminists, characterized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the American Women's Suffrage Party and Jane Addams, sought a broad array of women's rights. Motherhood counted as a central focus for these women, as did welfare and work rights. Suffragists, represented by Alice Paul and the National Women's Party, narrowed their demands to the vote. Using the same nomenclature might be less confusing to U.S. scholars, but it blurs the political alliances Cuban feminists and suffragists were making with political parties. Therefore, I have chosen to call all women's activists feminists and group them by their political affiliations, for example, conservative feminists, moderate and progressive feminists, and socialist feminists.

Political terms such as *conservative* and *moderate* had no clear ideological meaning during the formative years of the Republic. Other than the Cuban Communist Party, with its established party line, political organizations espoused few political ideologies, and these organizations were often used by members who selfishly sought power and wealth. Individ-

uals frequently changed from one party to another to enhance their fortunes, and not as an expression of political ideals. Therefore, political terms did not originate in classical meanings.

Some terms must, nonetheless, be used to indicate political positions. Central to most political agendas was the intention to reform Cuba's political structures and address, if not change, issues of racial discrimination and social justice. Conservatism in Cuba would have meant to return to the colonial past, a position that had few advocates. The question of reform was one of the extent to which individuals were willing to change, and not a blockage of change. Most Cubans favored modernization, democratic rule, and a modicum of social reform. Some conservatives wished to retain Catholic values and class and racial divisions. Conservative feminists primarily wanted the vote, though they paid some attention to health, education, and welfare services. Progressive feminists worked to alter aspects of social order and to require the state to take on matters of social welfare and provisions for the poor, but they left in place class structures, prevailing racist practices, and the patriarchy. Progressive feminists believed that democracy was possible in Cuba and that women were in a position to make significant contributions. They criticized the Church, but they did not attack conventions of male domination, and they believed that new laws would insure social reform. Most of the feminists belonged to this group.

Marxist and revolutionary activists advocated the restructuring of Cuban society to allow workers either to own the means of production or take political power to improve their lives. Students, intellectuals, workers, and a faction of the feminist movement belonged to this group. Revolutionary feminists by 1930 opposed suffrage because they believed that it would involve women in corrupt government. They worked to organize women in labor unions and defend dissidents of either gender against imprisonment, exile, and execution. They also supported women's issues before the socialist leadership to ensure that women's labor and maternity concerns were addressed.

Appropriate terminology denoting Cuban class ordering is no less difficult to implement because classifications such as upper, middle, and lower class, as well as elite, bourgeoisie, and proletariat have political connotations and applications that confuse the Cuban situation. That Cuba was a society of hierarchy through the early republic is unquestionable. But Cuba was experiencing tremendous flux and change in the composition of those orders. This transition makes it difficult to label groups without supplying appropriate definitions.

For the sake of simplicity, the terms *lower*, *middle* and *upper class* are

used to designate socioeconomic ordering of Cuban society and the positioning of feminists therein. Most feminists were middle- and upper-class women: they or their families had wealth and position and were from the landholding elite, the professional class, or political families (see chap. 4). Feminists also behaved as middle- or upper-class people, since they expected to be heard and they intended to wield influence. They also educated and cared for the less fortunate. Perhaps the most conclusive indication for the feminists' class affiliation are their own opinions of their position. In speeches to congress and in newspaper and journal articles, feminists referred to themselves as members of the intelligentsia and the middle and upper classes.

Feminists were committed to giving women important functions in Cuba's emerging national order. They recognized women's historical contributions to Cuban society, and they wished to expand those contributions into public duty. Legal reform seemed the best means to ensure women their rights and protection, and a feminist leadership formed to articulate new values and oversee the needs of powerless women. Common ends, however, did not imply a unified movement. Diversity characterized the Cuban feminist movement as moderate, progressive, and social feminists fought old social standards and each other. Aided by their social advantages, feminists of all political persuasions successfully convinced politicians to alter legal codes to accommodate women's needs.

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.

Breaking the Mold



Each generation bequeaths its descendants values and habits to accept or reject. The women who fought in the Cuban Wars of Independence presented their daughters with examples of heroism, durability, integrity, ingenuity, self-sacrifice, and combativeness during the campaigns against Spanish rule. The *mambisas* forged a new model for middle- and upper-class women of the twentieth century by breaking the mold of prescribed behavior for proper Cuban ladies who before 1868 were uneducated and dependent upon men. Mambisas, while remaining wives and mothers, left the protection of their homes, went into the *manigua*, and took up arms in support of national sovereignty.¹ The protracted guerrilla wars increased the difficulties of daily existence that women could not escape. Engulfed in the struggle to survive, women of all classes expanded their capabilities to include nursing, gunrunning, supplying provisions, fund raising, publishing, and fighting. Their war efforts proved to men and, more importantly, to the women themselves, their worthiness as full citizens in independent Cuba.

The actions of the *mambisas* contrasted sharply with the activities of proper Cuban ladies who lived only two decades before.² Social prescription for the highly bred in 1848 held that women were most desirable when weak, beautiful, and submissive. Men were their tutors in every matter save domestic work. If women received any education at all, it was in Church catechism to enhance their virtues as mothers. Men feared that women uninstructed in religious fundamentals risked becoming perverted, frivolous, and gossips. They might even fall into the disagreeable habit of reading “adventurous love stories” that would give them the illusion that love could possibly offer pleasure or enchantment. Such an illusion might lead them away from the brutal reality that marriage “was the painful job of having children.”³ Women’s education was based upon the principles that they should not use their intellects and that their place was having children and doing domestic work in the home.

Escaping the confinement of marriage was impossible for women and men. The family was the social base that united a people and preserved class and familial authority. It bound men to men through extended