

Cuba

and Culture

FREEDOM AND FEMINISM OR VICTIMS OF DEFENSE AND PRODUCTION

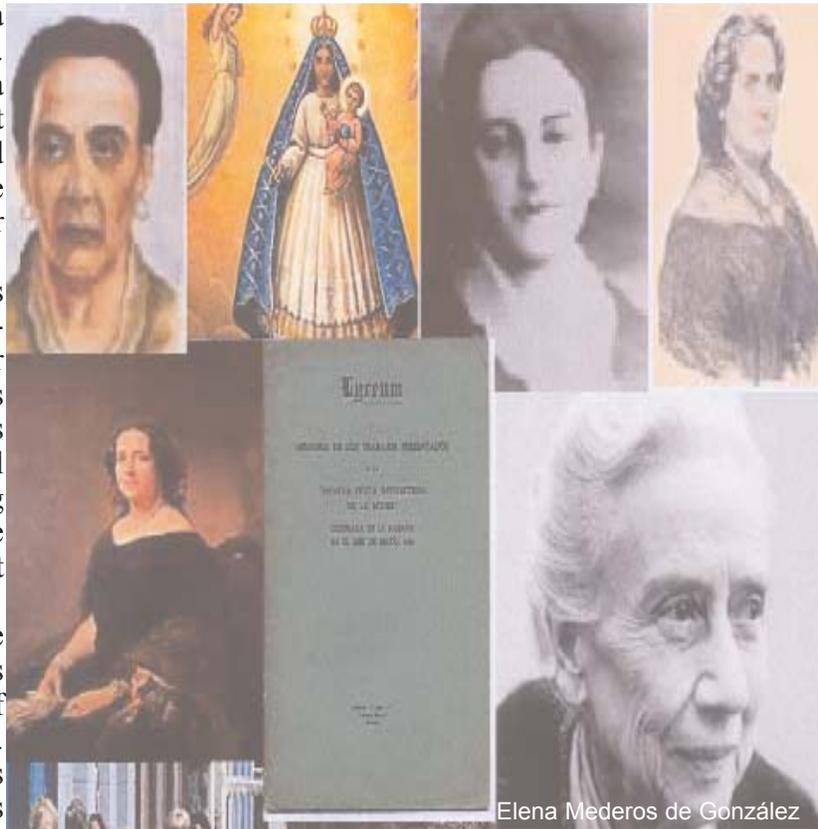
by Lillian Bertot Ph.D.

One of the great ladies of Cuban feminism was Elena Mederos González. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Mederos in Miami, already exiled. It was in 1969, at a small meeting I attended invited by Frank Calzon, a great fighter for human rights in Cuba. In that meeting she and Frank urged the attending young Cuban Americans to write to their federal representatives requesting they intercede for the freedom of Cuban political prisoners.

The political prisons with all their disastrous practices and consequences (firing squad walls, harassments, and torture, to mention a few), which have been instituted under Fidel Castro's mandate, as a political phenomenon, is inserted in a long trajectory of prisons or exile that has defined Cuban political life since colonial times. Political intolerance is a tragic phenomenon in societies (or among individuals) that have not learned to differ or persuade peacefully, or to debate in a civilized manner without resorting to entrapment, violence or crime.

Or, it is the prerogative of tyrannical rulers who have neither learned to establish and much less respect the rules and laws that defend the right to freedom of opinion and of thought, which form the bases of the democratic debate. Freedom of opinion and of thought with respect to politics imply a challenge and criticism of power, of the state, or its system of government, and it is for that reason that tyrannies curtail those freedoms and persecute those who practice them. The verbal, written, or electronic expression of opinion or thought is also perceived as a challenge to power, and for that reason tyrannies impose censorship and the high cost of imprisonment to those who express their opposition even peacefully. In fact, totalitarianism consists of censoring the alternatives to power; in this case the alternatives to the program implemented by the communist party, and Fidel Castro: persecuting and incarcerating anyone who expresses or professes opposition or alternatives to power.

Having served shortly in Fidel Castro's council of ministers as Minister of Social Welfare, in exile since 1961, Dr. Elena Mederos González for many represented a living



Elena Mederos de González

example of the feminist struggle and achievements in Cuba, an example of the ever-present confrontation of tyranny and oppression. Elena Mederos, a doctor in pharmacy graduated from the University of Havana, and was a founding member of the National Feminist Alliance founded in 1928. Years later, when she presided over the office of social assistance at the Lyceum Lawn and Tennis Club, she urged the authorities at the University of Havana to start the School of Social Welfare. She was a member of the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Pan-American Union, and served as a member of the Cuban delegation to The United Nations. After she arrived in the United States, she continued her work with UNICEF and the Children's House in Georgetown. She also worked with *Of Human Rights*, now directed by Frank Calzon in Washington, D. C.

(*Cuban Heritage Magazine*. Vol. 2, No. 1, Miami, 1988, p. 24.)

When I met her in 1969, already the liberal, pro-democracy and capitalist exile with a high sense of civic duty and a high degree of social conscience, anti Batista and anti Communist had been waging a liberating battle against the government of Fidel Castro, which had begun at the end of 1959, with the imprisonment of Commander Huber Matos.

Tragically, I am ashamed to say, had she been alive today, Elena Mederos, would still be tirelessly working in Washington where she lived, gathering signatures, speaking with government representatives, archbishops and Popes, and requesting they intercede for the liberation of the 75 prisoners of conscience who still today suffer prison sentences in Cuba of up to 20 or 30 years for practicing independent journalism, or for differing or opposing the government of Fidel Castro.

At that moment in 1969, while conversing with Dr. Mederos, I understood how much the democratic process had taken root in Cuba, and how knowledgeable she was of democratic practices and structures. It can be ascertained that democracy in Cuba was not a myth, but a true national aspiration. The aspiration of a government elected by the people, and not a people ruled by the will of a government, a party, or a leader; a government that is elected in free, transparent and multiparty elections. Where the opposition parties are organized and peacefully propose their respective political or economic agendas. Where they organize televised debates among the representatives of the authorized parties. Where the secret vote is guaranteed. A government where the majority party and its administration receives the support of the opposition in implementing their social or economic program, and where the opposition always possesses complete freedom of expressing its opinions and discrepancies in a peaceful civil manner as individuals or as a group.

Would the resignation of Elena Mederos González from Fidel Castro's cabinet have its basis on the great discrepancies between the Cuban pre-Castro leadership (revolutionary, capitalist, democratic and liberal) advocating rights and defending their property and assets, and Castro's plans of centralizing the country, absorbing not only all the sectors of the economy, of the culture, and of the means of production, but also all the political parties and movements of autochthonous liberation, like feminism? According to K. Lynn Stoner ("Women's Rights and the Cuban Republic". *Cuban Heritage Magazine*. Vol. 2, No. 1, Miami, 1988, p. 22): "The example of the *mambisas* [women who fought alongside the men in the wars for independence] is a paragon of patriotic heroism, the privileged position of Cuban feminists, [the ideological focus on the wife and the mother in association with the men; not in confrontation with them is the one defining feature of the Cuban feminist movement] centered in the preservation of the family and the advancement of women's rights [...] and the receptivity of the Cuban community to change, constituted the root of feminist success." (Stoner, p. 22)

By 1961, however, that success had already been

usurped and monopolized by the government of Fidel Castro. Just as with the Federation of Cuban Women, the Castro government constituted national mass organizations of compulsory participation of other sectors of civic activism directed by representatives of the Communist party. Among others, the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, the Committees in Defense of the Revolution (CDR), the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), and others, capturing, spying, and subduing not only their political activities, but also the work of free, apolitical, lay or religious associations.

The second time that I saw Dr. Mederos, ten years later, was during a luncheon in her honor in Miami celebrating her eightieth birthday, her work, and her dedication to social work. It was a very well attended event in Little Havana. Dr. Elena Mederos González was a lady of great refinement, civility, and kindness.

I felt a great deal of sorrow when she died in 1981, but I felt even sorrier to know that she could not return to Cuba and continue her social work. However, her dedication and tenacity with regard to social work on behalf of women and children have inspired me to write this article and in this way try to do justice once again, not only to her, but also to the work of so many people like her, who toiled for the well being of the citizens of the Cuban Republic.

This essay has to do with the work that Elena Mederos carried out in Cuba and its relationship to the comfortable and affluent life she had thanks to her father's fortune. I read in the *Cuban Heritage Magazine* (1988) that her father had bequeathed a fortune to her and to her sister so that "they would not have to get married, or stay married for reasons of economic dependence." And that fact has given me a lot to think about. Following are some thoughts.

The values Cuban women contributed to Cuban society were, and are, unquestionable and incalculable. However, as in all Western societies, the real economic power of women (as it is with men), that guarantees their political power and their lasting contributions, is derived from personal fortune, or private property.

Now returning to the topic of why Dr. Mederos refused to continue participating with Fidel Castro's government. Could it be that the socialist project excluded women like Elena Mederos, who possessed a personal fortune? Or, could it be that the Castro socialist project (Leninist), (Juan Benemelis, *The End of a Myth*, 2005) proposed the impounding of not only foreign capital, which was already a disastrous situation, but what is more absurd, the impounding of national capital? How would the eradication of private property or the seizure of economic assets affect Cuban women?

The economic dependence of women in Cuba, before (and now) with regard to men, and now also with regard to the State (situation that they share today with the men), has constituted the cause *sine qua non* of the impoverishment and degradation of Cuban society in general and of Cuban women in particular. I will mention just one example, although I could mention many more.

Poverty and the prostitution of women are two evils that

prevail and proliferate in countries where women do not have either rights, or the economic means to live with dignity and decency, and in prosperity. In Spanish America or in the Philippines, for example, still nowadays, the economic well being of women depends on the protection they receive or not, from their fathers or from their husbands.

In the specific case of Cuba, toward 1959, and thanks to the indefatigable work of many women of power and fortune on behalf of their gender, the dependence on the part of women with regard to men had diminished considerably, as well as negative attitudes of the society in general with regard to women's education and their participation in the several labor sectors, from maids to secretaries, teachers, accountants, doctors, politicians, and lawyers. Home economics trained the women to be housewives. According to K. Lynn Stoner: "beginning in 1917 and culminating in the Constitution of 1940, Cuban administrations had approved the most advanced legislation with respect to women in the entire Western hemisphere. The laws included liberal laws with regard to property, laws that permitted women to represent themselves in the courts, a law of divorce without guilt, a progressive code for maternity, guarantees of equal salary for equal work, a law of equality of rights, and of course the vote". ("Women's Rights and the Cuban Republic". *Cuban Heritage Magazine*. Vol. 2, No. 1, Miami, 1988, p.22) And she adds: "The initial demand for equality of rights was presented by Ana Betancourt Mora, in substitution for her husband, of the landowning aristocracy, who was ill, during the period called The Ten Year War (1868-1878), on the 10th of April, 1869 during the Guaimaro Constitutional Congress."(Stoner, p. 14). According to Stoner: "The Cuban feminists, the daughters of the *mambisas* pursued the rights and the recognition that had eluded their mothers." (Stoner, p. 16) [...] And she adds: [...] "During the generation that followed independence, feminist organizations proliferated. In 1923 the Feminine Club of Cuba summoned the First National Congress of Women to set down their objectives and identify the national leadership of the women's movement." (Stoner, p. 16). According to Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula in their *Sex and the Revolution; Women in Socialist Cuba*, (Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 8): "Before 1959[...] Between these extremes [the "prostitute" and "the ladies of the Country Club"] there was a large and important middle class that included a growing number of professional women [...]" The philanthropic, beneficent, and civic work of women in comfortable economic standing has come to be by way of contributions and charities from individuals and social clubs, "the charities[,] became the responsibility of the State, and the women often undertook the responsibility of their administration." (Stoner, p. 20).

Because of the need to give permanence to a social program, the transition, Stoner says, was inevitable. She adds: the transition from private beneficence to public social welfare allowed feminists to take charge of national programs and define matters pertaining to women in terms of health, safety, and human rights; the same concerns of the mothers who wish to protect their families. [...] Like program

administrators of social welfare and political activists the feminists of Cuba constituted an auxiliary leadership in the forming nation" (Stoner, pp.20-21).

However, the institutionalization and the subordination of feminist agenda in 1961 with the creation of Federation of Cuban Women, that serves the economic and political agenda as well as the judicial code of Fidel Castro's Communist government has brought about the stagnation of female social work with the promotion of economic well being.

After the literacy campaign and training in the sixties (due largely to the impulse of the Republic in the area of education), and the advances in the area of economic participation in those years (but during the revolutionary era always subordinated to the interests of a centralized state in terms of production and defense—see the ten million-ton sugar harvest or the internationalist wars in Africa and Latin America and the ensuing mobilization of women's labor), and the consequences of the falloff of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the subsidies, resulting in unemployment or underemployment of the population, the Cuban government could not offer women a solution to their problems, such as the prostitution of minors, teenage pregnancies, abortion, unemployment, the shortage of foods and personal hygiene products, political prisons, emigration and the escape or flight from the country of hundred of thousands of Cuban women with their children and husbands. The traditional Cuban family has been fragmented and the brain drain has caused great suffering as well as the impoverishment of the nation.

Not wanting or not being able to blame these circumstances on the government of Fidel Castro, on November 23, 1999, the Federation of Cuban Women sent to the organization *Women Rights* a report titled "Cuban Women's Living Conditions" in which the Federation shifts responsibility for the situation of women in Cuba to the United States and blames the "embargo" against Fidel Castro's government, alleging the following: "Information on the incidence of the embargo on the Cuban woman: The Revolution has provided excellent advances toward the equality of rights and opportunities for Cuban women, but still the traditional sexist patterns influence social conscience, such being the case that the traditional family and domestic roles overwhelm the majority of women, resulting in the problems, scarcities, and tensions caused by the blockade in their daily life harms them further." However, although the international legal and juridical code with regard to women is based on a code of respect to the individual, economic and political rights of women, endorsed by the struggle of so many women like Dr. Elena Mederos and many other women around the world, in today's Cuba, the rights of women are constantly being violated by the State.

For example, in Cuba freedom of association does not exist, nor does the right to work independently and be entitled to the fruits of one's labor. These activities are controlled by the state and these rights, never to the exclusion of all the others, formed the bases of the Cuban feminist

movement.

The right to work is subordinated to the participation in the organizations and projects of the government. Compensation is regulated by the state, that sets the price for the work workers perform without them having the right to strike, and private enterprise is severely limited or excluded. And, the right of free association, so thoroughly assumed by the Cuban feminists is totally forbidden.

The Cuban state, constituted under Castro's era has implemented a totalizing form of government since its inception and has monopolized civic action by individuals absorbing them in so-called non-governmental organizations such as the Federation of Cuban Women, but with strong ties to the Cuban political leadership, including family ties, a kind of state nepotism with the expected results of inefficiency, corruption and waste. Let's not forget that Vilma Espin, the president of the Federation of Cuba for so many years, is married to Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro's brother and second in command in Cuba and that Vilma's and Raul Castro's daughter now presides over the Federation.

It is worth noting that 85% of Cuban women hold compulsory membership in the Federation, and that, although the federated pay a quota, the organization follows the directives of the Communist party and the revolutionary leadership faithfully, and not necessarily the feminist agenda. The truth is that the government directives, since they do not address the real issues and needs of women, have stalemated the feminist work in Cuba.

Has the Federation ever held Fidel Castro accountable for the restitution of their economic rights, the right to property, the legalization of private enterprise in all its manifestations, the liberalization of the country's resources to include all Cubans and not just those who are integrated into the Communist party and its mass organizations, or to foreigners to the exclusion of Cuban nationals? Has it demanded the Cuban state for fair remuneration in accordance with the work performed, based on international wages, without government middlemen who diminish their earnings while the government leadership enjoys the profits, advantages, benefits and real earnings of the Cuban people in general, and of the women in particular? Has the Federation confronted Fidel Castro's government with the problem of international missions and obligatory conscription in the army of their children to be taken to zones of armed conflict or their children performing child labor in the in the countryside, both boys and girls, exposed to privations and dangers as well as to promiscuity and its consequences, especially for the girls? Has it raised the issue on the problems parents, but especially the mothers face while trying to feed their families, while barely surviving inadequate rations and being forced to steal from the State to compensate the food shortages (not to mention energy and water shortages) imposed on them by a rationing card or state regulations, their underemployment, and the constant persecution by the authorities of any private activity or enterprise? Authorities who do not stop calling the honest acquisition of wealth corruption, dispossessing the people of any kind of equipment, raw materials, or markets for the

always precarious production of home products, always clandestine, but surely fruitful, who private citizens originate? Has the Federation expressed to the government their grave concerns over the need of so many single or abandoned mothers to prostitute themselves to meet the needs of their families? Or look for any foreigner who can solve their problems? Or, the illegal escapes from Cuba? No matter to where in the world, or under what circumstances to improve their condition? Has the Federation held Fidel Castro's government accountable by suggesting voting against him unless a solution is given to such serious problems?

The antagonism toward the patriarchy (or to the paternalistic state, as some like to call Fidel Castro's government) not appeased, but completely neutralized, has resulted in the great failure of the feminist agenda in Cuba, one more in the long list of social and civic movements and projects rendered defunct in the long history of Fidel Castro's Communist tyranny.