

# **Women in Transition: The Revolution Effect on Gender (In)Equality**

Pre-Dissertation Fieldwork Report

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In the wide spectrum of revolutions in the 20th century, countries that experienced revolutions with socialist aims exhibited higher scores across indicators of gender equality in the immediate post-revolutionary period. However, several of these transitions led to an initial push in gender equality, followed by a reversal or regression resulting either from an end to the revolutionary regime—such as those in the Eastern Bloc (Matynia 1994)—or from market-oriented reforms—such as those in Vietnam (Jacobs, 2008). One exception to this regressive trend is the case of Cuba, where distributive mechanisms and the conception of citizenship have maintained an egalitarian aspiration despite the presence of deep economic shocks and social tensions, as well as a change in leadership. What explains the variation in gender inequality exhibited across countries that experienced a socialist revolution?

Little has been said by political science scholars about the reasons why some groups are favored over others, or about the durability of inclusionary projects and reforms sparked by revolutionary movements. My research project aims at explaining why and when women are included or excluded from communist revolutionary projects, and more specifically evaluate why revolutionary or transition leaders in Cuba targeted gender inequality via two key channels: property rights and political rights. When did revolutionary leaders treat women's property rights and citizenship differently? Were they subject to different political or wartime opportunities or constraints? Have these trends intensified or regressed over time?

A possible explanation for pro-women legislation in the post-revolutionary period in socialist revolutions is that leaders incorporate women into their revolutionary project to increase the size of the revolutionary support group. Another explanation is that leftist revolutionaries have an ideological motivation for incorporating women in the revolutionary project. However, theories on elite concessions, such as those presented by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) or Huntington (1968), predict that elites will renege on their promises to the masses as soon as a threat of revolution dissolves. That is, once revolutionary leaders take power (historically men), why would they keep their promises to women, especially if their motivations were pragmatic (to increase the role of the revolutionary coalition) and not ideological?

I propose that the level and type of incorporation of women into the legal and political system in post-revolutionary cases depends on the system of oppression in place at the time the revolution ignites. With a CLAS grant, I was able to conduct exploratory, pre-dissertation field research to Cuba, my primary case of interest. There, I spent 25 days during the summer of 2023 to become familiar with relevant national and subnational information sources, such as research institutions and government agencies. During this time, I traveled to the three biggest cities in the island, Havana, Camaguey, and Santiago, thus ensuring geographical representation of the western, central, and eastern regions. My time in these cities allowed me to gauge variations in both gender norms and institutions across the island, as well as hear from diverse perspectives on each region's experience with the Cuban Revolution. During my time in Cuba, I expanded on-the-ground contacts with current and past government officials, researchers, and local universities, as well as developed an initial understanding of the cultural nuances associated with conducting political science research in the island. Below is a summary of my activities and initial lessons.

I arrived in the state of Matanzas on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023. I spent three days there, where I have family and was able to set up meetings with people I had identified prior to my

arrival. While my initial goal was to identify information sources both formally and informally, as well as shadow current politicians, I quickly realized that if I needed to interview former revolutionaries, most of whom are over 84 years old, I needed to prioritize those meetings over shadowing currently serving officials. As such, upon arrival, I dedicated my time to identifying community leaders who could support me in my search for primary sources.

My next stop was the capital city of Havana. There, I interviewed two former revolutionaries, identified via snowballing, and made contacts with important future sources in the national archives, a series of national research institutions, and the University of Havana. Next, I travelled over 18 hours by bus to the state of Santiago de Cuba, where the revolutionary movement first began. There, I visited the local Association of Ex-Revolutionaries to introduce myself and my project. While I was not able to interview any former revolutionaries through that organization, I was able to forge a partnership that will facilitate future interviews. Nonetheless, while in Santiago, I was able to identify and interview two former revolutionaries through local community hubs and to partner with a University Professor.

From there, I repeated the process in the central city of Camaguey, where I was similarly able to identify a few sources, locate and communicate with the province's Ex-Revolutionaries' Association, and partner with a University Professor. This Professor explained the process of acquitting an academic visa through a partnership with the University, which will be necessary for me to conduct fieldwork during prolonged stays in the future.

This project is part of a broader research agenda exploring the effects of revolutionary transitions on three dimensions of inequality: (1) economic inequality, (2) gender inequality, and (3) racial inequality. Each dimension will ideally comprise a single study (article) or together form a larger research project (dissertation) that compares the Cuban revolution to other revolutions in Latin America. The CLAS Field Research Grant provided vital resources for me to conduct exploratory research and identify key information sources as I further develop this agenda. Importantly, I learned that conducting in-person fieldwork requires not only on-the-ground contacts, but an ongoing, trusting relationship with the communities one studies which cannot be forged in just a few weeks. Thanks to the support of the Berkeley CLAS, I will next arrive in Cuba with a clear agenda that is facilitated by the partnerships I was able to start this summer.

## References

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