

# Party and State in Cuba: Gender Equality in Political Decision Making

*Ilja A. Luciak*

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

This article examines the Cuban record concerning gender equality in political decision making. I begin with a brief overview of Cuba's system of government. I then examine the gender composition of the country's legislative structures, discuss efforts to strengthen women's political participation, and compare the inclusion of women into key state and party decision-making bodies. The article is guided by three main arguments: First, in Cuba's legislative structures, women have a greater presence at the national than at the local level, contrary to the experience of the United States and Western Europe. Second, despite the official position denying the existence of gender quotas, Cuba does implement measures of positive discrimination in order to strengthen women's presence in politics. Finally, Cuban women face a glass ceiling as they move up to positions of greater decision-making power, a reality faced by women all over the world. The excellent gender composition of Cuba's parliament is an apparent exception that confirms the following rule: The state of gender equality in Cuba's decision-making structures reveals an inverse relationship between the actual decision-making power of a particular institution and the presence of women. That is, the higher we get in the institutional decision-making hierarchy, the fewer women we find. The evidence presented in this article demonstrates that Cuba has not made as much progress in achieving gender equality in political decision making as some of the official data would indicate, and that women continue to be largely excluded from the most important decision-making bodies.

*The article is based on a report commissioned by the European Commission. The views expressed herein are those of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.*

*The author gratefully acknowledges the excellent advice given by two anonymous reviewers and the editors for revising this manuscript.*

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/05 \$12.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association. © The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association. Printed in the United States of America.  
DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X0500063

[The] phenomenon of women's participation in the revolution was *a revolution within a revolution*. And if we are asked what the most revolutionary thing is that the revolution is doing, we would answer that it is precisely this—the revolution that is occurring among the women of our country! (Quoted in Stone 1981, 48; emphasis mine)

[We have] a party in which there is a high percentage of men in the leadership, a government in which there is a very high percentage of men, so that it might seem to be a party of men and a government of men. *The day has to come when we have a party of men and women, and a leadership of men and women, and a state of men and women, and a government of men and women.* (Quoted in Stone 1981, 71; emphasis mine)

—Fidel Castro

In 1966, Cuban leader Fidel Castro publicly recognized the importance of incorporating women fully into the new Cuban social project. At the time, women were actively involved in changing the educational and health care system and were starting to participate in the workforce in greater numbers. Their political participation as candidates and officeholders, however, proceeded more slowly. Castro recognized this in 1974 when he focused on the lack of women's representation in party and state leadership structures and established gender equality as a goal. In his address (quoted above, Stone 1981, 71) to the Second Congress of the Cuban Federation of Women (FMC), the president described a gendered reality of Cuba's leadership structures that was dominated by men and expressed his conviction for the need to have women participate on a more equal footing. The struggle for women's equality was a key issue debated at the First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party held in 1975 (Stone 1981, 16). The basis for the discussion was a document entitled *Thesis: On the Full Exercise of Women's Equality*. It put the struggle for women's rights in the forefront of public discussion. The Cuban commitment to women's political equality has produced uneven results. While women have full political rights as voters, candidates, and officeholders, few women hold positions that give them important decision-making power in state and party structures.

The Cuban revolution elevated equality in all areas of political, economic, and social life to the main societal goal. Cuban officials point to the transformation of women's role in society as a key revolutionary achievement and act as advocates for women's rights in the inter-

national arena. For example, Cuba was the first country that signed the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Thus, the record merits in-depth analysis. A focus on the gender composition of Cuba's government and party structures illuminates the degree to which there is formal gender equality in political decision making. It permits us to assess whether the revolution has made good on its promise to bring about gender equality in the limited, albeit important, area that is explored in this article.

I begin with a brief overview of Cuba's system of government. I then examine the gender composition of the country's legislative structures, discuss efforts to strengthen women's political participation, and compare the inclusion of women into key state and party decision-making bodies. My article is guided by three main arguments: First, in Cuba's legislative structures women have a greater presence at the national than at the local level, contrary to the experience of the United States and Western Europe. Second, despite the official position denying the existence of gender quotas, Cuba does implement measures of positive discrimination in order to strengthen women's presence in politics. I argue that Cuban reality requires corrective measures in order to improve gender equality in decision making and that there is evidence that measures of positive discrimination, albeit not in the form of official quotas, are operative. It is precisely this need for corrective action that appears to make Cuban officials so reluctant to acknowledge the existence of governmental initiatives to advance women in politics. In their mind, such an acknowledgment would imply a critique of the revolution itself.

Finally, Cuban women face a glass ceiling as they move up to positions of greater decision-making power, a reality faced by women all over the world. The excellent gender composition of Cuba's parliament is an apparent exception that confirms the following rule: The state of gender equality in Cuba's decision-making structures reveals an inverse relationship between the actual decision-making power of a particular institution and the presence of women. That is, the higher we get in the institutional decision-making hierarchy, the fewer women we find.

Evidence for these arguments can be found by analyzing the gender composition of state and party structures. In this article, I employ evidence from Cuban government reports, from the secondary literature, and from personal interviews with Cuban political officials and feminist activists. I conducted 40 structured interviews in Havana during ten field-work trips between 1998 and 2003.

## THE EVOLUTION AND STRUCTURE OF CUBA'S SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

Political leadership in the Cuban system of government is located in two major structures: the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and the Organs of People's Power (Organos de Poder Popular, or OPP). Cuba is a one-party system, with party and state in a symbiotic relationship. For example, Fidel Castro combines the positions of head of state, head of government, and president of the PCC in his person. Party and state share interlocking directorates. As in Castro's case, the top party officials also hold the most important jobs in government. The constitution clearly assigns the party a hegemonic role. Thus, the center of decision-making power is located in the party structures. The most important government bodies, on the other hand, are the Council of State and the Working Commissions of the Cuban parliament. It is in the commissions that the work of the legislature is done, since parliament meets only twice a year for a few days.

In 1974, the Organs of People's Power, the current system of government, were initiated in Matanzas Province. This first election was considered experimental, a test for the country's redirection toward representative democracy. Two years later, in 1976, the process was institutionalized nationwide. The OPPs are comprised of municipal and provincial assemblies, as well as a national parliament. The members of the National Assembly are elected in a direct vote. The voter is given no choice—apart from abstaining or voting invalid—since there is only one candidate for each seat in parliament.

The changes in Cuba's government structures were codified in the 1976 constitution. The revised document was the result of an effort to "broaden the base of legal and political institutionalization in the early 1970s" (Stubbs 1994, 192). It greatly strengthened electoral democracy by instituting direct elections for People's Power assemblies at the municipal level. Elections to the provincial and national assemblies, however, were initially indirect. From 1976 to 1989, the delegates to the provincial and national assemblies were elected by the municipal assemblies for a period of two and a half years. Following the 1992 constitutional reform, however, the voting system was changed. Elections to the provincial and national assemblies were now direct, and the mandate of the delegates was extended to five years.

Cuban officials tend to emphasize the participatory nature of the country's election process and to assert that the Communist party

plays no role in it. Roberto Díaz Sotolongo, the minister of justice and head of the National Election Commission, recently elaborated the official perspective:

The [main] characteristic of the Cuban electoral system, what distinguishes it from other electoral systems, is that the party does not participate in the election process from an institutional point of view. In other systems, multiparty systems, the parties nominate the candidates and make up the lists. . . . The great difference and the fundamental characteristic of our system is that it is the people who nominate the candidates. (Díaz Sotolongo 2002)

Eduardo Freire, the president of the National Candidate Commission, affirmed that “the principle that governs our democratic election process is that the people elect and the people nominate” (Freire 2002). Whereas these statements are true in a purely technical sense, the party’s influence in the election process is, of course, pervasive.

At the local level, each municipal assembly delegate represents a small geographical area of a few city blocks. This electoral district is divided into seven nomination areas with the intention “[of facilitating] the possibility for any citizen to nominate candidates” (August 1999, 262). Thus, the neighbors come together to nominate the candidates for the local assemblies. Candidates are chosen primarily on the basis of the reputation and the public profile they enjoy in the neighborhood. Depending on the neighborhood’s size, a minimum of two and a maximum of eight candidates are nominated for each municipal council seat. This electoral system disadvantages women.

At the national level, the National Candidate Commission (*Comisión Nacional de Candidaturas*, or CNC) oversees the process of selecting candidates.<sup>1</sup> Under the 1992 election system there is only one candidate for each provincial or national parliamentary seat. Thus, voters do not choose between competing candidates. Instead, they vote for one or more of the candidates on the slate selected by the candidate commissions and confirmed by the municipal assemblies. As we will see, this system of candidate selection benefits female candidates.

From the perspective of the Cuban government, the process is in the hands of the voters. While this is arguably true at the local level, at the regional and national level the nomination process is controlled by

1. For an elaborate account of the 1997–98 election process see August 1999, 299–373.

the government-run mass organizations, with the Cuban Confederation of Workers (CTC) playing the leading role. Since the mass organizations have little to no autonomy from the party, the party does in fact control the election process for the regional and national legislatures. Nevertheless, party control over candidate nominations has diminished somewhat; prior to 1992, the party nominated the president of the CNC, the National Candidate Commission (August 1999, 303).

### THE GENDER COMPOSITION OF PODER POPULAR

Three patterns characterize women's participation in Cuba's legislative assemblies: 1) the difference in the gender composition at the local versus the national level; 2) the noticeable decline in female representation in the early 1990s; and 3) the high number of women in the National Assembly. In 2004, only six countries had a higher percentage of women in their parliament (UNRISD 2005, 148).

As can be seen in Table 1, women's participation in the National Assembly reached an initial high point in 1986 when 34% of the deputies were female. This represented a substantial increase from the 23% of female representation in 1981. By 1993, however, the number of female deputies had reverted to the level of the early 1980s. That year, 134 women (22.8 percent) were elected to the Cuban parliament composed of 589 members. Subsequently, women's representation again increased. Following the 2003 elections, the legislature had 219 women (36%) among a total of 609 members.

At all levels we observe a decline in female representation in the early 1990s. This precipitous reduction was related to the economic crisis that ensued in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union and Cuba's Eastern European allies. Women became even more reluctant to assume the burden of public office. It is generally recognized that due to "the scarcity of consumer goods and other hardships in the 1990s, women had to concentrate their efforts on the home front" (Azicri 2000, 124). Mayda Álvarez, an FMC leader and researcher, has argued that the decline in female representation in the early 1990s can be attributed to subjective and objective factors. The objective factors included women's workload in the home, particularly the responsibility to care for the children and the lack of material resources (Álvarez et al. 2000, 224). Whereas these factors made women reluctant to agree to be candidates for public office, the subjective factors were rooted in men's unwillingness to nom-

*Table 1.* Women's participation in legislative assemblies (Poder Popular), 1976–2003

	1976		1981		1986		1993		1997/8		2002/3	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
National Assembly	105	21.8	113	22.7	173	33.9	134	22.8	166	27.6	219	35.9
Provincial assemblies	192	17.2	191	16.8	426	30.8	284	23.9	342	28.6	451	37.6
Municipal assemblies	856	8.2	837	7.8	2,264	17.1	1,879	13.5	2,595	17.9	3,493	23.4

Source: National Election Commission 2002, data obtained by the author.

Table 2. Gender composition of candidates for municipal assemblies, 1976–2005

<i>Term</i>	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	
1976–1979	3,946	13.5	25,223	86.5	29,169
1979–1981	2,402	9.9	21,859	90.1	24,261
1981–1984	2,693	11.4	20,974	88.6	23,667
1984–1986	3,769	16.3	19,349	83.7	23,118
1986–1989	6,191	22.2	21,644	77.8	27,835
1989–1992	5,816	19.7	23,689	80.3	29,505
1992–1995	4,226	14.8	24,248	85.2	28,474
1995–1997	4,656	14.6	24,313	85.4	28,969
1997–2000	5,785	18.4	25,491	81.6	31,276
2000–2002	6,640	21.4	24,363	78.6	31,003
2002–2005	—	—	—	—	36,955

Source: Calculations based on data in Iraida Aguirrechu and José Quesada 2001; National Election Commission 2002, data obtained by the author.

inate women as candidates. Men's decisions were often based on stereotypes and prejudice: "the fear that women can't do a good job because of lack of time"; "women have children or will have them"; "not being accustomed to be led by women"; or "considering that women are less efficient than men" (Álvarez et al. 2000, 225).

In contrast to the experience of most countries, female representation was considerably lower at the municipal level than at the national level. Table 2 presents the gender composition of the candidates to the local assemblies and demonstrates the difficulty women had in being chosen as candidates.

In the first elections in 1976, 13.5% of the candidates to the municipal assemblies were women. Of the 3,946 women that were nominated, only 856 (21%) were elected. Men had a much higher success rate. Of the 25,223 male candidates, 9,869 (39%) became members of the municipal assemblies. Thus, men were almost twice as successful in getting elected. In the next election cycle, in 1979, the number of female candidates had dropped to less than 10%. Although a somewhat higher percentage of them (32%) got elected, female representation in the municipal assemblies that year was only 7%.

The number of female candidates rose in the subsequent years, both in absolute terms and in terms of the gender distribution. A decade later, female candidates represented about 20% of all candidates. However, in

Table 3. Gender composition of municipal assemblies,  
1976–2005

<i>Term</i>	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	
1976–1979	856	8.0	9,869	92.0	10,725
1979–1981	764	7.2	9,892	92.8	10,656
1981–1984	837	7.8	9,898	92.2	10,735
1984–1986	1,261	11.5	9,702	88.5	10,963
1986–1989	2,264	17.1	10,992	82.9	13,256
1989–1992	2,378	16.6	11,868	83.4	14,246
1992–1995	1,879	13.6	11,986	86.4	13,865
1995–1997	2,211	15.5	12,018	84.5	14,229
1997–2000	2,595	17.8	11,938	82.2	14,533
2000–2002	3,081	20.9	11,605	79.1	14,686
2002–2005	3,493	23.4	11,453	76.6	14,946

Source: Calculations based on data in Iraida Aguirrechu and José Quesada 2001; National Election Commission 2002, data obtained by the author.

the 1992 and 1995 elections, when Cuba suffered its worst economic crisis since the beginning of the revolution, the data show a significant drop in female candidates—less than 15% of the total in each election. At the same time, however, those women who were nominated had a much better chance of getting elected than their cohorts of the previous decades. In 1976, 13.5% of those nominated and 8% of those elected were women. By 1995, however, 14.6% of those nominated were women while 15.5% of those elected were female. Thus, once nominated, women had the same chance to get elected as their male counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

Table 3 presents the gender composition of the local assemblies. Women's representation started at a very low level (less than 10%) and became more equal over time. In the 2002 elections, women's representation reached 23%.

In the case of the National Assembly in the first election of 1976, almost 22% of those elected were women, as Table 4 shows. Over the next two decades, the gender composition of the National Assembly followed the same pattern as the municipal assemblies, with a substantial increase in the mid-1980s to 34% and a subsequent decline during the heyday of Cuba's economic crisis. Some party leaders considered the level of fe-

2. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for making this point.

*Table 4.* Gender composition of the National Assembly,  
1976–2008

<i>Term</i>	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	
1976–1981	376	78.2	105	21.8	481
1981–1986	386	77.4	113	22.6	499
1986–1993	337	66.1	173	33.9	510
1993–1998	455	77.3	134	22.7	589
1998–2003	435	72.4	166	27.6	601
2003–2008	390	64.1	219	35.9	609

Source: Calculations based on data in Iraida Aguirrechu and José Quesada 2001; *National Election Commission* 2002, data obtained by the author.

male representation before 2003 unsatisfactory. Leonardo Martínez, who headed the National Assembly's powerful Standing Committee for Productive Affairs, affirmed:

We all are greatly dissatisfied in Cuba. What happens: more than 60% of all middle and high-level professionals in Cuba are women. Thus, women should be represented more or less in this proportion. Higher than what we have . . . I consider 27% [before 2003] not bad. For Latin America this is not bad. But when you compare this with other parliaments and with the strength that women have in Cuban society, women should be without doubt better represented. (Martínez 2002)

By 2003, representation levels reached a historic high with 36%, putting Cuba into a select group of countries that can claim more than 30% female representation in their parliaments.

As the data presented here demonstrate, the differences in representation levels between the national and local level were pronounced and remained relatively constant over time. Women's representation in parliament was consistently 10% higher than at the local level. Yet based on the "pipeline theory" developed in the context of the United States, we would expect to find the highest level of female representation at the local level. As Georgia Duerst-Lahti (1998, 15) has argued, "experience in one elected office is seen as providing credentials for other offices." As we will see, the Cuban anomaly—having more female representatives at the national level than at the local level—is easily explained, once we examine the process more closely.

## EXPLAINING THE CUBAN ANOMALY

I argue that the differences in the gender composition of the national versus the local legislative bodies had their roots in three key realities: (1) the work burden and time commitment entailed in serving on a municipal assembly versus the parliament; (2) a machista culture that has greater impact at the local level due to electoral rules; and (3) the conscious efforts by government officials to change the gender composition of decision-making structures at the national level.

Eduardo Freire, president of the National Candidate Commission, emphasized the heavy workload carried by members of the municipal assemblies:

Everything that originates at the level of the nation and in the province is executed in the township. That's where the hole in the road is, that's where the gas tank is missing, where the potatoes didn't arrive or the liter of milk was cut. This is the basis. It is every day and constantly. You come home from work, tired and exhausted and . . . "There is no electricity!" That is it. One has to have a special capacity for service to the fatherland in order to fulfill this duty and many compañeros and compañeras do it with great dignity and with a lot of integrity. But these are the moments that we are living. (Freire 2002)

Therefore, serving on a municipal assembly requires a considerable amount of idealism, particularly in light of the fact that members are not paid for their work, which is time-consuming and demanding. Due to the workload at the municipal level, women were reluctant to take on duties as delegates. Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the National Assembly, summarized women's sentiments: "I have a house to keep, I have to cook, I have to go shopping . . . and at times there is no water, the electricity goes, all of these problems are associated with the woman not the man. They are not shared" (Alarcón 2003). Frequently, women who had served in office were not eager to seek reelection. On the contrary, "I have seen female delegates coaxing the [neighborhood] assembly so they elect someone else, not her, and she explains: 'I have two children . . . I don't want to get involved in this'" (Alarcón 2003). At the time for nominating candidates, local voters who did not want to impose additional burdens on a woman recognized this reality. Instead, male candidates were preferred, particularly when "there is a señor, with a beginning belly who has time on his hands and is disposed to collaborate" (Alarcón 2003).

The time commitment for a member of the National Assembly, on the other hand, is quite limited. Parliament meets only twice a year for a few days. As in the case of the local level, national delegates receive no additional compensation for their work. Instead, they continue to be paid a regular salary from their original workplace. Thus, the key difference between the local and the national bodies is that serving on a municipal assembly is considerably more demanding than being a member of parliament. Indeed, until Alarcón assumed the leadership of the National Assembly in the 1990s, the Cuban parliament was viewed as an overly formalistic body “which functioned more as a meeting of celebrities than as a forum of legislators who have to be accountable to the voters” (López Vigil 1999, 40). Since the cost of serving in parliament is not that high and more glamorous, it is not surprising that it is easier to find female candidates willing to run for national office than for a town council.

The second point concerning differences in female representation at the national versus the local level is rooted in the Cuban culture of machismo. Mayda Álvarez and her colleagues put it this way:

The fact that the participation of women in People’s Power is higher at the national level and lower at the grassroots level . . . has its origin in the perception that our society still maintains about [the image of] the leader. When positions are determined by direct vote there are more possibilities that beliefs, prejudices and cultural patterns inherited from a class and sexist society are expressed which assign to the man the world of work and public power and to the woman the realm of the home, that is to say, the social perception still assigns a preferential masculine face to leadership (Álvarez et al. 2000, 223).

Álvarez’s explanation was partially based on the old voting system under which only delegates to the local level of government were elected by direct vote. Although since 1992 legislators at all levels are chosen in direct elections, the potential impact of the direct vote was controlled in the case of the National Assembly due to the fact that there is only one candidate for every seat in parliament. Thus, the gender—or any other characteristic—of a particular candidate was not a factor in the voter’s choice. Although voters could elect not to vote for a specific candidate, they could not express a preference for male over female candidates or vice versa.

Therefore, female candidates at the local level are subject to the dominant gender relations to a greater degree than their counterparts at the

national level. Justo García Brigos, a former delegate and author of a study on Poder Popular, affirmed this:

We can control the composition of the provincial assembly and of the National Assembly better than the composition of the town councils. This means that in the case of the provincial and the National Assembly there is a candidate list elaborated by the Candidate Commission. For the municipal councils the proposal is totally free and totally uncontrollable and comes from the population. Thus, it is the population that continues to hold prejudices. Not so much prejudices but realities. The Cuban woman still carries the household responsibilities that people consider as limiting at times in completing other activities. It is for this reason that the people in the neighborhoods limit themselves at times in proposing women. (García Brigos 2003)

Women themselves are captives of the machista culture. Freire shared his experience of observing the deliberation of female members of the commission that selects candidates:

What operates here, at times, is the false machismo of the compañeras. Among each other they say: "Poor Aidita, who has two little kids, for what reason are we going to involve her in this responsibility." It also has to do a little with how we Cubans are, with this sense of protection toward a woman so she can fulfill her duty in the family. We men also have it but, well, the sentiments from the past remain. However, this is changing and when these things happen it is between ourselves. At times we see ourselves saying: "We will not include Aidita who has three small children." And perhaps we have not consulted her. Maybe you ask her [and she responds]: "It doesn't matter to me. I have three kids but I am [willing to be a candidate for] delegate or deputy" (Freire 2002)

Whereas some women are reluctant to serve, others are victims of a machista culture. Despite cultural change across time, machismo has nonetheless been a constant in Cuban political culture. As a result, the most important factor explaining the difference in representation levels can be found in the authorities' ability to control the gender composition of the National Assembly.

#### CUBAN EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Mala Htun (2004, 439) has reported that "some 50 countries officially allocate access to political power along the lines of gender, ethnicity, or

both: they have laws on the books reserving a fixed number of electoral candidacies or legislative seats.” In Latin America, 12 countries adopted gender quotas since 1990, with Cuba not being part of this group. Htun (2004, 450) argues that “military governments, one-party states, no-party states, and other countries that fail to respect civil liberties” are more likely to give women reserved seats instead of candidate quotas. Cuba, a one-party state, has no official gender quotas. There is clear evidence, however, that measures of positive discrimination have been instituted. I argue that the Cuban system is *de facto* closer to a reservation of seats than a system of candidate quotas, a reality that has a negative societal impact. It preempts coalition building for greater gender equality.

Officially, Cuban authorities have argued against the use of quotas designed to increase women’s participation in decision making. Roberto Díaz Sotolongo, the minister of justice, strongly denied the existence of quotas: “Here [in Cuba], we don’t have a quota. No, no, no. The voters get together in the candidate nomination areas, and [they choose among candidates] according to their merits, their background, [and] their capacity to serve the people” (Díaz Sotolongo 2002). When asked to explain the difference in female representation at the local versus the national level, Díaz Sotolongo offered this explanation for the lower female participation rate in the municipal assemblies: “I think that here operates spontaneity to a great degree. That is to say, there it is not a directed affair. It [a corrective mechanism] does not exist because I can tell you that the majority [of the candidates] are party militants and the party militants are not being controlled” (Díaz Sotolongo 2002). Thus, Díaz Sotolongo is representative of Cuban officials who feel obliged to deny that the government implements quotas but implicitly acknowledge the existence of measures to increase gender equality at the national level when discussing the electoral process.

National Assembly President Alarcón affirmed that quotas were frowned upon, presumably because they are seen as measures that are favored by “Western interests.” While he did “not think that it would be correct to establish a quota system as it is done in some countries,” he was not in principle against measures of positive discrimination (Alarcón 2003). For example, he argued that it was in his power to ensure that women were well represented in the Cuban parliament’s Working Commissions:

This is something that the Americans call “affirmative action,” that is, actions one can take. What one cannot do is to invent or to change what

the people are going to do when they vote their conscience. . . . The problem would be if we were to be ultrademocratic. Because if we were to do exactly what the people want, men and women, the situation of women would not improve. Thus, we need to force it, force the hand a tiny little bit, a little bit, with certain limits because you can't impose it fully. (Alarcón 2003)

This amazing statement reveals not only that various manifestations of affirmative action are a part of Cuban reality but also that Cuban political leaders perceive a need to intervene in order to establish gender equality in the political arena. María Josefa Ruíz, female member of the National Assembly emphasized that the candidate selection process at the national level had a gender component:

What we are looking for is that people understand that we have to be together [in the fight to end discrimination]. When there is a woman and a man with identical qualifications, we will choose the woman. . . . We choose the woman and we have greater representativeness, we have greater balance. When there is a black and a white [candidate] with the same qualifications, we will pick the black. The legislative body does not lose and gains a composition where increasingly we are all represented. This type [of positive discrimination] is being done." (Ruiz 2002)

The Cuban authorities worked consciously to address gender imbalances. In fact, the leadership has recognized prevailing gender inequities in numerous speeches and documents, and a long-standing campaign has sought to address them. Fidel Castro, together with other high-ranking officials, has consistently advocated greater gender equality.

Some female leaders acknowledged that quotas were useful tools in the early struggle to increase women's participation. Mavis Alvarez, a key figure in the struggle to strengthen women's leadership, acknowledged the existence of quotas:

There are no quotas [now]. But there was a time when they did exist, when one had to establish quotas. Otherwise there would be no women. There was a time when you had to tell them [the male leaders] in effect: "Listen! At least 5% or 10% have to be women." But it was also a policy of the party to establish quotas. Because without pressure there would be none [i.e., women elected]. However, this is no longer the case. It is no longer necessary to do this because of an increase in consciousness so that every time that a body of leaders is elected, it is always thought that women have to be part of it. (Álvarez 2002)

Reportedly, Castro himself considered the necessity of quotas. Nieves Alemany, a member of the FMC's national leadership, recounted exchanges between the Women's Federation and Fidel Castro:

El Jefe [the boss] who knows that quotas exist in other countries . . . consulted with the federation if we considered it necessary to establish quotas in order to promote women's development and women's participation. We told him no, that with the conditions prevailing in Cuba it appeared to us that it would not be necessary. Little by little, women would reach the necessary levels from a cultural, technical and professional point of view and would acquire the training necessary for leadership. (Alemany 2003)

By far the most significant effort to achieve greater gender equality was located in the work of the National Candidate Commission. The high level of women's representation in Cuba's parliament is a direct result of the commission's policies. While acknowledging their efforts to ensure a representative gender composition, commission officials were adamant that there was no quota system and insisted that female candidates were selected on the basis of merit. Eduardo Freire, the commission's president, emphasized this point in the months leading up to the 2002 elections:

Well, the first thing I would like to tell you is that there is no quota. It is not because of a quota, not because of an [established] norm [that women are included]. We are going to evaluate merit, we are going to evaluate capacity, we are going to evaluate disposition, and only based on this evaluation emerge the women. This process will always have a cut from the point of view of composition and representativeness that we talked to you about. For example, if we are going to form a National Assembly, not all [candidates] can be women nor can all of them be men. But there is no intentionality anywhere to say: "Here we need 10 more women to get to the 30%. Or here we need to put five more women." No, no, no! We make an evaluation of what [the candidate pool] gives. And what it gives, it gives. If what it gives is 15% [female representation] this does not correspond with the development women have had in the country. This is a hypothetical example that I'm telling you. It didn't come out this way. And I can tell you that in the first approximation that we have of the [candidate] projects that we are making, the number of women that have emerged is tremendous. . . . That today there will be a lot more than are currently there [in the National Assembly] is a result of this recognition that they have gained due to their work. (Freire 2002)

Thus, while government officials object to quotas, they acknowledge that the CNC takes gender into consideration in creating the candidate lists. Actually, the corrective measures implemented by the CNC have been quite comprehensive and are the key explanation for the relatively high levels of female representation at the national level. For women to constitute 28% of candidates at the national level, the National Candidate Commission had to make female candidates a top priority. Leonardo Martínez, a key figure in the National Assembly, explicitly affirmed this: “You privilege” female candidates (Martínez 2002). Martínez was referring to the fact that according to Cuban election law, up to 50% of the candidates for the National Assembly are drawn from the pool of elected municipal assembly delegates. Since this pool of candidates had a relatively low number of women, and since all elected municipal assembly delegates regardless of their sex had distinguished records, the Candidate Commission clearly gave preferential treatment to women in selecting candidates for the National Assembly elections.

In summary, it was in the Candidate Commission where gender imbalances were being addressed. Although the commission’s proposals needed to be confirmed by the municipal assemblies, approval of the lists was routine. Whereas the work of the commission has generated high numbers of women in elective office at the national level, this unique Cuban approach to the achievement of gender equality had serious negative implications for society as a whole. Most importantly, the Cuban system has given government officials the right to determine when and where the gender composition of a particular decision-making body needs to be adjusted. Similar measures have not been taken in the most important structures of the Communist Party where real power is located, however.

### **THE CUBAN GLASS CEILING: THE SCARCITY OF WOMEN IN TOP PARTY AND STATE STRUCTURES**

The closer one moves to the pinnacle of real power in Cuba, the fewer women one finds. The data clearly demonstrate an inverse relationship between the power of a particular institution and its gender composition. In the Council of State, a key decision-making body that acts on behalf of the parliament when the assembly is not in session, women’s representation was about half of that in the National Assembly. In order to get a seat on the council, a candidate had to be nominated by the

National Candidate Commission. The commission composed its list from the members of the National Assembly, seeking to include the most important ministers and the heads of the mass organizations, as well as representatives from other important state institutions. Freire, the head of the commission, insisted that in cases where the commission faces a choice between a woman or a man with equal merits, “we choose the woman” (Freire 2002). Assuming this was indeed the case, the low level of female representation reflected the fact that few women have risen through the system, acquiring the credentials that male leaders consider necessary to occupy the key positions of power.

Since 1993, the Council of State has been composed of 31 members. Five women have served in the council during the last decade, leaving female representation at 16%. In 2003, six women were elected, representing close to 20% of the council members.<sup>3</sup> Many Cuban officials acknowledged that women’s representation in government structures needs improvement. Alarcón put it quite bluntly: “It is evident that it is still very insufficient. Suffice it to contrast between the role women play in Cuban society, in culture, in education, in science, in research, including in [the sphere of] production, with the one she has in politics” (Alarcón 2003). Whereas female representation in the Council of State could be improved, the real problem was located elsewhere.

To reiterate, Cuba is a one-party state. All key decisions are made in two party structures, both headed by Fidel Castro: the Politburo and the Central Committee. In the realm of gender relations as in all other areas of life, the party is the hegemonic force. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to examine the party’s gender composition. The data demonstrate that women’s representation has increased over time. In the early years of the revolution, women were a distinct minority among the party members. For example, in 1967, women constituted only 10% of the membership. Their numbers grew to 15% by 1974 (Stubbs 1994, 196). From 1985 to 1993, female membership increased at a steady pace from less than 22% to 26% (Rodríguez Calderón n.d., 29–30). As of 1996, women represented 29% of the 767,944 party militants. At the time of the last Party Congress in 1997, female membership had risen slightly to a little over 30%.

Carollee Bengelsdorf has argued that the unequal gender composition of the party is rooted in Cuba’s sexual division of labor. The regular way

3. Figures calculated by author are based on Azicri 2000, 309–12; and *Granma*, 11 de octubre 1997; and Rodríguez Calderón n.d.

Table 5. Women's participation in the Cuban Communist Party, 1993–1997

<i>Membership Level</i>	<i>Percent Women 1993</i>	<i>Percent Women 1997</i>	<i>Percent Change 1993–1997</i>	<i>Rate of Increase</i>
Provincial committee	20.6	23	2.4	11.7
Municipal committee	15.5	22	6.5	41.9
Party professionals	19.5	25	5.5	28.2
Party members	26.3	30.1	3.8	14.4
Average	20.5	25	4.5	24.1

*Source:* Partido Comunista de Cuba, Departamento de Organización

The reliability of the 1993 figure for municipal party committees is questionable. Official data from the Central Committee of the PCC cited in Rodríguez Calderón (n.d., 30) report that 25.5% of party members are women in 1993, whereas data in several party archives indicate 15.5%. I use the latter figure because it is more consistent with reports of low levels of participation in party and mass organization structures in the wake of Cuba's economic crisis in the early 1990s.

to party membership is through one's workplace. Although women are well represented in the labor force, their unequal burden in terms of work and domestic responsibilities makes it less likely that they distinguish themselves at work, a prerequisite for being invited into the party (Bengelsdorf 1985, 44). In this context, it is interesting to note that for nearly 30 years, housewives were excluded from party membership (Smith and Padula 1996, 182).

Although female membership in local and regional leadership structures does not correspond to women's strength among the party membership, the differences are relatively small. The average percentage of women across the various levels of the party rose 5 percentage points, from 20.5% in 1993 to 25% by 1997 (see Table 5). The average rate of increase for women in the various levels of party organization was 24%.

The main problem existed at the national level, where few female leaders gained entry to the exclusive ranks of the Politburo and the Central Committee. For a long time, Vilma Espín, the head of the Cuban Women's Federation and one-time spouse of Raúl Castro, was the only woman who held full membership on the Politburo. Following elections in 1985 and 1991, three women were incorporated into the Politburo, representing 11.5% of the 26 members. Yet at the Fifth Party Congress in 1997, only two women were elected to the 24-member Politburo.

Women did only slightly better at the level of the Central Committee. In this important decision-making body, female representation decreased

from 18% in 1985 to 17% in 1991. In that year, 38 women were elected to a Central Committee consisting of 225 members (Randall 1992, 152; Rodríguez Calderón n.d., 30). In 1997, the Central Committee was reduced to 150 members. According to official data, only 20 (13%) were female.

There is no single explanation for the scarcity of women in higher party ranks. Cultural factors, combined with practical and institutional impediments, lead to this outcome. According to National Assembly member María Josefa Ruiz:

Our party has the leadership role [and] thus we are talking about decision making, important decisions. Well, many women are there. But in the end it seems to us that fundamentally it has to be men that have to take the main responsibilities. If we analyze the leadership of the party at its different levels we'll see that the main leader is male and many women occupy second positions. . . . I think that women still have a lot of ground to gain and this has to do with a world that used to be a masculine world, where the woman had the role to help the men live, to enjoy themselves, to rest, so they could continue to lead. Well, we have broken down the walls of the home but look what we are still missing, we are missing a lot. (Ruiz 2002).

Women in the party hierarchy reached a glass ceiling as they rose through the ranks. Although they had significant representation in leadership positions at the local and regional level, they were not as readily accepted into high party positions as their male counterparts. The data support two main conclusions: 1) Few women were permitted into the corridors of power; and 2) women's participation at the highest decision-making level has fallen over the last decade. This development was in contrast with increased female representation in the country's legislative bodies.

Cuban feminists with whom I spoke tended to be critical of the party's efforts to change the gender composition of its leadership. Many gave pessimistic assessments for the possibility of strengthened gender equality in the party ranks. A confidential source put it this way: "I don't think that the membership or the party leadership have a gender consciousness nor do the female party members, which is most disturbing" (Anonymous 2003).<sup>4</sup> The source refers here to substantive gender equality, which requires a change in consciousness, an acknowledgment that relations between women and men need to be reconstituted, as opposed to

4. This party member and feminist leader requested anonymity.

the affirmative action measures party and state officials favor to strengthen women's formal participation in decision making.

## CONCLUSION

Gender equality remains a goal that no country has realized at this point. Thus, we need to understand every country's record on its own terms and within a regional and international context. The evidence presented in this article demonstrates that Cuba has not made as much progress in achieving gender equality in political decision making as some of the official data would indicate, and that women continue to be largely excluded from the most important decision-making bodies.

In the Cuban system, power is located in the Communist Party. Few women can be found in the Politburo and the Central Committee, confirming that Cuban women hold little decision-making power. The failure of the Cuban Communist Party to incorporate more women into its leadership suggests that the government's commitment to gender equality has been limited. It is interesting to note that as the number of female party members increased, their numbers in the key leadership structures declined. Furthermore, we find important differences between state and party structures. In Cuba's legislative bodies, women's participation increased from the municipal assemblies to the National Assembly, while this relationship was reversed in the case of the party structures. The gender composition of the National Assembly demonstrates that authorities can successfully increase female representation levels if they are inclined to do so. However, the fact that the National Assembly does not enjoy a status comparable to the one held by parliaments in other countries makes this achievement less remarkable.

This analysis of the status of women in positions of political leadership in Cuba affords us a glimpse into the overall dynamics of power in the Castro government. In interviews, Cuban officials were reluctant to acknowledge the need for corrective measures in order to advance women in politics, but their reticence belies their obvious behind-the-scenes adjustments to ensure a favorable gender composition in selected decision-making bodies. This deprives societal forces favoring gender equality of the mobilizing power of public discussion. It preempts coalition building that could bring pressure to bear on the party to make its decision-making bodies more representative or to have a public discussion on the differences in the gender composition of local versus national legislative

bodies. Without a public dialogue, prevailing machista attitudes that impede women's advancement will not be challenged. The fact that Cuban women hold little political power needs to be openly addressed for societal consciousness to change, a necessary condition for substantive gender equality to emerge. Ironically, the Cuban leadership, which professes support for gender equality, undermines its own goal of transforming society. Whereas the leadership has the power to institute measures that strengthen formal equality, any substantive change requires that the common Cuban citizen be in support of gender equality, something that requires consciousness raising. Regardless of what the future holds for Cuba, be it a retrenchment of the current regime or a transition to a pluralist democracy, the involvement of women at the highest levels of political power will be critical for establishing the legitimacy of the government.

## REFERENCES

- II Seminario Nacional de Evaluación. 2002. *Plan de acción de seguimiento a la conferencia mundial sobre la mujer de Beijing*. Havana: Editorial de la Mujer.
- Aguirrechu, Iraida, and José Quesada. 2001. *Poder Popular. República de Cuba*. Havana: Editora Política.
- Alarcón, Ricardo. 2003. President of the Cuban National Assembly. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, March 20.
- Alemany, Nieves. 2003. Member of the National Assembly; Member of the National Committee of the Cuban Women's Federation. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, March 21.
- Álvarez, Mavis. 2002. Director of International Relations, Cuban Small Farmers Movement (ANAP). Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, November 13.
- Álvarez, Mayda, et al. 2000. *Situación de la niñez, la adolescencia, la mujer y la familia en Cuba*. La Habana: FMC/UNICEF.
- Anonymous. 2003. Member of the Cuban Communist Party; Feminist Leader. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, May 2.
- August, Arnold. 1999. *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997–98 Elections*. Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro.
- Azicri, Max. 2000. *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Bengelsdorf, Carollee. 1985. "On the Problem of Studying Women in Cuba." *Race and Class* 28 (2): 35–50.
- Díaz Sotolongo, Roberto. 2002. Minister of Justice; President of the National Election Commission. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, November 14.
- Duerst-Lahti, Georgia. 1998. "The Bottleneck: Women Becoming Candidates." In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Echevarría León, Dayma. 2004. "Mujer, empleo y dirección en Cuba: algo más que estadísticas." Havana (mimeographed).
- Federación de Mujeres Cubanas. 1996. *La Cubana: De Beijing al 2000*. Havana: Editorial de la Mujer.

- Freire, Eduardo. 2002. President of the National Candidate Commission; Secretary General of the Cuban Confederation of Workers in Havana. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, November 13.
- García Brigos, Justo. 2003. Former Member of the Municipal and Provincial Assembly of Havana; Head of the Institute of Philosophy. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, April 30.
- Htun, Mala. 2004. "Is Gender like Ethnicity? The Political Representation of Identity Groups." *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (3) (September): 439–58.
- López Vigil, María. 1999. *Cuba: Neither Heaven nor Hell*. Washington, DC: The Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean.
- Luciak, Ilja A. 2003. "Gender Equality and Democratization in Cuba." Report prepared under contract (CA/B7-6110/2000/02) for the European Commission (October).
- Martínez, Leonardo. 2002. Member of the National Assembly; Secretary of the Commission for Productive Matters. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, November 12.
- Mayoral, María Julia. 2003. "Constituye la asamblea nacional sus comisiones de trabajo." *Granma* (March 18): 8.
- Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas. 2003. *Panorama económico y social de Cuba 2002*. Havana: ONE.
- Randall, Margaret. 1992. *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Rodríguez Calderón, Mirta. N.d. "Queda mucho por andar." Havana: United Nations-Cuba office (unpublished report).
- Ruiz, María Josefa. 2002. Member of the National Assembly; Secretary of the Commission of Education, Culture, Science and Technology. Interview with Ilja A. Luciak. Havana, November 11.
- Smith, Lois M., and Alfred Padula. 1996. *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stone, Elizabeth, ed. 1981. *Women and the Cuban Revolution: Speeches & Documents by Fidel Castro, Vilma Espín & Others*. New York: Pathfinder.
- Stubbs, Jean. 1994. "Revolutionizing Women, Family, and Power." In *Women and Politics Worldwide*, ed. Barbara J. Nelson and Najma Chowdhury. New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 190–207.
- United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). 2005. *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*. France: UNRISD.