


DISCURSOS/SPEECHES

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Good Afternoon. Thank you for inviting to speak on a topic so closed to my heart since I have been researching and working on this topic in the last 30 years visiting and travels to Cuba.

While the Cuban Revolution made an early political commitment to gender equality, the impetus for its implementation came primarily from its leaders, especially Fidel Castro and Vilma Espín, and its program was passed down to women at the grassroots who had limited chances to participate in the agenda's design. As one scholar lamented, «the women's movement in Cuba has not been the architect of its own success»¹.

Their well-intentioned policies produced quantifiable successes, but Cuba's gender equality laws have not yet effectively changed Cuban society. Yes, women were incorporated into the work force in greater numbers, but there remains resistance to and rejection of women in charge. There are laws promoting greater equality in the home and workplace, but studies show that Cuban women still spend in excess of thirty-four hours every week doing

chores and child-rearing, while men contribute just twelve hours of their time².

Despite these challenges, the progress Cuban women have made toward gender equality is striking, and the world has taken notice. When international institutions rank nations around the world on gender disparities in opportunities, resources, services, and benefits, Cuba consistently performs well³.

Although data vary year to year, Save the Children consistently rates Cuba first among developing countries (ahead of democratic nations such as South Korea, Mexico, and South Africa) for the wellbeing of mothers and children⁴. The Overseas Development Institute, a leading British think tank on development and humanitarian issues, rates Cuba in the top twenty nations for its progress relative to the Millennium Development Goals⁵. The World Economic Forum ranks Cuba 20th among 135 countries on the health, literacy, economic status, and political participation of women, outperforming all but Trinidad and Tobago in Latin America, and many of its peers in the developing world⁶.

How is this possible? At roughly \$50 billion, Cuba has a tiny economy. It isn't capitalist. It isn't rich. By U.S. standards, it isn't free. These results are especially hard for some in the United States to accept because they reject the legitimacy of Cuba's government and its socialist system. But the facts speak for themselves.

In my many trips to Cuba I reviewed, scholarly studies and detailed insider accounts of Cuba's most consequential movements and historic figures in gender equality. My aim is to provide an updated analysis examining early efforts to promote women's equality in the face of deep-rooted impediments to progress, and also assess difficulties encountered since the early 1990s resulting from Cuba's economic limitations.

In this effort, we were assisted by Cuban and U.S. scholars who have devoted much of their professional work to the issues considered here. With their help, we reviewed considerable research on the social, economic and political standing of women in Cuba, and on the comparative status of women the world over.

We also interviewed and spent time with Cuban women in Havana and other provinces. During my research trips, we met Cuban women of every hue, religion and character; privileged and poor; isolated single mothers and members of enormous intertwined families; lesbian and straight. We talked to academics, professionals, factory workers, entrepreneurs, agricultural cooperative members, artists and activists; grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. They live in regions different in culture, geography, and climate. Their political opinions vary. Some have migrated between regions; others have little experience beyond the community where they have lived their entire lives.

From these encounters, we are able to offer the views of Cuban women—their experiences, their gripes and problems, and their aspirations—in their own words. As a consequence, our admiration for the women

we've met on the island continues to deepen as we better understand the historic, cultural, and political barriers they face.

Under the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952-1959), Cuba had a more prosperous economy than many Latin American countries at the time, but this prosperity co-existed with stark income inequalities: great disparities developed between black and white Cubans, between rural and city dwellers and, importantly for our consideration, between women and men. Prospects were bleak for many Cuban women to improve their lives.

Since the revolution, however, women have seen substantial changes in their status. Scholars differ over which factors mattered most or what causes created the greatest effect, but as we conducted our research, spoke to Cuban women, and reviewed data from global institutions, we kept returning to six fundamental elements that help explain Cuba's progress.

- The early decision by revolutionary leaders to incorporate women's equality and rights as a core component of their political and social project.
- Initiatives by the new government to tackle gender inequality and form women's organizations to serve as advocates for change.
- An early transformative victory in a campaign that eliminated illiteracy for all Cubans, including women and girls, and empowered women to teach others to read and write.
- The adoption of a legal architecture to incorporate gender equality rights in Cuban law.
- National commitments to education and health care, including substantial state spending for programs that improved the skills and well-being of all Cubans, and programs that addressed the special concerns of women's health.
- State employment opportunities that steadily increased labor force participation

by women, and the creation of social services to reduce their workload at home.

The objectives of these commitments—e.g., achieving access to higher paying jobs, producing a fair division of labor in work and domestic life, and seeing more women ascend to positions of real political power—have not been fully met. There are many critical actions that must take place before women can achieve further progress on the road to true equality.

That goal—making life better for women—was always ambitious, and is especially so under today's circumstances. Periods of economic crisis, like the "Special Period" of the 1990s, saw sharp cuts in many programs, especially those affecting gender equality. Despite positive indicators and measureable progress for women and girls, conditions were never ideal. For Cuba to preserve its existing achievements, it must address the serious crisis affecting its economy today.

The biggest challenge Cuba faces today is the Risk of Falling Back, we describe the complex moment it now confronts. For more than 60 years, gender equality policy has been part of commitments to an expansive welfare system developed within a centrally-controlled state. Now, however, Cuba's economy is burdened by low productivity, an imbalance of trade, and high external debt. The country imports over 8 % of its food. These factors—in the face of a global economic crisis, ruinous hurricanes, and an unyielding U.S. embargo—have made improving the standard of living and women's status in Cuba stubbornly intractable. Adding to their troubles, Cuba potentially faces years to recover from the damage inflicted by repeated hurricanes, including Sandy in October 2012.

Cuba is also threatened by another crisis: a population aging out of the labor force that will need support from diminishing numbers of new workers, falling birth rates, and steady increases in emigration. Together, these have

produced what one scholar calls a «demographic time bomb», placing enormous strains on the state's capacity to provide services for social welfare.

In 2011, nearly 40,000 persons emigrated from Cuba, more than half of them women. They took expertise and skills with them. Many departed because the economy doesn't produce enough good jobs to satisfy and engage them. «Cubans are leaving the island because they think it will take 20 years for Cuba to straighten out its problems», a psychologist told us. «They don't want to delay their life projects until then». They are educated for jobs that do not exist and are tempted by images from abroad.

Such departures undercut the networks of school classmates that traditionally facilitate life and provide an important social base. Youths who otherwise might make their peace with domestic opportunity are prompted to look elsewhere. «I'm the only one left. All my friends are abroad. It's lonely», said a young woman, employed as a secretary, who stays to take care of her mother⁷.

Among those who remain, there is a pronounced weariness. A woman in Havana told us, «People live as they can, not as they want to».

Since 2006, the government has been working to update its economic model. Changes include reducing the size of the state's payrolls, and eliminating certain social benefits while using the savings to invest in activities it hopes will increase Cuba's productivity and exports. Cuba's government is loosening certain restrictions grounded in socialism and banking on an emerging private sector to absorb workers who will lose their state jobs.

It's not at all clear that this effort will work in the long run, but in the short term the reforms have already posed a challenge to gender equality. Aspects of the system that propelled women forward—such as state employment and Cuba's commitment to providing universal

access to education and health care—are being cut back and reorganized as Cuba seeks to balance its budget.

«The current ‘updating’ of the economic model in the country could have repercussions on the development that women have achieved», cautioned.

Notas:

¹ Norma Vasallo, President of the Women’s Studies Department at the University of Havana, in an interview told me.

² This would not just be tragic in a historic sense, putting at risk hard fought gains in equality and social justice, but also counter-productive economically. As the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Millennium Challenge Corporation have all found, gender equality contributes greatly to productivity and economic growth.

³ Thus, we argue in *The Role of Women in Building Cuba’s Future* that by broadening rather than curtailing their participation, contributions by women to economic growth, social well-being, and family formation will advance Cuba’s prospects for economic recovery while preserving its commitment to equality. There is much that Cuba can do acting alone—or in concert with NGOs, foreign governments, and other actors—to enhance women’s participation. Cuban women must play a major role in this process, particularly in the design of policies and programs for updating their country’s economic model currently underway.

⁴ We believe their success is not just in Cuba’s interest, but in the U.S. interest as well.

⁵ For three centuries, the U.S. has sought—at times successfully—to control Cuba’s destiny. That impulse intensified after the Cuban Revolution occurred in the midst of our Cold War with the Soviet Union. Whether influenced by opposition to communism or motivated by concerns over human rights, the U.S. has rarely viewed Cuba as a sovereign nation capable of determining its own course.

⁶ Today, policy makers who advocate for wholesale regime change in Cuba consider evidence-based discussions of progress in Cuba as mere apologies for the Castro government. Yet, Cuba

has not bent to U.S. pressure and shows no sign of doing so. The U.S. has a choice of sticking with policies that have proven to be a failure or doing something different.

⁷ We share a region—and a world—with countries struggling to break free of the burdens of underdevelopment and inequality. Empowerment of women is commonly understood as more than a powerful instrument of social justice to alleviate those conditions, but also as a means of creating a more broadly shared prosperity. In spite of impediments, the progress made in Cuba to substantially increase gender equality carries with it important lessons for other societies. In today’s increasingly interconnected world, progress or regression in one country is likely to have a transnational impact. Cubans are in a position to share programmatic insights, especially with those countries where the status of women is highly deficient. Since women constitute the majority of the world’s population, supporting, fortifying and disseminating Cuban women’s experience could contribute to improved welfare in other countries that have not progressed as much. During our week to visit Cuba this week we will hear from our president what are the next steps that the US will take to free Cuba from prolong embargo.