

# WOMEN AND POST-COLD WAR SOCIALISM: THE CASES OF CUBA AND VIETNAM

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This paper compares the post-Cold War experiences of women in Cuba and Vietnam. The regimes in both of these countries suffered gravely from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The disappearance of the Soviet bloc and the subsequent economic slowdown forced the Cuban and Vietnamese leadership to sort quickly through various policies that might bring about recovery and rapid economic growth while averting the unraveling of socialism and communist-party rule. However, the two countries took markedly different paths.

Vietnam opted to embrace the market and carried out sweeping economic reforms, from privatizing state enterprises and agriculture to devaluing the currency, from drastically slashing subsidies to eliminating thousands of state firms, from opening the country to foreign trade and investment to laying off almost a million workers. The Cuban regime chose a more cautious and less costly approach of adjustment and limited reform. Enticed by the prospect of rapid economic development, the Vietnamese were prepared for a bold and risky move. Concerned at the possible wrench on their grip on power, the Cubans preferred to muddle along with incremental changes.

Given the cultural and structural differences between Cuba and Vietnam and their contrasting post-Cold War approaches to recovery, the experiences of wom-

en in each country raises important questions to which this paper advances partial answers. How similar were the experiences of women in Cuba and Vietnam throughout the prerevolutionary and revolutionary phases? In what ways has the post-Cold War period of reform affected women in each country? In other words, what have women gained and what have they lost?

## WOMEN AND THEIR PREREVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCES

Women in prerevolutionary Vietnam and Cuba wholly lacked equal rights and lived in sharply discriminatory societies. Women in Cuba, however, fared noticeably better than those in Vietnam. Cuban women received the right to vote in 1934. Rates of abortion and divorce in prerevolutionary Cuba ranked among the highest in Latin America. In education the percentage of female students from ages five to fifteen approximately equaled that of male students.<sup>1</sup> According to Cuba's 1953 census, the percentage of illiterate males (26 percent) exceeded that of illiterate females (21 percent).<sup>2</sup> The number of women working outside the home, attending school, and practicing birth control surpassed the corresponding percentages in nearly every other Latin American or developing country. Women served as judges, mayors, and cabinet members, and the Constitution of 1940 stood as one of the most progressive

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1. José Moreno, "From Traditional to Modern Values," in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, ed. Carmelo Mesa-Lago (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 479.

2. Julie Marie Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in Cuba* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1994), p. 89.

in the Western Hemisphere with regard to women's rights.

Women in pre-revolutionary Vietnam, however, before and during French rule, enjoyed virtually no rights or privileges. Indeed, Vietnamese citizens in general enjoyed few rights. Law and society afforded women scant protection in the workplace and the home. In fact, throughout the colonial period, the French continued to recognize laws regulating the status of concubines and polygamy. In 1943, approximately 95 percent of the population and 98 percent of women could neither read nor write.

Moreover, traditional Vietnamese society—which might be characterized as patriarchal, authoritarian, and reliant on subsistence agriculture—wholly depended on the labor of wives, daughters, concubines, and female servants. Women lived narrowly circumscribed lives, usually confined to the home and the family rice paddies. Often, their lives did not extend far past the family plot. Prerevolutionary Cuban society, by contrast, offered broader horizons to its women. Cuba was more urban, literate, and commercial, and the roles of women were more varied and fulfilling.

### REVOLUTION AND WOMEN IN CUBA AND VIETNAM

Perhaps the most important change for women in Cuba after the revolution was their rapid entry into the workforce. In 1959 women comprised only 17 percent of the workforce. By 1990 they made up 38 percent. Cuban women participated actively in the building of a revolutionary society—teaching peasants as part of the literacy campaign, promoting government goals, supporting child-care programs. Furthermore, throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s women's issues and objectives in Cuba, at least rhetorically, took on more visibility and importance.

In Vietnam, women's issues actually formed an important intellectual basis for the anti-colonial movement. While the French were by no means especially

enlightened or progressive in governing Vietnam, they did openly support efforts to improve the lot of Vietnamese women in education and political rights. In fact, the French initiated most of the early efforts to improve women's condition in Vietnam's conservative Confucian society. Perhaps reflective of the role of women in French society, throughout France and its colonies gender was seen as an appropriate and acceptable topic of discourse, and progress in women's rights was one positive aspect of the history of French Indochina.

In promoting anti-colonial sentiments and fostering a revolutionary consciousness, Vietnam's Marxist intellectuals relied heavily on the language of gender. Indeed, as in so many other anti-colonial movements, Vietnamese revolutionaries turned the language and concepts of the colonizers back on the colonial hierarchy. Revolutionary intellectuals came to embrace the concept of gender as a code term for analyzing parallel conditions under colonialism. Intellectuals used debates regarding women as vehicles for arguing about colonialism. Inequality of women took on a second secret meaning: oppression of the whole society. The revolutionaries labeled the French and their Vietnamese supporters "Patrons" (males) oppressing and abusing women, who symbolized the victims of colonialism. Women's liberation, thus, became synonymous with colonial self-determination. Ultimately, as these double meanings became apparent, the French withdrew their support of women's rights.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the fighting for independence, this use of gender to symbolize oppression appealed to and gained the support of Vietnamese women. Women hoped that revolution and liberation would mean political, social and economic equality. Despite all the gender-oriented language, however, not all Vietnamese Marxists were serious in advocating a change in the basic legal status of women. Many male revolutionaries—products of their culture—believed that women involved in the anti-colonial

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3. Mary Ann Tetreault, "Women and Revolution in Vietnam," in *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*, ed. Mary Ann Tetreault (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 111-113.

movement should make traditional sacrifices and contributions. One Vietnamese Marxist, reminiscent of the writings of Che Guevara, wrote that women would provide to the anti-French movement “feminine strengths, such as virtue, patience, loyalty.”<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, like the left in Latin America, including Castro’s regime, Vietnam’s Marxists expected all their followers to subordinate personal or private ambitions to the goals of the socialist state. After the Vietnamese defeated the French, the new leaders openly encouraged women to subordinate specifically female ambitions and goals to the objectives of the entire nation. Women were to pursue goals that prepared them educationally and politically to participate fully in a Marxist society.

In much the same way, the Cuban regime emphasized economic goals in many of its efforts on behalf of women. Fidel Castro clearly stated that he expected women to subordinate their personal goals to those of society as a whole. He declared: “women can be free only to the extent that they commit themselves first and foremost to the Revolution.”<sup>5</sup> It may be that neither the Cuban nor the Vietnamese leadership, both overwhelmingly male, valued women’s liberation on its own terms, apart from broader revolutionary goals. In the case of Vietnam this view reflected a long-ingrained communitarian ethic: one sacrifices not for one’s self or even one’s family or gender, but for the community or the nation as a whole.

It is highly revealing that polygamy, an institution under fierce rhetorical attack during the Vietnamese revolutionary movement, remained legal and untouched in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam until 1960. The Marxist regime justified polygamy on the grounds that the family in Vietnam’s traditional patriarchal society formed the chief economic unit. In

this unit women performed the bulk of the labor under male supervision. The idea was that the more wives, daughters, concubines, and female servants a male could dominate the more work could be performed and the more the family could produce.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for all the rhetoric promoting gender equality, the long process of dismantling the family farms really sounded the death knell for polygamy in Vietnam.

Once their revolutions began, both Cuban and Vietnamese leaders implored women to do more for the cause. And, the evidence suggests that many women participated fully and enthusiastically, viewing the revolutionary struggle as both their own personal battle for women’s rights and, more important, as their duty to the larger whole. The Indochinese Communist Party created the Women’s Union—still the largest women’s organization in Vietnam—which mobilized women to work and to fight. The Castro regime organized the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) primarily to promote revolutionary goals and to carry out various activities, such as the literacy campaign, teacher training programs, and child-care workshops.

The experiences of Vietnamese women may be contrasted with those of Cuban women. Indeed, on account of the decades of warfare in Vietnam, the revolution exacted a considerably higher price from Vietnamese women. Ho Chi Minh seized control of Hanoi in 1945, but the war against the French continued for another nine years. During that period Vietnamese women fought, gathered intelligence, transported supplies, and tended to the wounded. Many women died during the conflict, either in battle or by execution. In 1941, for example, the French executed Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, revered by the Vietnamese today as an anti-colonial heroine and martyr.

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4. David Marr, *Vietnamese Traditions on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 242-243; see also Bunk, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in Cuba*, p. 99.

5. Oscar Lewis, Ruth Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Four Women Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. xvii.

6. Tetreault, “Women and Revolution in Vietnam,” p. 113.

After the partitioning of Vietnam in 1954, the intensified north-south conflict demanded even more sacrifices from Vietnamese women. According to one estimate, more than 250,000 women were killed between 1954 and 1965 alone.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, by 1965, as the pool of males continued to diminish because of war casualties, the leadership recruited women to become even more deeply involved in the front lines of the conflict. Indeed, along with fighting and suffering from the ravages of war, Vietnamese women took a central role in farming, the so-called “feminization of agriculture.” Although women had long performed most of the manual labor in Vietnam, they now actually managed the farm cooperatives. Vietnamese women, then, faced increasingly heavy burdens and extreme hardship between 1945 and 1975.

After 1975 how did the Vietnamese leadership reward Vietnamese women for their sacrifices? In various respects, it failed utterly to do so. The leadership was, and has remained, dominated by men. Indeed, the Vietnamese leadership never recognized seriously the vital contribution of women in the wars. Time and again, the leaders have opted to portray women solely as victims of the war, rather than as serious agents or contributors. For example, in the Museum of the Revolution in Hanoi, which boasts the most extensive collection of photographs and artifacts from the revolutionary period, little in the collection features or even includes women. One would not learn of the role women played by simply visiting the centerpiece museum in Hanoi.<sup>8</sup>

The War Crimes Museum in Ho Chi Minh City features a horrific collection of photographs of victims—piled corpses, mutilated bodies, crippled children. Yet, here again, while the museum prominently portrays women as victims, as it should, women are rarely, if ever, presented as soldiers, agents, or leaders. Moreover, Vietnamese memories of female

contributions to the war efforts seem to have faded much more quickly than memories of male contributions. We know very few names of women involved—even in various recent memoirs by women themselves in the revolution.<sup>9</sup>

In the aftermath of the revolution women in Vietnam did gain considerable economic power, albeit a different type of power than that enjoyed by Cuban women. As more men entered the armed forces in the mid-1960s, and as the state seized more private family farms and converted them to state cooperatives, women virtually controlled the daily administration of agriculture, Vietnam’s largest economic sector. Vietnamese women, like Cuban women, also rapidly joined the urban workforce. In fact, by 1991 women made up 52 percent of the population and 60 percent of the total workforce: in excess of 20 percentage points more working women than in revolutionary Cuba.

Several factors help to explain this remarkably high number. First, Vietnam lost so many males during the war years that throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s women seized millions of available positions and succeeded in holding them. Second, Vietnam was and remains an agricultural society. Indeed, 80 percent of the Vietnamese population continues to reside in rural areas.<sup>10</sup> Thus, women were poised to enter a field with considerable vacancies in which they or their ancestors had worked.

Perhaps most telling, within Vietnamese society the types of work that women began to do may not have been viewed as such a notable step forward. Hence, the door to the workforce may have swung open more easily than in many societies. In Vietnam, as in many other countries, rice-based agriculture was long considered fairly simple, menial, low-status work. And, Vietnamese society often relegated wom-

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7. Le Han Danh, “The Long-Haired Army,” *Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1966), pp. 61-62.

8. Women have their own museum in Hanoi—a much less known, less-touted museum. But, as Mary Ann Tetreault wrote, separate is not equal. See Tetreault, “Women and Revolution in Vietnam,” p. 123.

9. See, for example, Truong Nha Trang’s 1995 memoir.

10. Le Thi, “*Doi Moi* and Female Workers: A Case Study of Hanoi,” in *Economic Reforms, Women’s Employment, and Social Policies*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Helsinki: World Institute for Development Research, 1995), p. 46.

en working outside the agricultural sector to support roles in light industry, services, and education.

Women also found that increased power in the agricultural realm both empowered and burdened them. On the one hand, the cooperatives offered to women decision-making capabilities and opportunities for social exchanges and relationships outside the family. It provided a chance to meet with, work with, and join forces with other women, a potentially potent means to dissent or, at least, to foment change.

On the other hand, Vietnamese women worked exceedingly long hours. Under the cooperative arrangements, the state paid men and women equally. But men did the heavy work—carrying loads, hauling water, maneuvering water buffalo. Because the largely male leadership classified this “male” work as more demanding, it permitted men to work fewer hours per day. So, while men and women received the same salaries, men enjoyed more time away from the workplace. Nevertheless, working women found that even men in revolutionary society were not ordinarily inclined to use their leisure time to maintain the house, cook the meals, and raise the children. Thus, the demands of the workplace added to, rather than replaced, the demands of the home.<sup>11</sup>

### WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN CUBA AND VIETNAM

In the area of basic education, the gains of Cuban women and Vietnamese women are similar in certain respects, different in others. In Vietnam by 1985 women comprised about 50 percent of all primary students and 43 percent of all university students. Approximately 27 percent of university faculty and 11 percent of doctoral degree holders today are women. However, despite their level of education, women

faculty members, are rarely ranked above lecturer, and few universities employ female administrators.

Cuban women have fared better. While primary and secondary education has remained on par with Vietnam, Cuban women have accomplished more in higher education. In 1994 women accounted for 44 percent of the full professors and 65 percent of the assistant professors at the University of Havana. Moreover, women now hold ten of the sixteen deanships.<sup>12</sup> Given the regime’s post-Cold War move to marginalize and diminish the influence of university education, however, the professional advances of women in education may not be quite so glowing if critically scrutinized.

### WOMEN’S RIGHTS

As for women’s rights, both revolutionary regimes have promised much, yet delivered little. The Vietnamese Constitution of 1980, like the Cuban Constitution, ensures women the right to vote, own land, and choose their own profession. It requires men to share equally with women the work of the home and protects women against domestic abuse. A pregnant woman can get a divorce, but her spouse cannot divorce her until one year after the baby is born, and each party after divorce is entitled to one-half of the common property.

While such provisions appear promising on paper, in reality, both the notion of a rule of law<sup>13</sup> and the court system in which such rights might be enforced remain weak and underdeveloped in revolutionary Vietnam. Corruption is rampant, people do not trust the courts, and those dispensing justice frequently consider an individual’s revolutionary orientation before deciding a case. Thus, in practice, many laws regulating the rights of women go unenforced. The state often fails to honor labor contracts, and the

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11. Tetreault, “Women and Revolution in Vietnam,” p. 125.

12. Elena Díaz González, “Economic Crisis: Employment and Quality of Life in Cuba,” in *Economic Reforms, Women’s Employment, and Social Policies*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Helsinki: World Institute for Development and Economic Research, 1995), pp. 139-140.

13. Michael Fowler has written of a rule of law as follows: “When the rule of law is supreme, the legal system guarantees individual rights and protects individuals from the actions of others and from abuse by the state. In a society that values law so highly, individuals can assert and defend their legal rights, and laws will define and limit the powers of the state.” Michael Ross Fowler, *With Justice for All? The Nature of the American Legal System* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 7.

courts provide very limited recourse in labor and social matters.

Some exceptions do exist. For instance, the 1986 family law not only contemplates prison sentences for domestic violence, but actually establishes a mechanism for enforcement. It assigns to the women's union the responsibility of protecting women with shelter and support and reporting offenders. This provides an important sanctuary and a community structure that can give real practical meaning to an otherwise unenforced set of laws. To a large extent, however, vaunted legal undertakings have failed to upset traditional patterns of conduct toward women.

### WOMEN IN POLITICS

In both Cuba and Vietnam women have never attained significant political power. Rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, both regimes have consistently excluded women from the center of important political discussion. In socialist societies such as Cuba in which the state controls virtually all resources and their distribution, political influence constitutes the only authentic form of power. Alternative forms of empowerment, such as the market, a free press, or autonomous artistic expression, are muted or nonexistent. The leaderships in both Cuba and Vietnam have quieted the voices of women, refusing to allow them a significant role in the political and economic decisions made on their behalf. In both societies, women have remained peripheral and politically impotent, despite their numbers in the workforce. Recently, the market in Vietnam has provided women with other mechanisms for empowerment. In Cuba, however, genuine power—power to shape their lives in positive ways—merely trickles down to women from the men who are in charge, or eludes women altogether.

In the case of Vietnam, the political role of women has steadily deteriorated since the revolution succeeded in unifying the country in 1975. While in 1965 women made up 17 percent of the Democratic Re-

public of Vietnam's central committee, women have never held that many central committee seats since. In 1946 women held only 2.5 percent of the seats—10 of 250 total seats—of the first national assembly. By 1975 women made up more than 32 percent of the national assembly membership. Today that number has dropped to about 15 percent. Women today head 2 of 14 ministries, fewer than ever before since 1965, and they lead none of the major commissions.<sup>14</sup> Women serve neither on the politburo nor on the powerful party standing committee, newly established at the party congress in June 1996. Nor has a movement to reverse this trend yet surfaced among the men who run the country.

Vietnam's original leaders of the women's movement, the grand old women of the revolution, have largely disappeared from public life. For some years the sizeable women's union has drifted about, lacking vibrant leadership and clear purpose. Thus, to the extent that Vietnamese women once had substantive and symbolic influence in the political arena, it has been eroded over time.

Cuban women have not fared much better. No Cuban woman ever served on the secretariat, disbanded in 1991. Indeed, until 1991 only one woman—Vilma Espín, Raúl Castro's wife—served on the Political Bureau. Today, a mere three of the twenty-five-member politburo are women.<sup>15</sup> Women comprise only about 21 percent of the Party, 22.8 percent of the National Assembly, 16 percent of the Central Committee, and 10 percent of Cuba's ambassadors. Thus, the Castro regime has long overlooked the contributions women might make in each of the key policy-making institutions.

Why have women experienced such few successes in the political arena of these two avowedly revolutionary societies? Several explanations may shed some light. First, women joined the revolutions with idealistic and substantive goals. As the revolutions progressed and revealed themselves as elitist, isolated, and male-dominated, the idealism faded. Women

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14. Arlene Eisen, *Women and Revolution in Viet Nam* (London: Zed Books, 1984), pp. 243-247.

15. Díaz González, "Economic Crisis: Employment and Quality of Life in Cuba," p.127.

became disillusioned and dropped away. They lost their drive and commitment, retreated from the public domain, and returned to private life. One might characterize this as a form of discreet, noncombative dissidence. An elite and self-selected group of men, perhaps more concerned with power than ideals and certainly confronted with more opportunities and fewer obstacles than their female revolutionary colleagues, have continued to control the state. Thus, the course of the revolution has moved from an ideals-oriented push for substantive change to a traditional male fight over power. Women in Cuba and Vietnam, with no record of winning that game, lost interest in playing it. Hence, they have retreated from the public to the private realm.

A second explanation focuses on the machismo of the regimes. As I have argued at more length elsewhere, the substantial disparity between the Cuban leadership's rhetoric and its actual policies toward women calls into question the notion that a chief objective of the Revolution was to ensure full equality between the sexes.<sup>16</sup> The governments in Cuba and Vietnam both had many opportunities to assure women equal access to political positions and leadership roles through fair, noncoercive measures. These regimes could have given women a voice in telling political decisions. In fact, however, the governments repeatedly failed to take the fundamental steps necessary to transform the rhetoric of equality into political reality.

For its part, the Castro leadership consistently concerned itself more with augmenting the size of the labor force than with achieving equality between the sexes.<sup>17</sup> Bringing women into the work force meant eradicating prerevolutionary attitudes that stressed the traditional role of women in the home. Traditional culture thus hindered the government's revo-

lutionary goals. Hence, Cuban leaders created the FMC to mobilize women and to inculcate new attitudes throughout society that were more appropriate for the state's objectives.

The leadership itself, however, never relinquished its own traditional view of women's role in politics and society. Fidel Castro himself was perhaps too much the *caudillo*, the gun-carrying, jeep-driving, cigar-smoking *macho*, to revamp his own basic attitudes toward women. As Carlos Alberto Montaner observed: "[The government would have to] concoct a different mythology, adopt other manners, and castrate the revolution...[T]he revolutionary thing would be to eradicate the masculine accent, the machismo style which rules over Cuba's public life....But that would be like asking for a different revolution."<sup>18</sup>

Likewise in Vietnam, the regime certainly used seductive rhetoric in promoting women's issues. It certainly gained workers and fighters, but it displayed no commitment to truly empowering women. Few avenues provided women real access to the political arena. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing on the French Revolution, argued that France after the revolution appeared very much like France before the revolution. Culture—values, attitudes, beliefs, traditions—had changed very little. Similarly, in gender relations the term "continuity" describes modern Vietnam more appropriately than the word "revolutionary."

Crisis—especially after 1984 in Vietnam and 1991 in Cuba—further diminished attention to women's concerns. As economic difficulties became dire, both regimes turned to the tasks of consolidating and maintaining their power and averting economic disaster. With so few women in leadership positions

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16. See Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture*, pp. 89-124.

17. See Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture*, p. 122; Susan Kaufman Purcell, "Modernizing Women for a Modern Society: The Cuban Case" in *Female and Male in Latin America*, Ann Pescatello, ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), p. 259.

18. Carlos Alberto Montaner, *Secret Report on the Cuban Revolution* (London: Transaction Books, 1971), p. 91, cited in Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture*, p. 123. See also Ileana Fuentes, *Cuba Sin Caudillos: Un Enfoque Feminista Para El Siglo XXI* (Princeton: Linden Lane, 1994).

able to hold the regimes to their ideals and promises, gender issues naturally fell to the wayside.

It may also be the case that women themselves have continued to view their roles in fundamentally traditional terms. Polls in Cuba and Vietnam have revealed that women choose to subordinate politics to home and family. Le Thi, a noted revolutionary and the former director of the Women's Center in Hanoi, recently wrote an article in which she called on women to take on their "natural functions." She argued that men, naturally and appropriately, should manage the political affairs of state. Neither revolutionary Cuba nor revolutionary Vietnam has truly revolutionized the long-enduring view in those society's that men should control the public domain, while women occupy themselves with the private.<sup>19</sup>

#### WOMEN AND POST-COLD WAR SOCIETY

In the case of Vietnam, the economic transition has had a complex and contradictory impact on women. Since women continue to dominate the agricultural sector, the transition to the free market system has provided rural women with slightly more access to capital. Agricultural exports—primarily rice—earn much hard currency for Vietnam. By working in agriculture, women have independent, though limited, access to hard currency that they lacked when more doctrinaire Marxist policies were in effect.

At the same time, agricultural privatization dissolved the cooperatives and resurrected the family farms. Since the bonds forged in running the cooperatives have not always survived, this has deprived women of an important social and communication outlet. Many women are back to laboring within narrower confines. They have lost a key social role. Thus in agriculture, women are economically better off than before though they may be more socially isolated. Whether their role in the market will provide more opportunities to shape Vietnamese society than their role in the cooperatives did remains to be seen.

Second, as part of Vietnam's privatization the state laid off 900,000 workers and eliminated thousands of state enterprises.<sup>20</sup> Approximately 60 percent of those workers released from their jobs were women. At the same time, however, the private sector expanded and quickly absorbed virtually all of these workers. Thus, women found new opportunities. A recent study of one neighborhood in Hanoi revealed that women make up 64 percent of workers in newly-created enterprises. While the number of women in agriculture has actually been decreasing, the percentage of women in other sectors has increased steadily since 1988. Today women outnumber men in commerce, education, finance, and health care. In contrast to Cuba, however, Vietnamese women have not advanced in the higher professions. Women comprise a mere 6 percent of medical doctors and 4 percent of university professors.<sup>21</sup>

While the transition to the market has provided ample new opportunities for urban women, it may have further weakened their ability to secure equal pay and acceptable working conditions. Where in the past the state might pass laws and enforce them within state enterprises, now the state must try to police foreign firms doing business in Vietnam. Political corruption, ineffective judicial process, and the lack of an efficient regulatory state have opened new opportunities for skirting social laws.

In the private sector today women earn less than men working in the same job, keep long and irregular working hours, and lack most benefits provided in the state enterprises. Should the supply of labor no longer vastly exceed the demand, women may gain the economic clout necessary to ensure positive changes. And, should the legal system be strengthened and made more accessible, women may gain the practical ability to translate contractual and constitutional rhetoric into workplace reality. But, neither of these changes is likely to occur in the immediate future.

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19. Le Thi, "Gender, Growth and Scientific Study on Women," *Vietnam Social Sciences* 4 (1992), pp. 6-9.

20. George Irvin, "Vietnam: Assessing the Achievements of *Doi Moi*," *Journal of Development Studies* 5:31 (June 1995), p. 727.

21. Le Thi, "*Doi Moi* and Female Workers," pp. 48-50.

Vietnam's economic transition has also triggered the migration of women to the cities. They come to find a job or sell produce. Many collect trash, perform domestic services, or work for little pay (20 cents a day).<sup>22</sup> Some bring their children with them; many resort to crime. As in Cuba, unprecedented numbers have been turning to prostitution.

Vietnam has also witnessed a phenomenal increase in the number of beggars—especially street children—which has led to crime, drug abuse, and child prostitution. According to a recent statistic, 50,000 children roam the streets of Vietnam's major cities. Moreover, the health of these children—indeed, of all Vietnamese children—remains a chief concern. Roughly 85 percent of Vietnamese youngsters have parasites, 70 percent have infections, and 27 percent suffer from glaucoma.

### POVERTY

What has been the impact of the economic transition on the poorest groups in Vietnamese society? Some have argued that Vietnam's economic reforms increased the chasm between rich and poor. Illiteracy is on the rise as education has become increasingly inaccessible and privatized. Moreover, health care, which the Vietnamese state never provided on the level of other Marxist states, has also become increasingly out of reach. Unemployment has risen to around 12 percent. According to one estimate, 5 million rural workers remain unemployed and 3.5 million urban workers seek work.

Curiously, despite these statistics, poverty has not increased during the economic transition. The economy, of course, was performing abysmally before market reforms were implemented. According to a recent World Bank report, in 1984 approximately 75 percent of the population was poverty-stricken. In 1993 less than 55 percent remained so.<sup>23</sup> Thus, while relative deprivation may have risen in Vietnam, a rise in absolute poverty affecting a large segment of the population has not occurred. In fact, for several reasons

reforms have probably helped many Vietnamese citizens to lift themselves out of poverty.

First, national income has grown continuously throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s—and most of that growth was in the agricultural sector—historically the poorest sector. Thus, economic transition was not associated with a severe economic contraction, which generally harms the peasantry more than other social groups. Second, several features of the Vietnamese economy have cushioned the impact of reforms. Unlike in the industrialized, centrally planned economies, pre-transition Vietnamese firms provided few benefits to workers.

Moreover, a relatively large portion of the labor force worked outside the formal state sector. Thus, during transition Vietnam has avoided the heightened expectations that dogged other transition countries whose state sectors had long provided substantial benefits to their workers. Vietnam has not experienced a transition like those in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in which severe economic contraction exacerbated the problems inherent in a collapsing welfare system.

Unlike the landless peasants of transition countries in Latin America, most peasants in Vietnam now own and farm their own land. And, given the staggering growth of the agricultural sector, the shift in terms of trade favored the peasantry since they produced the rice being exported. Finally, stabilization in Vietnam has been swift and effective. In this sense, the Vietnamese adopted a “shock-treatment” approach to economic transition, similar to that of Poland and quite different from the more gradual Chinese strategy.<sup>24</sup>

### CUBAN WOMEN DURING THE PERIOD OF ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT

Just as *doi moi* has had contradictory effects for Vietnamese women, so the much more limited adjustments in Cuba have also had positive and negative

22. Personal interview with Le Thi, Director of Hanoi's Women's Center, Hanoi, Vietnam (April 12, 1995).

23. *World Development Report 1996: From Plan to Market* (Washington: World Bank, 1996), p. 48.

24. George Irvin, “Vietnam: Assessing the Achievements of *Doi Moi*,” pp. 741-742; *World Development Report 1996*, pp. 1-18.

repercussions. The leading drawback has been rising unemployment. In the late 1980s as the economic crisis in Cuba intensified, the Fidel Castro regime implemented a process of economic “rationalization” in which Castro announced that “nonessential” workers would be laid off, men who had concluded active military service would be guaranteed the best jobs, and workers would be assigned to jobs that the regime deemed most appropriate for their skills. In this process many women lost employment.

Some enterprises confronted women workers, many of whom could not afford child care, with new, longer and more erratic work hours.<sup>25</sup> In other instances the state simply decided that women had other home responsibilities and could be released more justifiably than men. The regime created the microbrigades to absorb excess workers and to construct houses. The microbrigades, however, largely excluded women. According to one estimate, by the summer of 1989 the program hired 33,000 workers, yet women accounted for only 6 percent of those hired.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the state raised the cost and the minimum age of day care eligibility, which compelled still more women to stay at home.

With the regime still shunning the free market and intent on centralized decisionmaking, the women who retained their jobs often found the government reassigning them to different tasks. These work re-assignments undermined some of the previous gains women had made. In some instances, the government called on women to perform what had traditionally been seen as “women’s work.” In the national process of re-assigning workers, the regime called on women to work as teachers in day-care centers,

waitresses in restaurants, and maids and cooks in the tourism sector.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the government reassigned many women to agriculture, primarily working in sugar.<sup>28</sup> In many cases women joined agricultural brigades, organized to grow food. Since these brigades were sex segregated, families were often split up and separated for anywhere from two weeks to two years.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, the Cuban adjustment to post-Cold War realities has not been entirely negative for Cuban women. Despite the many obstacles, women continue to comprise approximately 35 percent of the Cuban workforce, roughly on par with the percentage of women in other labor forces in the region.<sup>30</sup> Although their occupations may often be menial, women continue to dominate the service sector, the most rapidly expanding part of the Cuban economy.<sup>31</sup> Women have thus been able to take advantage of the rapidly growing tourism industry, finding and holding more lucrative jobs than many Cuban men. By the same token, however, one unfortunate result of the expansion of tourism in Cuba has been the rapid burgeoning of the sex tourism industry. Prostitution provides thousands of young Cuban females, and some males, with fast access to hard currency, though with considerable health and psychological costs.<sup>32</sup>

Cuban women have also found adequate medical care to be in shorter supply in the post-Cold War era. Fewer medical facilities, tighter medical rations, and less available medicines have forced women to overlook basic health needs. Abortion, widely available to Cuban women in the 1980s, has become much more difficult to attain. In 1986 there were 91 abortions in

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25. Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 119.

26. Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, p. 119.

27. *Granma Weekly Review* (August 3, 1986, p. 1; February 21, 1988, p. 3; August 24, 1987, p. 8); and *Granma* (April 18, 1991), p. 2.

28. *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (October 4, 1990), p. 4.

29. Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, p. 119.

30. According to Isel Rivero y Méndez, a full 53 percent of “economically active” women are virtually unemployed. Isel Rivero y Méndez, “Cuban Women: Back to the Future?” *Mi* (May-June 1993), p. 16.

31. The service sector alone accounts for more than half of the foreign direct investment in Cuba. See Carlos Lage, “La Economía Cubana,” *Economía Cubana: Boletín Informativo*, 11 (Febrero 1995), p. 1.

32. See Julia O’Connell Davidson, “Sex Tourism in Cuba,” in *Race and Class* 38:1 (July-September 1996), pp. 39-48.

Cuba for every 100 births. In 1993 that number had dropped to 56 for every 100, and the number has continued to plummet.<sup>33</sup>

The quality of Cuba's primary and secondary schools has also deteriorated as schools lack daily needs, such as books, pencils, erasers, and paper. The universities, likewise, cannot cover basic essentials, including books and computers. Day-care is no longer as accessible as before and services, such as laundries, have closed or raised prices. Indeed, the erosion of the Cuban standard of living has affected women more acutely and directly than men.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to Vietnam, however, women in Cuba have retained a strong hold on the professions. Approximately 44 percent of the University of Havana's full professors and 65 percent of its assistant professors are women. Moreover, women make up roughly 58 percent of Cuba's medical doctors, despite the fact that in 1988 the Castro regime actually dropped medical school admission requirements for men in order to increase the number of male medical students.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, a medical doctor in Cuba earns the equivalent of about three dollars a month: a disincentive to practicing a profession as opposed to opting for manual labor, prostitution, or child-rearing. Fur-

thermore, while the government has approved increasing numbers of licenses for self-employment in an attempt to alleviate unemployment and raise production levels, it has barred many professionals from self-employment. Given the high number of women among Cuba's professionals, they have been adversely affected by this regulation.

### CONCLUSION

The post-Cold War crisis in Cuba and Vietnam has had a complex impact on women. The experiences of women in the prerevolutionary and revolutionary periods contained certain pertinent parallels, alongside a host of striking differences. The common denominator during the post-Cold War period seems to have been the contradictory nature of the changes. Progress in some areas has been tempered by backsliding in others. In general terms, Cuba's economic adjustment has been considerably less sweeping than Vietnam's market transition. While any findings at this early date must be tentative, the new economic policies seem to have opened fewer new opportunities for women in Cuba. While women remain outside the political center in both countries, the best hope for economic empowerment and personal independence may yet be found in the marketplace rather than in the tired rhetoric of supposedly revolutionary regimes long dominated by male elites.

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33. Díaz González, "Economic Crisis," p. 137.

34. The recent legalization of various private enterprises, including laundries, has alleviated the burden somewhat.

35. Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*, p. 90; Díaz González, "Economic Crisis," p. 133.