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ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

(1974, b&w, 78 min., Dir: Sara Gomez, Cuba, English subtitles)

Women and the Cuban Revolution

One of the great changes brought about by the Cuban revolution is the "revolution within the revolution" (as Fidel Castro has called it); the change in the status of women.

In the period prior to 1959 almost all women were forced into a system of economic and social dependence on men since they were actively discouraged from working. As a result, in 1958 85% of women were housewives; out of a total population of 7,000,000 there were only 100,000 working women (mostly domestics and servants plus some in the tobacco and textile industries) and over 12,000 prostitutes. About 30% could neither read nor write and only 1% had any university education. 80% of the people lived in bohios - thatched huts with dirt floors and no plumbing.

Today women make up 32% of the work force of 2.6 million including more than 60% of the workers in education and social services, over 40% of the scientific and administrative work force, 37% of the doctors (35% of the specialists) and 96% of the nurses. 50% of the students at all levels are women. Illiteracy has been virtually eliminated. Almost 50% of the Young Communist League is female as are the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, and 43% of the local trade union leadership. This said, at the level of municipal, regional and national government leadership, only a scant 5% of the personnel are women.

Although housing is no longer in crisis because of the construction of multiple rental units, there is still a shortage. Infant mortality has been lowered to 1/50, the lowest rate in Latin America, and life expectancy has increased by 15 years. Both statistics indicate the dramatic improvement in health care. Day-care facilities provide services for 150,000 children making it possible for more women to participate in society beyond the home. Unlike some post-revolutionary societies women are not urged to have children. IUDs, a low estrogen birth control pill and birth control information are provided under the national health plan. Abortions are freely available through the first trimester and are performed as frequently in Havanna as in New York.

In Cuba the major strategy for combatting sexism is the campaign for the participation of women in the work force. This strategy flows from the orthodox Marxist view that the oppression and exploitation of women by men is the result of women's economic and social dependence on men. If she has a job, a woman can survive even if she does not have a man to support her; she gains her freedom and independence, men lose the economic weapon. Furthermore, experiences at work unlike those at home are expected to encourage a revolutionary outlook.

To achieve the changes the Cubans had to wage a hard ideological campaign against sexist thinking. The key social and legal document establishing the change in the status of women is the Family Code of 1975 passed after prolonged public discussion and debate. The most challenging provision of this code states that in a home where the woman works, the man must contribute equally to the housework and child care. Even though this section of the law is read at all marriage services it has yet to be reflected in a major change in the attitudes of adult men. In part this is because the ideological strength of machismo may be stronger in Cuba than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. Combining a glorification of "motherhood" in the most traditional sense and an intense homophobia, Cuban machismo includes elements of Spanish, African and Yankee ideology. For instance, religions of the Congo and Nigeria contributed the abakua or nanigo (referred to in the film) which are secret male societies based on a belief in the inferiority and uncleanliness of women.

Does Traditional Marxism Solve the Problem? A Marxist-Feminist Alternative

When women enter the workforce only part of the sexist structures of society are being changed. Unless a woman is freed from housework and the responsibility of childcare she faces a "double day:" work and housework. Therefore for women to achieve full participation in society men must share equally in housework and childcare. But men benefit from the current situation in which they are cared for by women and are freed from the responsibility for children. It is not surprising then to find that the mainly male leadership of Cuba, while supporting the Family Code, subtly stresses the continued responsibility of women for the care of home and children. This is accomplished by stressing the importance of the traditional family to the development of Cuba and by the granting of family social services "for the benefit of women."

An ideological campaign that successfully brings the male into housework and childcare would clash with the machismo ideology that insists that men and women live as part of the traditional family. An additional part of a successful campaign against machismo would be to urge the acceptance of gay and lesbian lifestyles in which men and women can enjoy social and sexual relationships by choice and not by the dictates of biology.