CUBA:

THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN

Extracts of the speech by Fidel Castro at the closing session of the 2nd Congress of the Federation of Cuban Women, Havana, December 1974.

We have reached the end of this beautiful Congress. And it is not so easy to sum up an event so filled with accomplishments and hope.

In the first place it has not been entirely our congress; we have shared it amply with a worthy and representative delegation of the revolutionary women of the entire world.

Across oceans, boundaries, languages, the representatives of the progressive women of the entire world have joined hands in this congress. And there is no need to use the term “foreigner” to characterise these delegations, because at all times we have experienced the feeling that we are part of the same homeland, the human population. This proves that nothing except exploitation and injustice separates people, and nothing unites people more than the community of ideals and the aspiration to justice.

The topics that we have been discussing in this congress have a truly universal interest. They are not just the problems of Cuban women but the problems of the vast majority of women in the world.

It is clear that women need to participate in the struggle against exploitation, against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism; in a word: in the struggle for national liberation. But when the objective of national liberation is finally achieved, women must continue struggling for their own liberation within human society.

We have brought along some data from a report made by the United Nations Department of Statistics which reveals women’s situation in most of the world. Women represent 34 per cent of the workforce, that is, 515 million workers. By the end of the present decade, it is estimated that this figure will rise to 600
million, and in the year 2000, to 842 million. In Western Europe and North America, women constitute between 30 and 40 per cent of the workforce.

In spite of the increasing number of women in the ranks of the employed, particularly in professional and technical posts, the United Nations report points out that they are underpaid in comparison to men.

“Although it is true”, says the report, “that the legal barriers against equal job opportunities for women are few and the principle of equal pay for equal work is now universally accepted, in practice the situation demands the urgent application of measures to eliminate such discrimination.

In many industrialised countries, women’s wages are approximately 50 per cent to 80 per cent of men’s for the same hours of work. In the developing nations, the low salaries for women indicate that women are engaged in the lowest levels of work and jobs in terms of skill and pay.

In general, this report refers to the question of wages. Of course, it does not analyse the infinite number of problems that affect women in the class society of the capitalist world. Naturally, in the socialist countries women have advanced a long distance along the road of their liberation. But if we ask ourselves about our own situation: we who are a socialist country with almost 16 years of revolution, can we really say that the Cuban women have acquired full equality of rights in practice, and that they are absolutely integrated into Cuban society?

We can analyse certain data, for example, before the revolution, there were 194,000 working women. Of them, according to a report read here, 70 per cent were domestics. Today, we have three times more women working. The figure for women in civilian state jobs, which as you know include the majority of productive activities, services and administration, is 590,000 women out of a total of 2,331,000 persons working. That is, 25.3 per cent of the workers are women. Nevertheless, the number of women holding leadership posts in all this apparatus of production, services and administration, is only 15 per cent. Only 12.79 per cent of our party members are women. A notably low figure. And the number of women who work as party cadres and officials is only six per cent.

But we have an example that is still more illustrative and is related to the elections held for People’s Power in the province of Matanzas. The number of women selected as candidates was 7.6 per cent and the number of women elected was three per cent, to which the comrade from Matanzas referred. The figures are really something to be concerned about, to make us do something about this problem. Because in those elections the candidates were proposed by the masses, and the masses only proposed 7.6 per cent women candidates, when women make up approximately 50 per cent of the population. Only three per cent of those elected by the masses were women.

Who here at this congress, what invited delegate who has been here with you for a week can understand, imagine or conceive how, with such a strong and such a politically advanced women’s movement, only three per cent of women were chosen in elections?

THE REALITY IS THAT THERE ARE STILL OBJECTIVE FACTORS THAT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST WOMEN

And these figures reflect nothing more than the reality that after more than 15 years of revolution, we are still politically and culturally behind in this area. The reality is that there are still objective and subjective factors that discriminate against women.

Naturally if we compare our present situation with what existed before the revolution, the advances are enormous. It isn’t even possible to make any kind of comparison between women's situation before the revolution and their present situation. And the situation which the revolution encountered fully justified the creation of the Federation of Cuban
Women. Because our experience teaches us that when an under-developed country such as ours liberates itself and begins to construct socialism, a mass organisation like this one is necessary, since women have innumerable tasks to face up to within the revolutionary process. And for this reason we believe that the decision to develop this women’s movement, to create this organisation that was born on August 23, 1960, was really a wise decision because the work this organisation has done could not have been carried forward by any other means.

It is true that we have other magnificent mass organisations, such as the trade unions, the CDRs, the peasant organisations, the youth and student organisations, the Pioneers and even the organisation of the day-care centres. But what organisation could have fulfilled the tasks that the Federation of Cuban Women has accomplished?

Comrade Vilma* gave a significant historical account of those innumerable tasks, but it is sufficient to recall, first of all, the struggle to develop culture and political understanding in Cuban women, because in capitalist society women really remain culturally and politically downtrodden, they have even fewer educational opportunities than men, and many times women in class society are deceived precisely because of that low political level and are frequently used against revolutionary processes.

It is enough to recall that among those tasks were some of great importance. In the first place, the tasks related to the defence of the revolution and the homeland, the struggle against illiteracy, the struggle for the education of peasant girls, the struggle in preparing domestics for doing productive jobs, the struggle against prostitution, the struggle to incorporate women into work, the struggle to create day-care centres, the tasks of support for education, the public health campaigns, the social work, the deepening of political and ideological consciousness among women and the struggle for the development of an internationalist spirit in Cuban women.

The Federation has worked in all those fields and has successfully completed all its tasks. And only the women themselves could have carried out those activities with such efficiency. But now, in this present stage of the revolution, women have a basic task, a historical battle to wage.

What was the crux, the centre of the analysis and the efforts of this congress? the struggle for women’s equality. The struggle for the full integration of Cuban women into society! And that is really a historical battle. And we believe that this objective is precisely the focal point of this congress, because, in practice, women’s full equality still does not exist. And we revolutionaries must understand this, and women themselves must understand it. It is not, of course, only a task for women. It is a task for the whole society!

But no one need be frightened because women’s equality in society is being discussed, although some were frightened when the discussion of the Family Code draft was launched. And Blas explained to us here the many conversations he has had with certain men comrades who didn’t understand, and he summed up his ideas with a beautiful argument that man’s happiness was not possible without woman’s happiness.

And we don’t see why anyone should be frightened, because what should really frighten us as revolutionaries is that we have to admit the reality that women still do not have absolute equality in Cuban society. What must concern us as revolutionaries is that the work of the revolution is not yet complete.

Of course, in this lack of equality, in this lack of full integration, as I said, there are objective factors and there are subjective factors. Naturally, everything that prevents the incorporation of women into work makes this process of integration

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difficult, makes this process of achieving full equality difficult. And you have seen that precisely when women are incorporated into work, when women stop performing the traditional and historical activities, is when these problems begin to show up.

In conversation with some of the delegates to this congress, they expressed their great satisfaction and joy that, during these days of the congress, many of their husbands had remained at home taking care of the children so that they could come to the congress. It is unquestionable that if those women had not been integrated into the Federation and had not carried out this work, if they had not been revolutionary militants and had not been participating in this congress, such a problem never would have arisen in their homes, and the opportunity for those husbands to become aware of such a necessity and of such duties would never even have existed.

Among the objective factors that still hinder women's incorporation into education and work, some were pointed out here, such as the lack of sufficient day-care centres, of sufficient semi-boarding schools, of sufficient boarding schools, problems concerning the hours in which the schools function, to which we can add such factors as the lack of sufficient jobs for women throughout the country and, of course, the fact that many women do not have the level of qualification for that productive work.

In this area, as far as the day-care centres and education are concerned, over and beyond the great efforts that the revolution has already made, during the next few years - and particularly in the next five years, from '76 to '80 - a still greater effort will be made in the first place, to satisfy the growing educational needs of our people and at the same time to facilitate the incorporation of women into work.

The present-day capacity of day-care centres is approximately 50,000 children. In the first version of the next five-year plan, the idea of constructing 400 day-care centres with state brigades has been considered, apart from those the minibrigades construct in order to increase the capacity up to 150,000 children. That is, three times the capacity we now have.

We are also proposing to construct 400 semi-boarding schools for 300 pupils each, or the equivalent, in order to increase the capacity by 120,000 children; to construct no less than a thousand high schools with a capacity of more than half a million additional boarding school students.

Special attention will also be given to a type of school that you know is very important, the social schools for pupils with certain problems. The proposal is to build capacity for 40,000 new pupils in this type of special education.

At the same time, the revolution will continue developing the public health sector in the next few years: 49 new hospitals, 110 polyclinics, 19 dental clinics, 51 homes for the aged, and 16 homes for the disabled will be built throughout the country.

The total investment in education and public health in the next five years will be approximately 1650 million pesos.

We believe this is good news for the members of the Federation. And it does not mean starting something new, but rather increasing the rhythm of what is now being built, because more than 180 high schools accommodating 500 students each are now being built per year.

The hospital construction program is moving ahead; the first brigades for the construction of day-care centres have also been organised. And the brigades necessary to construct the 400 day-care centres programmed and to construct the special schools, the polyclinics, the homes for the aged, for the disabled and the semi-boarding schools at the primary level, those brigades that are still lacking, will be organised beginning in 1975. This program is in progress and we are perfectly sure that it will be carried forward.
EDUCATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

During the discussion we could appreciate the enormous importance that you attach to these problems and especially to the problems of education. It can be said that a large part of the discussion in the Congress revolved around these questions. Yet in the fields of education and public health our country already occupies first place among all the countries of Latin America.

It is precisely in the last years that it has been possible to provide a great impulse to school construction. And there were not enough installations nor enough cadres, nor enough teachers.

And we are really just beginning. The Minister of Public Health explained what the infant mortality rate is now: 27.4 per thousand live births. In Brazil where there aren't even mortality statistics it is estimated that it may be between 150 and 200. And unfortunately this is what takes place in many other Latin-American countries. This means that, for every infant that dies in Cuba, four, five, six or seven infants die in other countries of Latin America. The same is true of many other problems: mortality at other ages - because we are talking about mortality in the first year of birth, medical care in general, education.

The Minister of Education explained the figures that reflect the progress of education in Cuba: all children enrolled in schools, the growing number of those graduating from the sixth grade and the explosion we are already having at the high school level, with the result that all the construction we’re building aren’t enough.

But now in the years to come the problem will be not only the number of children studying, but also the quality of our education. And our education will improve in quality year by year, with the new system that is being projected and with the growing number of young people studying to be teachers and joining the Pedagogical Detachment.

I have said all this, speaking of the objective factors that hinder the integration of women, referring to schools, hospitals, etc. And I really simply wanted to express to you the ideas and the projects related to the solution of these problems.

The question has been raised here as to whether the same measures were being applied to the junior high schools in the countryside as to the semiboarding schools with respect to the children of working mothers, and actually there are some regions where all the pupils, all of them, are now in the junior highs in the countryside, all the pupils of that level. There are various regions in the country where of course this problem no longer exists because all the young people are taken care of.

The Minister of Education explained the factors that hinder this, taking into consideration the objective of having not a single youth without a corresponding high school, not one 6th-grade graduate who does not go on to a higher level: the same principle for the difficulties involved can be applied to these schools as well. But we believe that, even so, something can still be done to favor the children of working mothers, high school students in certain regions, in certain provinces; because many times they take out a complete school in order to put a primary school there, for example, and they have to find locations for those pupils in any case.

But this proposal was just a proposal; that is the aspiration expressed here by some comrade delegates and at the same time it is also only fair that the Ministry’s difficulties be taken into account since its number one problem is to make all the changes and combinations possible in order to achieve the objective of having no 8th-grade graduate left without a school.

We also believe that, in the long run, the question of auxiliary teachers will have to be solved. We believe that the country will have to face up to the necessity of employing a specific number of comrades in this task and that it will be necessary to
analyse the economic aspects and also the facilities that those auxiliary teachers must be given.

Given that there are presently close to 600,000 working women, and 250,000 more are to be incorporated in the next five years, there will be no other solution than to attack those problems related to the hour that the primary schools and the semiboarding schools begin to function, and the problems of Saturdays.

The question of vacations was also raised. And we believe that the country has the resources to deal with this problem of summer vacations, since we are building hundreds of junior high schools in the countryside, and those installations could also be used for vacation plans. They are magnificent installations, and we are analysing the possibilities of using them during the summer for vacation plans.

Many of these problems that you have raised here can be solved with what we already have today. And in the long run, all these questions that hinder the incorporation of women into work, as the most certain way for the advancement of Cuban women along the road of their own liberation; we will overcome all these objective difficulties sooner or later.

There are others that weren’t mentioned, at least in the discussion at the Congress, such as questions relating to laundries, etc. etc. But we will go on solving these material difficulties.

And now there remain the other difficulties we mentioned before: those of a subjective character. And what are those subjective difficulties? The problem of an old culture, of old habits, of old concepts, of old prejudices.

There are administrators, for example, who, whenever they can, will give a job to a man rather than to a woman, for a number of reasons: because they begin to think of problems of job slotting, of problems of maternity, of the difficulties of absenteeism a woman may have. The reasons, the factors are many; but the fact is that women are discriminated against in terms of job opportunities.

One day, Resolution 47 was decreed, which froze a number of positions, certain positions, to be filled only by women. Later, that question was analysed in the Workers’ Congress and it was proposed that Resolution 47 be abolished and at the same time, that Resolution 48 which prohibited women from taking certain jobs, be studied more deeply.

In any case, this problem must be attacked, if not in the form of freezing these jobs which has raised certain difficulties, because many times the skilled female personnel for the job didn’t turn up, at least in job slotting in work centres, the positions in which women will be given preference must be noted; and in every new industry, every new work centre, these job slots must be noted. And the Party, the workers’ organisations, the mass organisations and public administration, in judging the efficiency of those work centres, must take into account whether the job slottings that give preference to women are really, in effect, occupied by women.

And in every new factory built in any Cuban town, it must now be indicated what work is to be given to women so there will be time enough to proceed with the selection and training of those women.

The rules and policy of the Party and of the mass organisations must be careful to maintain and insure the conditions for women to be incorporated into work. First, it is a question of elemental justice; and second, it is an imperative necessity of the revolution, it is a demand of our economic development, because at some point, the male work force will not be enough, it simply will not be enough.

And for that reason it is necessary to wage a consistent battle against that mentality of discriminating against women in their job opportunities.

Here, in the Congress, you pointed out other types of difficulties women have, related to the home, related to child care and related to old habits. And you
suggested ways to overcome those difficulties.

In the investigation that was made it was shown that there are attitudes held by men, negative attitudes, and that there are also negative attitudes held by some women, and that this requires a special educational effort.

We believe that this struggle against the discrimination of women, this struggle for women's equality and for women's integration, must be carried out by the whole society. And it is the task of our Party, in the first place, and it is the task of our educational institutions and of all our mass organisations.

We were very pleased by the statements made here in the name of our youth, and how they committed themselves to wage the battle to overcome prejudices and the mentality that still exists. Perhaps these subjective factors imply an even greater struggle than the objective elements. Because with the development of our economy, we will overcome the material difficulties and one day we will all have the day-care centres we need, and we will have all the semiboarding schools we need, and all the boarding schools we need, and all the services we need.

But we still have to ask ourselves when we will eradicate the age-old ways of thinking, when we will defeat all those prejudices. Of course, we have no doubt that those prejudices will be defeated. It also seemed very difficult to overcome the concepts on property that existed in our society before the revolution. It was impossible to conceive of life without private property. And today it really isn't possible to conceive of life without socialist ownership of the means of production.

But many habits remain from the times when women were also property within society. And these ways of thinking have to be eradicated. And we understand that the Family Code itself, which has produced so much discussion, is an important legal and educational tool in helping to overcome those habits and those prejudices.

But in order to achieve those objectives women and men must struggle together, women and men have to become seriously and profoundly aware of the problem. They have to wage that battle together. And we are certain that it will be waged and that it will be won! And we believe that you are also certain of that. And the agreements of this Congress will be magnificent tools in that struggle.

One of the things that our revolution will be judged by in future years is how we have solved women's problems in our society and in our homeland, even though that is one of the revolution's problems that demands more tenacity, more firmness, more constancy and more effort.

On the question of prejudice, we told you once what happened in the Sierra Maestra when we began to organise the "Mariana Grajales" platoon, and the real resistance we encountered to the ideas of arming that women's unit, which reminds us how much more backward we were a few years ago. Some men believed that women weren't capable of fighting. But the unit was organised, and the women fought excellently, with all the bravery that the most valiant of our soldiers could have shown.

Nor was that the first time in history that this occurred. In the underground struggle women carried out an infinite number of tasks that, on occasion, placed them in greater danger than the dangers on the front line. And during World War II, during the fascist aggression against the Soviet Union, thousands of women fought in anti-aircraft units, in fighter and bomber planes and even with guerrillas, and at the front. But still the old prejudices seek to impose themselves.

Nature made woman physically weaker than man, but it did not make her morally and intellectually inferior to man. And human society has the duty to prevent this difference in physical strength from becoming a cause for discrimination against women. This is precisely the duty
of human society: to establish the norms of coexistence and justice for all.

Of course, the exploiting societies, the class societies exploit women, discriminate against them and make them victims of the system. Socialist society must eradicate every form of discrimination against women and every form of injustice and discrimination.

But women also have other functions in society. Women are nature’s workshop where life is formed. They are the creators par excellence of the human being. And I say this because, instead of being the object of discrimination and inequality, women deserve special consideration from society.

I mention this point because there is something that we must bear very much in mind: that the struggle for women’s security and full integration into society must never be converted into lack of consideration for women; it never means the loss of habits of respect that every woman deserves. Because there are some who confuse equality with rudeness.

And if women are physically weaker, if women must be mothers, if on top of their social obligations, if on top of their work, they carry the weight of reproduction and child-bearing, of giving birth to every human being who enters the world, and if they bear the physical and biological sacrifices that those functions bring with them, it is just that women should be given all the respect and all the consideration they deserve in society.

If there is to be any privilege in human society, if there is to be any inequality in human society, there must be certain small privileges and certain small inequalities in favor of women. And I say this clearly and frankly, because there are some who believe they’re not obliged to give their seat on the bus to a pregnant woman, or to an old woman, or to a little girl, or to a woman of any age who gets on the bus. Just as I also understand it to be the obligation of any youth to give his seat on the bus to an old man.

It is a question of the basic obligation we have towards others: on a bus, in productive work, on the truck, others always have to be given special consideration, for one reason or another.

It is true with women and must be so with women because they are physically weaker and because they have tasks and functions and human responsibilities that man does not have.

It would be very sad if, with the revolution, there wasn’t even the recollection of what certain men in bourgeois society did out of bourgeois or feudal chivalry. And instead of bourgeois or feudal chivalry, there must exist proletarian chivalry, proletarian courtesy, proletarian manners and proletarian consideration of women.

And I say this with the certainty that the people understand it and share it, with the certainty that every mother and every father would like their son to be a chivalrous proletarian, that type of man who is respectful of women and considerate of women, capable of making a small sacrifice that dishonors no man but on the contrary exalts and elevates him.

And here, at the closing of this Congress, in which the question of the struggle for women’s equality and integration has become the centre of Cuban women’s political and revolutionary activity for future years, I say this so that one thing isn’t confused with the other, I am saying what I really feel.

And we constantly run up against even verbal, linguistic forms of discrimination against women. The comrade who spoke here in the name of the workers, Agapito Figueroa, spoke of the discriminatory terminology used. And we must be careful even about this. Because sometimes we use a slogan that seems very pretty, that says: “Woman must be man’s comrade”; but one might also say: “Man must be woman’s comrade”.

There is the linguistic habit of always making the man the centre and this is inequality, it reflects habits of thinking,
although language is the least important in the final analysis, words are the least important. There are times when words remind us of something in the past although they no longer have that meaning. Deeds are what are really important.

The revolution’s force lies in the proximity, in the identification between the masses and the government, between the masses and the state, between the masses and authority. This is what gives the revolution an invincible force, because the masses see in everything - in the state, in the government - something that is theirs; not someone else’s, not a foreign thing or a strange thing. And no leader can view positions, functions, authority as his own. (But in any case, it has been highly flattering for us to see how our guests have commented about the form and character of the Congress.)

We are gratified to see the force the revolution has in women; we are gratified to confirm the revolutionary quality of Cuban women, their self-sacrifice, discipline and enthusiasm, their passion for the revolution, for just ideas, for the just cause of Cuban women demonstrating their virtues which - as we have said on other occasions - are virtues demanded of the revolutionary militant and that women have to a very high degree. And so we believe that our party must draw more from that force, that our state must draw more from that force, that our apparatus of production must draw more from that force.

The revolution has in Cuban women today a true army, an impressive political force. And that is why we say that the revolution is simply invincible. Because when women acquire that level of political culture and revolutionary militancy it means that the country has made a very great political leap, that our people have developed extraordinarily, that our country’s march toward the future can’t be stopped by anyone. That things will only be better all the time, that things will only be superior all the time. And that is why revolution is so strong; because of the people’s political consciousness, and because of its vanguard Party.

And our country is doing well. Going ahead, going well and work on all fronts is improving. And this contribution you have made is a help, it is an aid that has an important material significance. But it has a still greater importance from a moral point of view. This is what is called political consciousness. This is what is called ideological depth. And after this, who is going to deceive us? Who is going to tell us stories? Who is going to detour us? No one.

And every year that passes will be better. Every year that passes we will have a more educated, more aware, more revolutionary and more internationalist people.

So these are the impressions we take from this historical Congress. We think that you are also happy, that you are satisfied, that you are proud of the Congress. I can tell you that our Party is also proud of the Congress.

Sometimes you say that you have learned from us, but the reality is that we have learned much more from you, we have learned much more from the people, from the masses. Because they always renew and fortify our confidence, our faith, our revolutionary enthusiasm. You help to educate us, and when I say us, I speak not only as leader of the Party, I also speak as a man. You help us all, all men, all revolutionaries, to have a clearer awareness of these problems. And you help the Party and you help the leaders of the revolution; a Party in which there is a very 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 state 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. And I believe that all the comrades are aware that this is a necessity of the revolution, of society and of history.