

From Puerto Rico to Cuba: A Feminist View of Social Justice

Elizabeth Iglesias
West Virginia University

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West Virginia University

*Cuba y Puerto Rico son,
de un mismo pájaro las dos alas
reciben flores ó balas
sobre un mismo corazon ...
Qué muchos si en la ilusión
que mil tintes arrebola
sueña la musa de Lola
con ferviente fantasía
de esta tierra y de la mía
hacer una patria sola!*

A Cuba (Fragmentos) Lola Rodriguez de Tió

As a Puerto Rican woman and representative of " the other wing," I was warmly received in Cuba with the passionate verses of the distinguished Puerto Rican poet Lola Rodriguez de Tió. My impending presentation on Puerto Rican feminist perspectives created high expectations of rediscovering the commonalities we shared based on gender and cultural heritage. Lola Rodriguez de Tió was a woman whose life was characterized by a profound sense of political and militant spirit (Santos Silva, 1997). The strong connection that she felt while living in Cuba was reaffirmed through the significant recognition of her verses in the writings of the

eminent Jose Martí. Similarly, the commonalities that I found with colleagues in Matanzas highlighted a natural connection between us; one which was easily conveyed through one Puerto Rican woman's words of struggle against oppression and her resistance for liberation. Our feminist discussions inspired questions about Puerto Rican and Cuban societies' acceptance of women's resistance to traditional and more modern sex-role expectations.

From Puerto Rico to Cuba, our common roots have been differentiated by recent history and distinct sociopolitical circumstance; thus our psychological well-being and perceptions of equity have been influenced in a variety of ways. For nearly four decades, activism and resistance among Cuban women have been encouraged with slogans such as "the strengths of a woman at the service of the Revolution", and with their participation in a "revolution within a revolution," while some Cuban women call for a deeper analysis of gender biases which prevail in their society. During the same period, the collective identity of Puerto Rican women has been subjected to a unique form of psychological colonialization. The younger generation of women is especially vulnerable, as confirmed by Dominguez(1996). In Cuba, the changing circumstances of the 1990s have created an urgent set of practical concerns for women that reflect new global realities.

In this essay I will present some commonalities and differences in the experiences of Puerto Rican women and women in Cuba. Feminist assumptions are by no means widely acknowledged as essential to the full participation of women in our societies, and this paper contends that further analysis of feminist experiences can enhance the development of a healthy resistance in the younger generation of women. Beginning with a brief examination of feminist discussions regarding Puerto Rican women and women in Cuba, this essay will present how feminist reconsiderations are essential for fostering young women's healthy resistance to

oppression. I propose that reflecting on the past experiences of Puerto Rican women and women in Cuba with respect to social justice may have considerable implications for the resistance strategies employed by the younger generation of women in both societies and that there are losses that result from lack of these.

Puerto Rican Women: Resistance and Resignation

For Puerto Rican women on the island, the decade of the seventies represented a time of new political discourse. In 1972, the first organization for women, *Mujer Integrate Ahora* (MIA) was formed following public hearings of the Human Rights Commission on "equality of opportunity and rights of the Puerto Rican woman." Other organizations followed, such as la *Federación de Mujeres Puertorriqueñas* and the university student organization *Alianza Feminista por la Liberación Humana*, which denounced sexism and led to many of the political transformations that have current repercussions for women in Puerto Rico. However, as evidenced by Torres Martinez (1997), these groups demanded equality and they were met with repression, political persecution and criminalization of the organized women.

The experiences of Puerto Rican women have also been largely influenced in many respects by their status as U.S. citizens. Based on the analysis of Bailey and Ellis (1993) using U.S. census data from 1960, 1970, and 1980, it is evident that Puerto Rican females between the ages of 15 to 44 were consistently more likely to have lived in the United States than the general Puerto Rican population. These census data also indicate that females had higher rates of return to Puerto Rico than others.

During those three decades, many Puerto Rican-born women migrated to the U.S. mainland in search of educational and economic opportunities, particularly if

they were single or heads of households. Many who migrated held on to the dream of permanently returning to the island someday. They continued to seek refuge in family and social networks back on the island, but sometimes became entrapped in institutional support structures on the mainland, lacking resources for the trip home (Bailey & Ellis, 1993). Others found that, while they felt marginalized in U.S. society based on their ethnicity and gender, their views of women's place in society had changed with the experience of migration, making it difficult to accept traditional gender norms on the island (Iglesias, 1988).

In traditional Puerto Rican families, regardless of educational level, women undergo a socialization process which assigns them an inferior role (Comas-Diaz, 1982). The Puerto Rican culture conveys mixed messages to women; in one sense they are considered inferior, but at the same time they must assume the responsibilities of being a wife and a mother, and of pursuing a full-time occupation. These are evident in the life experiences that are vividly described by Esmeralda Santiago in *When I was Puerto Rican* (1993).

The prevailing traditional concepts of male and female roles have been challenged by the many structural changes which Puerto Rican families have experienced in the last 40 years. The circulatory migration of family members to and from the U.S. mainland, migration to large urban areas within the island, participation in the U.S. labor force, and awareness of their sociopolitical and economic inequality, are factors which have contributed to changing roles for Puerto Rican women. Fitzpatrick (1987) has attributed the shift in the roles of husband and wife to the Puerto Rican woman's greater participation in mainland society. Factors such as the woman's greater employability, involvement in social, community, and political activities, and the potential for role-reversal were considered by Fitzpatrick to influence Puerto Rican women to gradually adopt cultural patterns of the U.S. mainland.

As Puerto Rican women on the island move into new roles within their personal and professional relationships, they are confronted with different issues and dilemmas that are related to participation in a culture affected by the capitalist interests of dominant U.S. society. Professional women realize that they must expand the roles they assume and the behaviors that are required for upward mobility in workplaces that are directed by individualistic cultural norms. These differing professional expectations may have a significant impact on the personal lives of women whose self-identity and natural support systems are linked to a traditional orientation toward family and community. The complexities of these changes have received limited attention by scholars.

In much of the professional literature that describes Puerto Rican women, the voices of those who resist oppression are silenced, amidst the voices of other marginalized groups in the U.S., with discouraging reports of poverty and low educational attainment. There is a body of evidence which suggests the socioeconomic standing of Puerto Rican women is lower than any other group in the U.S. Puerto Rican women are socialized in families and communities that are affected by the sociopolitical realities of racism and economic oppression in the U.S. Their concepts of success are influenced by a dominant society that denigrates their womanhood and their ethnic roots. However, researchers in the United States have generally ignored the significance of sociopolitical factors when investigating and describing the experiences of Puerto Rican women (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994).

Puerto Rican women have confronted many challenges in their attempts to adhere to role expectations in the family and community, while meeting the opposing demands of their new professional roles. Notwithstanding, research findings indicate that professional Puerto Rican women who are in positions of educational leadership in the U.S. feel that they come from a culture that supports

women to be successful (Iglesias, 1988). The women who "succeed" have resisted the powerful sociopolitical forces affecting Puerto Rican women, by speaking up while attempting to stay "connected" or "in relationship" to significant others and to their community. Nevertheless, the multitude of conflicting demands to which they are subjected may lead to individual stress and difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

When Puerto Rican women on the island and on the U.S. mainland speak up and challenge patriarchal norms, they incur in personal and social costs. The Puerto Rican feminist organizations of the seventies had a powerful impact on the island in that they proposed non-traditional political practices and they were capable of social transformation. Torres Martinez (1997) indicates that they were perceived as "dangerous women" because of their political action and willingness to speak up against oppressive social norms. It is unfortunate that this type of resistance by Puerto Rican women was criminalized; in so doing, oppressive cultural norms and social structures were reinforced and maintained.

Perspectives on Women in Cuba

El concepto de género es sociohistórico y es dialéctico; por lo tanto, cambia

(Rodríguez Calderon, 1996)

The progress made by post-Revolution Cuban women, in terms of resisting the patriarchal norms which were prevalent in their society, is palpable through the experiences that are described by "Reyita, sencillamente" (Rubiera Castillo, 1996). The revolutionary process has provided Cuban women with opportunities for their development, with enhanced social and economic participation. Women have responded by devoting themselves completely to achieving the revolutionary goals

of their society and to the full exercise of their rights. However, according to Lutjens (1997) *The Federation of Cuban Women remains a mass organization that lacks the autonomy that feminist critics extol, though it does reflect the changing circumstances of the 1990s. The FMC continues to organize the formal participation of cubanas. Not all women belong to the FMC, though women's overt oppositional politics is limited in Cuba.* Notwithstanding, Rodríguez Calderón (1996), Cuban professional woman in the field of communications, writes from a feminist perspective about the need to revisit the concept of gender for women in Cuba.

Comprendí muy temprano que la Revolución había colocado a mis congéneres en el mundo del trabajo y de la vida social, que el Partido había expresado claramente su voluntad política igualadora, pero que en muchos sentidos, esa idea resultaba una trampa porque... para no discriminarnos no se reconocía que estamos discriminadas.

Vilasis (1996) revisits the concept of gender with an analysis of Cuban films, and finds that the male perspective dominates, with images of women tending to be silenced, absent or marginalized. *Casi siempre, y como consecuencia de la mirada masculina, el discurso fílmico hegemónico es también masculino, y las mujeres suelen ser/estar silenciadas, ausentes o marginadas: activan o encarnan las cualidades genéricas que la hegemonía masculina de la sociedad patriarcal les atribuye; y, con mucha frecuencia, son objetos de una gratificación erótica para esa mirada.* Vilasis confirms that Cuban society continues to be essentially patriarchal and questions whether this is currently reinforced by the structural and economic changes taking place during this time of crisis. According to Lutjens (1997), gendering resistance means confronting a variety of deeply rooted traditional frameworks referred to previously as "popular attitudes.

Similarly, the comments of Acosta de Armas and Ruiz Narvaez (1996) indicate that a feminist understanding of the concepts of gender and empowerment in Cuban society today is lacking in spite of the considerable progress for women which resulted from the Revolution. They write in Magín:

Las Mujeres en Cuba han avanzado, probablemente más que sus congéneres de Latinoamérica, por lo que se refiere a leyes que las benefician y las igualan y a algunos resultados concretos de su accionar en favor de sí mismas. Pero en el plano subjetivo, tanto ellas como el resto de la sociedad en la que interactúan poseen poca información e insuficiente reflexión acerca de la dimensión de género y sus condicionamientos discriminatorios y desfavorecedores, así como la noción de empoderamiento y aun de las diferencias mismas entre sexo y género.

With respect to young women, the everyday roles that are assigned present contradictory expectations. As explained by Dominguez (1996):

... se espera que estudie, trabaje y participe, pero también que asuma sus responsabilidades de esposa, ama de casa eficiente y madre ejemplar; con lo cual se le sobrecarga de exigencias y responsabilidades en mayor medida que al varón. Es decir, se le han añadido nuevas áreas al rol de la mujer, pero este no se ha redefinido íntegramente ni en la relación con el rol masculino. Por eso se producen profundos conflictos que una parte de las mujeres jóvenes evitan, refugiándose en el espacio doméstico tradicional.

Lutjens (1997) finds that feminist questions in Cuba of the 1990's seem still to be informed by past criticism of the centralization of planning, the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC), Castro's leadership, and the Federation of Cuban Women, and that the feminist answers of the 1990s cannot be those of the 1970s or 1980s. She proposes that, although it is no longer certain what questions should be

asked, the fundamental matter is whether gender and politics have changed in tune with the shifting realities of globalization, its projects, and its agents.

The economic crisis of Cuban socialism that began in the 1980s continues. Reform strategies accentuate inequalities that have often been used to attribute an anti-feminist disposition to the Cuban state. Economic crisis has affected work and the gendered division of labor in Cuba. The state and the Federation of Cuban Women have for decades emphasized women's role in production and with the onset of the Special Period, the FMC proudly asserted that women's employment did not decline. Lutjens asks, "Have the much-criticized male biases of socialist states prevailed unchanged and unchallenged in Cuba? Despite the hopes of many Cubans that the ideas of equality between the sexes and races, of freedom from hunger and want might become reality under a revolutionary government Cuba is being pushed back in time. That prostitution is not a passing problem is now acknowledged. Concern for the emotional and physical well-being of women is also apparent, though policies have been criticized for being insufficient.

Developing Resistance for Liberation

The issue of developing healthy resistance is a social issue and ultimately must be addressed on this level. Puerto Rican and Cuban women who occupy a significant place in their communities may seek to have a positive influence on the younger generation of girls and women. Their lives reflect resistance against the oppressive elements of their traditional heritage and rejection of the subordinate status which is assigned to their gender in their societies. However, since oppressive social structures can be created and reinforced by women as well as by men, developing healthy resistance strategies is not an issue that pertains exclusively to women, in Puerto Rico or Cuba.

Awareness of the concerns and challenges that adult women have confronted can empower the younger generations of women to develop healthy strategies for resisting oppressive social norms. Developing healthy resistance strategies is a developmental and reflective process that occurs with time. It means awareness of inequity, courage to speak one's mind and take action, even at the risk of being seen as not fitting in, being impolite, or violating social norms. This does not imply saying or doing impulsively all that you think, feel and want. It is self-expression with social consciousness. Adherence to traditional gender role expectations may undermine this resistance for young Puerto Rican women and young women in Cuba.

Puerto Rican and Cuban adolescent girls who are engaged in the process of identity formation face the task of survival in societies which are caught between traditional expectations and increasing global pressures. During the passage from adolescence to adulthood they formulate critical attitudes, engage in adaptive behaviors, and make lifestyle choices. Sometimes these choices reflect forms of resistance which help them survive in the short term, but are not conducive to their true liberation as women. Knowledge of the challenges and concerns that other women have confronted in their passage from childhood to adult status can help us to prepare young women to resist those who seek to undermine their efforts.

Adolescent girls may develop strategies that help them survive in the short term but are problematic in the long term. Some of them make choices that disconnect them from their communities. Some of these choices distance them from people who have been significant in their lives. These choices are strategies for survival. Resistance for liberation may, in the long term, have a more positive impact on the interconnections between self, family and community

Cuban women who came of age with the Revolution had the opportunity to develop healthy strategies for resistance with their leadership in challenging

multiple forms of oppression in their communities. The educational access provided, and the resulting sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, was acknowledged by a Black Cuban woman colleague to be responsible for her high level of professional attainment. However, while sharing experiences with other women in Cuba, some of us also reflected on whether the notable accomplishments of the Revolution fully address the differing concerns of young women today. These reflections have, in turn, led to a consideration of some of the losses that have occurred for Puerto Rican girls and women, and the implications of these losses for family and community.

Resignation vs. Resistance for Liberation

Where there is power there is resistance and where there is resistance there is power (Ross, 1993)

A girl who has developed resistance for liberation:

- Has a strong sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy.
- Respects and cares for her body.
- Feels empowered in school and social institutions.
- Recognizes and is able to challenge and resist situations of discrimination, oppression and harassment.
- Feels aligned with her culture and community.

Emotional Losses

- Girls and women may silence their resistance or learn to override their feelings in order to become more adaptable and more accommodating of patriarchal gender norms.

Physical

- Passion and sexual desires are often shamed for adolescent Puerto Rican girls. With loss of desires comes loss of creativity or "soul" and loss of power. With loss of power comes resignation.

Behavioral expressions

- Premarital sexual activity and unintended pregnancy are stigmatized in Puerto Rican society, many times leading to loss of status and disconnection for adolescent girls within their communities.
- Short term strategies for survival may lead to involvement in situations of violence and abuse.

Education

- As evidenced by female participation rates in non-traditional careers, Cuban girls exhibit self-esteem and self-confidence in the academic arenas of math and science. This is increasing for Puerto Rican girls on the island, although not for Puerto Rican girls who live on the mainland. Neither group has adequate participation in the hierarchical professional fields of technology
- Career aspirations for Cuban and Puerto Rican women drop more than for men, as a result of family responsibilities and inequity in terms of gender expectations.

In the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, liberation is defined as "a process where people engage with each other openly and honestly to identify their true needs, define their common values, and raise one another to higher levels of motivation and effectiveness." Societal perceptions in terms of acceptability emerges as a problem to assuming a feminist identity in Puerto Rico and Cuba. Cultural traditions

essentialize women's identities and associations, impeding the development of their own sense of identity. However, involvement in feminist coalitions provides a broader vision, maintains a collective identity, and creates opportunities to reflect on the societal transformations needed for social justice.

In the words expressed by Vilma Espín during the recent international meeting of women's solidarity:

nos esperan días difíciles y hermosos en que tendremos ocasión de vernos en un lugar u otro del planeta, allí donde más se necesite aunar fuerzas, convocadas por la solidaridad que en estos días se hará más organizada, más fuerte.

¡Trabajemos unidas, con toda la firmeza y la voluntad que merece tan formidable empresa!

This essay represents an initial attempt for Puerto Rican and Cuban men and women to engage in reflection on the process of young women's resistance for liberation. Based on our common values, we can aspire to creating opportunities for an open and honest identification of true needs. *Sueña la musa de Lola ...*

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