

En Casa: Women and Households in Post-Soviet Cuba*

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Abstract. This paper argues that the household has become a renewed space of significance for Cuban women in the post-Soviet period. It draws from existing scholarship and ethnographic fieldwork conducted with women in the city of Santiago de Cuba to discuss the effect of post-Soviet crisis and reform upon women's domestic practices, the management of domestic economies, and long-standing gender ideals that link women to the domestic sphere. Physical, economic and social factors leading to post-Soviet Cuban women's increased concentration upon the household are argued to be *both* the result of pre-existing social orientations towards households as a womanly space *and* a response to specific politico-economic shifts since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Cuba, women, household, post-Soviet, anthropology

Introduction

Although in Europe communism had largely collapsed by the time the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, on the island of Cuba, a socialist revolution has officially remained ongoing. Following the declaration of the 'Special Period in Times of Peace' in 1993, many aspects of the Cuban economy were dramatically altered. While socialist principles remained central to many of the discursive and organisational practices of the Cuban state, major reforms of the 1990s included the introduction of a dual economy, mass tourism, the facilitation of emigrant returns and remittances, and the legalisation of certain small businesses. By the mid 2000s, the Cuban economy had recovered sufficiently to permit a shift in official rhetoric away from the declarations of the Special Period and towards new priorities, such as the proclaimed need

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for an 'Energy Revolution'. The economic shifts of the post-Soviet era have had significant transformative impacts upon the rhythms, practices and norms of daily life in contemporary Cuba. Most Cubans recognise that the last fifteen years have demanded very specific skills and practices that make life categorically different from what it was in the Soviet period.

Women and men have been affected differentially by these changes. This article focuses on a gendered process of re-localisation which took place during and after the Special Period, in which the household was re-signified for Cuban women. The daily lives of women in post-Soviet Cuba centre upon the household in terms of activities, income and social status, to a degree that might seem surprising given the socialist revolution's promotion of equality of the sexes and more than four decades of provision of extensive state services. While policies and institutions introduced during the Soviet years transformed many aspects of life for women in Cuba, these transformations have not been accompanied by changes of equal magnitude to the practices and identities rooted in domestic life that remain strongly associated with femininity or womanhood. On the contrary, in the post-Soviet era traditional associations of women with the household have become even more comprehensive than in the preceding decades.

To understand how and why a gendered resurgence of domesticity has taken place, this article reviews existing secondary sources and draws on ethnographic research with women in an inner-city community of Santiago de Cuba. I conducted fieldwork over a period of fourteen months in 2003 and 2004. Follow up visits were made in 2006 and 2008. In addition to participant observation involving the community-based and domestic activities of approximately 40 residents and their households, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to develop more detailed case studies of six women, three of which are included here. Although my research interests had not originally been focussed on gender, but rather on consumption practices and domestic life more generally, I quickly found that it was impossible to do research on the domestic sphere without being referred to women as the experts of all things domestic. A study of domestic consumption therefore demanded an analysis of women's relationships to their domestic spaces. The women included in my study varied considerably in terms of age, race/ethnicity, marital status, family and household makeup, economic stability, employment status and degree of political engagement. Despite the diversity of women informants, it was always women – never men – who were responsible for household activities.

Santiago de Cuba is the second biggest city in Cuba, with a population of approximately 500,000 people. The fact that the city is located more than 800 km from Havana means that despite its status as Cuba's second city, Santiago de Cuba has significantly fewer resources and poorer public

infrastructure than the capital city of Havana. As most of Cuba's goods and services are centralised in Havana, the state infrastructure upon which most distribution of products continues to rely is strongest in the provinces close to Havana and weakest in the provinces of the eastern region in which Santiago de Cuba lies. As the largest city in Oriente, Santiago de Cuba serves as a hub of governmental services for the south-east of the country, including several hospitals, a university, libraries and manufacturing plants. But in general the people of Oriente suffer greater degrees of poverty, have less access to hard currency, a poorer agricultural industry and lower levels of education than the provinces closer to Havana. The local context within which this study was carried out is therefore quite different from that of Havana-based investigations and even more so to research conducted in rural areas.¹ Yet despite these differences, Santiago de Cuba provides a good illustration of the broader problems that have affected daily life in urban communities throughout the country. The impact of the post-Soviet economic collapse during the mid 1990s meant that all cities became harder places to live than rural areas. As Laura Enríquez documented in her study, a process of 're-peasantization' occurred as significant numbers of urban residents faced with shortages of basic foodstuffs, opted to return to rural areas in order to secure access to locally grown produce.² However, by the time of my field-work, the hardest years of the Special Period had passed, and none of my informants considered migration to rural areas as an option. Instead, flows of migration were from Santiago de Cuba towards Havana or abroad, as young people in particular sought better work and life opportunities.

In Santiago de Cuba, the practices of everyday life are clearly differentiated along gender lines. Both women and men are equally likely to suggest that the gendered division of family and work responsibilities is a natural state of affairs. While men spend much of their time outside the house, for both labour and leisure activities, women are seen to belong to the house and are responsible for running the household. In Cuba, this typically includes cleaning the house on a daily basis, shopping for groceries, cooking and ensuring that bills are paid. Not all women contribute equally to domestic work; often younger women, especially those who are studying or in paid employment, will do less housework if their mother or another woman in the house is not part of the formal workforce. As women become elderly, they in turn rely upon the younger women of their household to keep things running. Child-care is

¹ Laura J. Enríquez, 'Economic Reform and Repeasantization in post-1990 Cuba', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2003), pp. 202–17; Ruth Pearson, 'Renegotiating the Reproductive Bargain: Gender Analysis of Economic Transition of Cuba in the 1990s', *Development and Change*, vol. 28 (1997), pp. 671–705; Mona Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution: Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba* (Ithaca, 1997).

² Laura J. Enríquez, 'Economic Reform and Repeasantization'.

shared across generations and between members of extended families, and it is common for children and young adults to be living with grandparents, or to spend weeks at a time with other relatives. There is little disapproval of women who work full-time, or of those who are seen out at night, or who move away leaving children in the care of other female relatives. But women are only able to withdraw from the principal activities of running a household and caring for children when there are other women able to assume their place. When women's work or social life is perceived to coincide with the neglect of their households or children, this attracts strong disapproval from other people, especially other women.³

Men's most common contributions to a household include generating income to cover domestic expenses, organising house and furniture repairs and running errands that require heavy lifting, such as the refilling of cooking gas canisters. When men go on such errands as shopping for a specific item, they are usually 'sent' by the women in charge of household provisioning, and such errands are additional to women's core shopping and provisioning activities. Men are seen as belonging to 'the street', and the street is where they are most likely to spend their leisure hours (of which they have substantially more than most women). Many adolescent boys play football on the street, while adult men play dominoes at tables set up on street corners, and older men congregate in parks and plazas to talk.

This gendered division of domestic responsibilities, where men belong to the street and women belong to the house, has remained largely unchanged in modern Cuba despite considerable transformations to women's lives in the areas of social welfare, paid employment, legal rights, and reproductive and contraceptive practices. Previous anthropological studies, such as those conducted by Oscar Lewis' team of researchers in Havana in the 1960s, and by Mona Rosendahl in the 1980s, indicate that women's orientation towards the household changed very little as a result of a revolution which effected dramatic transformations in other aspects of Cubans' lives.⁴ The incorporation of women into public and political life under the auspices of the revolution was expected by some Cuban policymakers to herald profound changes in the gender relations of everyday life. Much scholarship about women during the Soviet years focussed on the new possibilities women

³ Similar occurrences of inter-generational transferring of domestic labour between women have been observed elsewhere in Latin America; see Sylvia Chant, 'Women, Work and Household Survival Strategies in Mexico, 1982–1992: Past Trends, Current Tendencies and Future Research', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1994), p. 210.

⁴ Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis and Susan M. Rigdon, *Four Women: Living the Revolution. An Oral Historical of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana, 1977); Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis and Susan M. Rigdon, *Neighbors: Living the Revolution. An Oral Historical of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana, 1978); Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution*, pp. 51–77.

experienced through work and revolutionary participation.⁵ Irrespective of whether or not such wider shifts were ever likely to transform radically household relations, the changes of the post-Soviet era have substantially eroded Cuban women's possibilities of developing economic security or maintaining social respectability without reference to their domestic responsibilities. Practically, economically and symbolically the significance of women's work within households became especially evident in the wake of the economic crisis that plagued Cuba in the mid 1990s and which has informed the practices of Cuban women to this day.

Cuban Women in Context

Historians of gender relations in Cuba have documented the importance of *casa* and *calle* as gendered spaces since at least the beginning of Cuban independence from Spain.⁶ The *casa/calle* gender division is argued to be a legacy of Spanish colonialism most clearly represented by urban *mestizo* or white communities of Latin America. In Cuba this idealised representation of middle class practice was the dominant image of family envisaged not only by male-dominated state institutions, but also by the (largely middle class) women's movements of the early twentieth century.⁷

The *casa/calle* divide as a social model appears within the two main variants of household structure that have been observed in Cuba. The first is a predominantly white or European idealised vision of the male-headed household, in which men of the street earned income while their legally married wives stayed at home. While men are expected to enact the ideology of *machismo* by engaging in competition with other men and assuming the productive role of earning an income to bring to the household, women engage in a complementary set of practices that some have identified as belonging to an ideology of *marianismo*, and focus on the reproductive labour of the domestic sphere.⁸ Such a model of femininity emphasises not only a

⁵ L. M. Smith & A. Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (Oxford, 1996); Vilma Espín and Deborah Schnookal, *Cuban Women Confront the Future* (Melbourne, 1991); Maxine Molyneux, *State, Gender and institutional change in Cuba's 'Special Period': the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (London, 1996); Helen Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialisation in the Caribbean* (Boulder, 1995).

⁶ K. Lynn Stoner, *From the house to the street: The Cuban Women's Movement for Legal Reform, 1898–1940* (Durham, 1991); Irma Arriagada, 'Changes and Inequality in Latin American Families', *Cepal Review*, vol. 77 (2002), p. 138.

⁷ K. Lynn Stoner, *From the house to the street*.

⁸ Cuba's very low fertility rates and widespread access to contraception have not been accompanied by a devaluing of motherhood as a concept of vital importance. Although Cuban women have fewer children than elsewhere in Latin America, and can more easily control when and with whom they have them, the importance of mother-child bonds not only for economic stability but also as the central element in kinship networks remains very

cult of domesticity, but also the sanctity of motherhood, the veneration of older women, the virtue of women's sacrifices and religious devotion.⁹

A second variant of household is commonly associated with Afro-Cubans, which is typically matrifocal in nature where women frequently head their households and rely more on relations within their own extended family for economic stability than upon their more temporary relations with male partners. There is ongoing debate over how much contemporary Afro-American gender and family practices, including high rates of female headed households, might be the result of separating partners and families through centuries of slavery and plantation economy.¹⁰ Raymond Smith's ground-breaking work on Caribbean matrifocality argues that it is women who form the 'engine' of the house and the family.¹¹ As men may drift through the households of their partners, they are not reliable contributors of resources to the family; as their children grow up, sons are less bound to the house than their sisters, and tend to move between their mother's house and the house(s) of their current partner(s). Solien de Gonzalez's work argues that the prevalence of consanguineal ties is as important as mother-child bonds in understanding Caribbean kinship.¹² The centrality of relationships between adults within an extended family to maintaining households demonstrates why the presence of more than one adult woman is usually necessary in order to manage a household.¹³

important. A decline in fertility after the post-Soviet economic collapse can even be seen as a commitment to child-bearing as a venerated practice, with informants choosing to wait until they were economically able to provide for the children they intended to have. Garcia & De Oliveira's study of fertility and work in urban Mexico similarly found that although women's practices were changing to include higher workforce participation and fewer children, most women still considered their main source of identity to derive from motherhood. See Sonia Catasús Cervea and Juan Carlos Alfonso Fraga, 'The Fertility Transition in Cuba', in José Miguel Guzman et al. (eds.), *The Fertility Transition in Latin America* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 397–413; Brigida Garcia and Orlandina de Oliveira, 'Motherhood and Extradomestic Work in Urban Mexico', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1997), pp. 364–84.

⁹ Melhuus and Stølen, *Maebos, Mistresses and Madonnas*, p. 12; Sylvia Chant with Nikki Craske, *Gender in Latin America* (London, 2003), pp. 9–13.

¹⁰ Helen Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialisation in the Caribbean* (Boulder, 1995), pp. 48–9; see also Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (Ann Arbor, 1989), and Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The sugarmill: the socioeconomic complex of sugar in Cuba, 1760–1860* translated by Cedric Belfrage (New York, 1976).

¹¹ Raymond T. Smith, 'The Matrifocal Family', in Jack Goody (ed.), *The Character of Kinship 1760–1860* (Cambridge, 1973). For an example of critiques of Smith's model of matrifocality, see Christine Barrow, 'Men, Women and Family in the Caribbean: A Review', in Christine Barrow & Rhoda Reddock (eds.), *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 418–26.

¹² Nancie L. Solien de González, 'The Consanguineal Household and Matrifocality', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 67, no. 1 (1965), pp. 1541–49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1542.

Although matrifocality is most immediately observed in women-headed households, and although women-headed households are disproportionately found in Afro-Cuban families, the concept of matrifocality was applicable to all of the families I worked with in Santiago de Cuba, regardless of race and the presence or absence of fathers and husbands. The high proportion of Afro-Cubans in Santiago de Cuba makes discussions about the impact of slavery upon household practices, and the ongoing racialised hierarchy of values in Cuba, particularly relevant. However, as Helen Safa has argued, the perception among Cuban people and within the Cuban government that male-headed households are more desirable than female-headed ones is not only an expression of racial hierarchies, but also of class divisions.¹⁴ As many of these class divisions have blurred through the policies of socialism, there has been a convergence of domestic practices between white and black and between formerly middle class and working class sectors of the population, even while people retain distinctions about ‘respectable’ household forms which maintain racialised and class-driven undertones.

This hierarchy of values in which the vision of domesticity most championed by the white middle classes prevails has clearly informed the attitudes of socialist policymakers towards gender reform during the Cuban revolution. Several studies completed during the 1990s examined the political and social transformations of women’s lives, observing that Cuban socialism has never seriously undermined the gendered domestic division of responsibilities that have characterised Cuban families for centuries.¹⁵ Legislation that directly addressed the dynamics of family and married life, such as the Family Code of 1975, was often more a set of desirable objectives than enforceable laws.¹⁶ The Family Code does call for equality and mutual respect between the sexes, but the very structure of the family it envisions implies a (patriarchal, hetero-centric) nuclear family that has historically been associated with the white bourgeoisie. Another example of the type of family envisioned by the Cuban state can be seen in its public housing plans, which have never been realised with the degree of success found in areas such as healthcare and education. As housing shortages have been a mainstay of urban Cuban society, the majority of households involved in my research were in fact triple-generational, consisting of extended families. But the government’s stated aim of providing individual housing for each nuclear

¹⁴ Helen I. Safa, ‘The Matrifocal Family and Patriarchal Ideology in Cuba and the Caribbean’, *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2003), pp. 312–48.

¹⁵ Smith, *Sex and Revolution*; Pearson, ‘Renegotiating the Reproductive Bargain’, p. 671; Molyneux, *State, Gender*.

¹⁶ Margaret Randall, ‘The Family Code’, in A. Chomsky, B. Carr and P. M. Smorkaloff (eds.), *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham and London, 2003), pp. 399–405. See also Safa ‘The Matrifocal Family’, p. 315.

family recognised that ideally young people should be provided with housing upon marriage in order to establish a new nuclear household independent of their parents.

Under the guidance of the nationwide Federation of Cuban Women (*Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, or FMC), the 1970s did see considerable changes in the role of women, with increasing participation in the workforce and in education.¹⁷ Yet it is telling that the organising philosophy of the FMC divides its units along neighbourhood blocks on the assumption that women will be involved in FMC activities largely at the scale of the home and neighbourhood. This is testament to the fact that the purpose of the FMC is to organise women for revolutionary progress, but its objective has never been to actively reform or challenge women's control of domestic space. Many of the policies designed to address the needs of working women – such as the expansion of children's day-care facilities and the extension of shopping hours – also highlight the degree to which women were still expected by their families to manage the housework and childcare.¹⁸ Historian Louis Pérez cites a survey undertaken by the Cuban Workers' Federation in the mid 1970s – a period in which work opportunities were actually expanding – investigating barriers to women's participation in leadership positions. In discussing their reasons for not pursuing leadership roles, 85 per cent of women surveyed cited housework, 83 per cent listed childcare problems, and 26 per cent thought that taking on such jobs would lead to problems with their husbands.¹⁹ It seems that throughout the revolution, when forced to choose between being a housewife and being a worker, domestic responsibilities have consistently been more important for women than career or educational duties. Although official policies emphasise gender equality and encourage the increased participation of women in some traditionally male sectors of society, unofficially the cultural expectations of women as mothers, housekeepers and wives have remained intact, effectively doubling the burden of women's work.

Cuban women are not unusual in having their workloads expand in times of economic change. The dualistic understanding of gender identified by so many scholars in the Caribbean and parts of Latin America seems in recent decades to have been reinforced by the various consequences that dramatic economic changes have brought to the region.²⁰ Even in households where

¹⁷ Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner*, p. 128.

¹⁸ Molyneux, *State Gender*, pp. 12–8. See also Vilma Espín and Deborah Shnookal, *Cuban Women Confront the Future: Three Decades After the Revolution* (Melbourne, 1991).

¹⁹ Louis A. Pérez, Jr, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, Third Edition (Oxford, 2006), p. 284.

²⁰ Dualisms such as 'inside' and 'outside' and 'reputation' and 'respectability' have been argued to correspond with Caribbean notions of masculinity and femininity – although some anthropologists have pointed out that men and women can also be seen to move

men are present as husbands and fathers, their supposed traditional role as income providers has declined in importance since the 1980s, while women's roles have increased in multiple ways. Firstly, given the ideal of a *casa/calle* division, the practical effects of expanded domestic labour that usually result from a shrinking salaried income are disproportionately dealt with by women. Secondly, the forms of both informal and formal service-oriented labour in which women dominate have grown, so that in increasing numbers of households across Latin America and the Caribbean, women were found to be both the domestic managers and the primary breadwinners.²¹

Women's experiences of a 'double burden' or *la triple jornada* as a consequence of economic decline has been much discussed in recent research on Latin America.²² Whether through the rise of neo-liberal capitalism (as seen in Mexico and Puerto Rico), the decline of international socialism (in Cuba) or both (in Nicaragua), the effects of economic restructuring on households within these societies have demonstrated some noticeable parallels. Although men's formal work opportunities generally contract in times of scarcity, women's work opportunities tend to expand through a heavier reliance upon the informal economy or self-employment. Domestic economies consequently rely on the intensification and diversification of paid labour by household members of working age, an expansion of domestic labour by women and children, and reductions and reprioritisations in consumption.²³ Economic crises force women to move into waged labour, but it does not free them from their domestic labour for which they are still held responsible as women.²⁴ The effect of economic crisis upon households across Latin

between these dualisms according to context. See Diane Austin, *Urban Life in Kingston, Jamaica: The Culture and Class Ideology of Two Neighbourhoods* (New York, 1984); Peter Wilson, *Crab Antics: the social anthropology of English-speaking Negro societies of the Caribbean* (New Haven, 1973); Jean Besson 'Reputation and Respectability Reconsidered: A new perspective on Afro-Caribbean peasant women', in Christine Barrow and Rhoda Reddock (eds.), *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 350–70; Daniel Miller, *Modernity, An Ethnographic Approach: dualism and mass consumption in Trinidad* (Oxford, 1994).

²¹ Chant with Craske, *Gender in Latin America*, pp. 188–9; Mercedes González de la Rocha, 'The Urban Family and Poverty in Latin America', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1995), pp. 12–31; Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner*.

²² C. M. Melhuus and K. A. Stølen, 'Introduction', in M. Melhuus and K. A. Stølen (eds.), *Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas: Contesting the Power of Latin American Gender Imagery* (London, 1996), pp. 12–3; Helen I. Safa and Peggy Antrobus, 'Women and the Economic Crisis in the Caribbean', in Lourdes Benería and Shelley Feldman (eds.), *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty and Women's Work* (Boulder, 1992), pp. 49–82; Arriagada, 'Changes and Inequality', pp. 136–44; Chant, 'Women, Work and Household', pp. 226–8.

²³ González de la Rocha, 'The Urban Family', p. 15; Chant, 'Women, Work and Household', pp. 226–8; Leslie C. Gates, 'The Strategic Uses of Gender in Household Negotiations: Women Workers on Mexico's Northern Border', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2002), pp. 507–26.

²⁴ González de la Rocha, 'The Urban Family', p. 25.

America and the Caribbean has resulted in a notable convergence with Cuba in key demographic trends. These include a growing number of women-headed households, higher frequencies of households including multiple adult women to share domestic work, higher rates of consensual unions and divorces, lower fertility rates, and women's increased participation in both formal and informal work in order to generate domestic income.²⁵ Although all of these demographic shifts seem to have lessened the reliance of women upon men for economic security, they have not reduced the degree to which women remain responsible for, and are identified with, the domestic sphere. In many ways, the household has become more important for women than ever. Indeed, several researchers have argued that the economic and demographic shifts occurring in Latin America since the 1980s have not caused a social change that has resulted in a lessening of the value of motherhood and household.²⁶

Parallels can also be found with reference to the experiences of women in other socialist societies, although within the context of this article these parallels can only be briefly discussed. As in Cuba, across socialist Europe the very diverse policies enacted to transform women's working, familial and domestic opportunities never erased, and often complemented, pre-existing conceptions of gendered roles. Although socialist states generally sought to increase women's participation as workers, and transform relationships of intra-familial dependence into relationships of dependence upon a paternalistic state, in many socialist societies policies that espoused the equality of women were also contradicted by beliefs in the 'natural' role of women as housekeepers and mothers.²⁷ Anthropologists working in post-socialist 'transition economies' during the 1990s also noted that the expansion of domestic labour that resulted from post-socialist economic shortages affected women's lives especially. In some cases a 'backlash effect' from the socialist emphasis on gender equality resulted in women rejecting 'public identities' and actively cultivating a 'traditional' role in the domestic sphere.²⁸ Clearly then, although the women in my ethnography understand

²⁵ Arriagada, 'Changes and Inequality', pp. 141–44; Chant, 'Women, Work and Household', p. 211; Catasús and Fraga, 'The Fertility Transition in Cuba', pp. 404–5; Safa, 'The Matrifocal Family', p. 332.

²⁶ Sylvia Chant, 'Women, Work and Household', pp. 203–33; Garcia and de Oliveira, 'Motherhood and Extradomestic Work'; Gates, 'The Strategic Uses of Gender'.

²⁷ Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The politics of gender after socialism: a comparative-historical essay* (Princeton, 2000), p. 5. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 79–82.

²⁸ Frances Pine, 'Retreat to the household? Gendered domains in post-socialist Poland' in Chris Hann (ed.), *Post Socialism: ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002). Maxine Molyneux, 'Women's Rights and the International Context: Some Reflections on the Post-Communist States', *Millennium*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1994), pp. 287–313.

their (often difficult) situations to be specific to the time and place of post-Soviet Cuba, their decisions about labour, family and household sit within a broader context of regional gendered histories, political change and global economic development. These women's domestic practices, and the reasons these practices are so important to them, should be understood both as a specific response to the economic situation of scarcity that is locally seen as definitive of post-Soviet life on the island, and also as a trend that is comparable to women's responses to economic crisis elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin American region as well as in the post-socialist world.

Before considering how post-Soviet change has affected Cuban households, it is worth mentioning some important differences that can emerge between the overlapping concepts of household, house and family. In Cuba, families often extend beyond the boundaries of households, with children and parents living with various members of the extended family. It is also sometimes the case that single houses contain multiple family units effectively acting as separate households, a practice that is often made necessary by the shortage of housing. When conflicts arise between the actual practices of residence, the state categorisation of residence and the notion of 'belonging' to a household, my research findings suggest that the most permanent and significant definition of belonging is to one's consanguineal family. To 'belong' to a household in Cuba is most often defined as belonging to the house of one's mother and/or grandmother. Households and families, although sometimes conflated in social scientific analysis, are therefore by no means the same thing, as where one resides and to whom one belongs are often quite distinct in Cuba, and indeed in many other communities around the world.²⁹ However, in comparison to other Caribbean societies, the Cuban state reinforces the bureaucratic centrality of the household through a significant degree of resource distribution (and data collection, in the form of censuses and other reports) that treats each household as a social unit. Furthermore, although residents distinguish (when pressed) between families and households, the frequent overlap between their closest relatives and their co-residents is reinforced by the tendency of Cubans to conflate the concepts of family and residence through the use of such terms as *casa* (house). Although one might speculate that women are especially likely to see the household as the convergence of the material and economic space of the house and the personal hub of the family, in practice both the men and women I talked to would frequently explain the daily practices of their families with reference to their house, for example by saying 'in my house,

²⁹ R. M. Netting, R. Wilk and E. Arnould, 'Introduction', in R. Netting, R. Wilk and E. Arnould, (eds.), *Households: Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group* (Berkeley, 1984), p. xx.

we generally eat early' (*en mi casa, generalmente comemos temprano*). In such circumstances it seemed clear that households are the space within which certain important family dynamics are located, even though 'my house' might refer to present residence or to mother's residence at any given time depending upon the context.

The Household as Physical Labour: Housework in the Special Period

Since the 1990s, the continuing role that women in Cuba (both waged and unwaged) maintain in running domestic economies and undertaking domestic labour has been intensified by the lack of material resources and declining urban infrastructure that resulted from the post-Soviet crisis and which still pose challenges for domestic reproduction. As the tasks involved in maintaining a household became increasingly time-consuming, the hardships of grocery shopping, queuing, food preparation and house cleaning affected the everyday lives of women in a very physical way. Simply completing what are regarded as basic household chores requires that women spend many more hours either within the house, or outdoors provisioning for the household, than was the case in previous decades.

This increased housework burden is not restricted to marginal or low-income households. Indeed, women who remain in salaried work, even in high-status professions, have found managing their households more difficult, both practically and financially, than some of their neighbours who do not work outside the home. Nilda, a woman in her late forties who works for a government institute, provides an illustration of this predicament. She earns a high salary within the scale of Cuban peso incomes (approximately US\$25 a month), and her daughter and son-in-law also contribute much of their salaries towards the household costs. However, Nilda's job does not give her the time or connections to run a small business or to generate income in dollars, so until recently her household relied almost entirely upon their salary income for everyday spending. Despite her professional status and having a triple income household, Nilda always had to calculate her basic spending very carefully to ensure she had enough money for groceries.

Nilda often told me that she was looking forward to her retirement in a few years, as soon as she was eligible. She felt that her salary in itself was not sufficient to justify making her life so troublesome when added to the burden of housework. Although she took her work seriously and was very well respected by her colleagues, Nilda spoke of being extremely tired of putting up with poor conditions in her workplace, of having to sit through long meetings, of walking long distances and travelling on crowded trucks to get to and from work, and of not having time to take care of her house. Although her daughter Sonia helped in cleaning the house, Nilda was responsible for

all the grocery shopping and cooking for the family, which meant that as soon as she finished work for the day, she would rush to the markets and the *bodega* (state ration shop) in order to buy food for dinner. During an interview, when I asked how much time she spends each day obtaining and preparing food, Nilda responded:

I don't think less than four hours a day. I'm the person in charge of food and cooking; I have to worry about obtaining it and preparing it. Because if I add the time I spend obtaining it I spend more than four hours; it could be approximately, I don't know, double that, eight hours ... Generally every day you buy some kind of food.

Regardless of the material state of their houses or of their position within transforming old and new social orders, residents of urban communities in Cuba share Nilda's experience of burdensome domestic routines generated by the scarcities and shortages that began in the Special Period. For the oldest residents, the changes in domestic routine that were experienced in the 1990s were the latest in a long line of transformations of home life created by political change, as the early years of the revolution, and following waves of Soviet era reform, each had an impact upon the rhythms of everyday practices. For example, queues for particularly sought-after consumer goods became a familiar part of shopping culture, as Rosendahl reported in her ethnography of Cuba in the 1980s. Rosendahl's informants reported queuing for items such as fabric and kitchenware, but in contrast to contemporary Cuba, there was a widespread availability of basic grocery goods in Cuban pesos, so that queuing for long periods for consumer goods was not a daily or even weekly necessity.³⁰ After the declaration of the Special Period, the time required to acquire goods expanded considerably, such that sociologist Susan Eckstein claimed that in the early 1990s a typical family would spend 15 hours a week queuing for food.³¹ By the time of my fieldwork in 2004, the flow of rationed goods had stabilised and improved, even though the quantity and consistency of rations arriving has never returned to pre-Special Period levels. Nevertheless, unpredictable schedules and small quantities of stock delivered to ration shops and markets obliged those managing household meals to buy or otherwise acquire goods almost daily. Food purchasing activities cannot be consolidated into one or two trips a week even when there is money on hand to do so.

In addition to the time required to source food and other grocery items, Special Period domestic routines were also complicated by faltering energy supplies and fuel shortages. In the early 1990s, electricity cuts of six to seven

³⁰ Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution*.

³¹ Susan Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro*, Second Edition (New York, 2003), p. 99.

hours a day became routine as power plants could not be fuelled or maintained.³² Dilapidated Soviet-era technology continued to fall into disrepair, so that even by 2004, during my fieldwork, power cuts would occur in two out of every three days, for an average duration of four hours at a time. While electricity shortages do not prevent cooking from taking place (for which people in Santiago largely used gas in 2004), refrigeration becomes unreliable, and other cooking appliances such as blenders and rice cookers cannot be used. Several women complained to me that frequent shortages damaged their refrigerators, requiring the purchase of expensive circuit breakers in US dollar or *pesos convertibles*. Unreliable refrigeration also discourages shopping in bulk and increases the daily burden of food preparation, as each day's food must be prepared from scratch. In Santiago de Cuba, water shortages add pressure to power cuts. Severe droughts in Oriente during 2003 and 2004 resulted in Cuba's water reservoirs containing only 54 per cent of their capacity,³³ with water generally arriving through the town plumbing around one day a week – although at one stage my own household endured 21 days without water on tap. A shortage of water makes cleaning the house (and its inhabitants) a stressful activity, as washing dishes or laundry requires the careful storing and recycling of water and prevents any form of wasteful automated washing or flushing. Fuel shortages also create problems in managing a household, as transportation delivering crucial consumer goods from Havana does not always arrive. Petrol shortages make vehicle use for shopping trips prohibitively expensive, and so most households rely on local shops, markets and vendors for daily food purchases, as goods must largely be carried home on foot, and not much can be carried in one trip. In these and many other small but important ways, scarcity and shortage have significantly altered the practices of housekeeping since the early 1990s in ways that require more hours of harder work than had been experienced by most urban Cubans since the early years of the revolution.

The breakdown in infrastructure serving Cuban cities has been a crucial aspect in the return to the domestic sphere – particularly for women – as the space in which most of one's life takes place. The lack of fuel and transportation obliges many people simply to stay at home; whereas in the 1980s, travel ranging from daily commutes to cross-country touring was a normal part of life, by 1992 40 per cent of national bus services and train schedules had been suspended.³⁴ In Santiago, the return of horse-drawn carriages has only been economically viable for short trips across the town, and although other Cuban cities benefited from the distribution of over 700,000 bicycles from China, Santiago's hilly topography has made walking the most viable alternative for transportation in the central districts. At the same time, a lack

³² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³³ Pérez, *Cuba*, p. 295.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

of growth and decline in quality of children's day-care and educational services reinforced the necessity for many women to prioritise their focus on the domestic sphere even more than in earlier periods of the revolution.³⁵

It is within such a localised context that the vast majority of my women informants completed all of their household-related chores within walking distance from their houses. In part this was a specific result of living in an inner-city area; within approximately 30 minutes' walk from their homes, my informants had access to 25 medical services and eleven schools. Important shopping areas, with goods sold both in dollars and Cuban pesos, were located less than 15 minutes away, and two agricultural markets (of which only one lies in the central historical district) were also reached in less than half an hour's walk. The organisation of state support services at the local level meant that most daily errands could be completed within the neighbourhood. Rations were collected from state outlets that typically serviced areas of around 20 blocks. Family doctors' practices were similarly allocated, with two practices servicing the women in this study. The immediate neighbourhood included two primary schools and a secondary school, although students are not obliged to attend their nearest school and may travel some distance to attend specialised schools, perhaps even boarding for senior secondary education. Therefore, what I term a 're-localisation' of social life is due in part to the economic decline that made national and city-wide infrastructure unreliable, but is also because the provision of state services that do still function, and the growth of small-scale private enterprises, have been specifically aimed at the local level of the neighbourhood or household.

During fieldwork I found that Cuban women evaluated policy and economic reform largely in terms of their impact upon the daily practices of domestic reproduction that were already felt to be arduous. In 2006 the government announced a raft of reforms aimed at increasing the nation's capacity for power generation while decreasing the population's net use of resources. The 'Year of the Energy Revolution' saw the introduction of many reforms that resulted in new adaptations in domestic routines, both by increasing costs of domestic power and by the substitution of older domestic appliances for more energy-efficient alternatives. The broader impact of the 'Year of the Energy Revolution' upon Cuban society was considerable, as workplace and industry reform, infrastructure development, and Chinese and Venezuelan investment in new petroleum deposits initiated new possibilities to shift economic viability away from a dependence upon foreign remittances and tourism. However, my informants were not focussed on the broader economic, ideological or international implications of the 'Energy

³⁵ Isabel Holgado Fernández, *¡No es fácil! Mujeres cubanas y la crisis revolucionaria* (Barcelona, 2000), pp. 131–73.

Revolution’, but rather on the transformations, both positive and negative, that were occurring within the domestic realm of water supplies, electricity bills, gas and electric cookers and refrigerators. The impact of socialist policies on the basic practices of everyday life continues to be very substantial, and it is women who are most concerned with – and most affected by – the domestic impact of policies such as that of the Energy Revolution.

The Household as Economic Hub: Making Money in the Post-Soviet Era

At the same time as the tasks of managing a household became increasingly demanding, from the 1990s onwards the benefits of participating in the formal workforce considerably diminished. Legal and illegal practices which made the home a central site for economic activities increased; major economic reforms of 1993 included Law 141, which legalised a number of *cuentalpropista* small business activities,³⁶ while the black market, in which a wide range of goods and services were traded, continued to flourish. Women’s resurgent focus on the household can therefore be understood as the result of economic strategising.

Official employment figures released by the Cuban government have been the source of some debate, as declarations of continuing full or near-full employment have been argued by others to produce a misleading picture of the Cuban workforce. The Economist Intelligence Unit cites ECLAC data to estimate that in the mid 1990s, 40 per cent of the adult population was either unemployed or underemployed.³⁷ Since that time, around 30 per cent of adults have continued to be ‘economically inactive’. This category includes people who identify as housewives and students, and must also include those who rely on black market income or remittances for an income without participation in the formal labour market.³⁸

Many women in contemporary urban Cuba find that more money can be made from home than in the formal workplace. This includes highly educated women in professional occupations, as seen in the dissatisfaction that Nilda reports in her juggling of salaried work, where material gain has diminished, and housework, in which the labour has expanded. Although my own field research supports anecdotal evidence gathered by other researchers that since the Special Period women have been particularly unable to maintain wage employment and have preferred to seek other income generating options, the Federation of Cuban Women and other official sources state that the level of women’s participation in the workforce actually increased during

³⁶ Pérez, *Cuba*, p. 305.

³⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile: Cuba* (London, 2008).

³⁸ Further, many Cubans who do participate in the formal workforce would also rely heavily on black market income and remittances that are not reflected in official statistics.

the 1990s. But at the same time, during the 1990s women's official unemployment rate was at 10.1 per cent, more than double that of men.³⁹ The proportion of hours and energy dedicated to the workplace by women certainly reduced drastically during the Special Period. Underemployment, if not unemployment, became commonplace, as reduced workloads, low productivity due to industrial shortages, and absenteeism were all used by women as strategies to redirect their labour towards the household.⁴⁰

More significantly for the purposes of this article, men and women who are not in formal employment behave differently and describe their absence from the formal workforce in very different terms. Whereas men outside formal employment tend to characterise their activities as entrepreneurial, women are more likely to define their non-salaried lives in terms of managing their households, even when they are also engaged in entrepreneurial activities. Conducting a short survey of 40 households in Santiago, I found that while women identified as being 'housewives' but never as 'unemployed', men who did not formally work were described as 'unemployed', or as engaging in a range of small sporadic money-making activities. One respondent lived with a large extended family which included five adult nephews and nieces, none of whom were formally employed. The resident described all of her nieces as 'housewives', although two of them sold biscuits and other baked goods for income spent on themselves and their children. In contrast, when talking about her nephews the respondent used such phrases as '*el saca sus cosas*' ('he finds his things') to describe their involvement in sporadic black market buying and selling which paid for their personal expenses but did not contribute to the household economy. Whether in paid work or not, women are often responsible for generating household income, while men do not usually identify as being involved with domestic management even when they have left the formal workforce.

Elisabeth's household is a good example of a typical domestic economy that combines both salaried and self-generated incomes so that Elisabeth can earn money while caring for a small child. Elisabeth moved to Santiago in the late 1980s to accompany her husband who works as a low-ranking official in the Ministry of the Interior. Although she has never had a salaried job and considers herself a housewife, Elisabeth runs a manicure business from her house, which provides the money to buy most of the family's food and for specific consumer goods such as toothpaste and laundry detergent. Elisabeth operates her business with her sister, and they allocate the profits between them according to need. They have a manicure table in their living room with over 30 types of nail polish and a fluorescent light. Elisabeth buys some of

³⁹ Safa, 'The Matrifocal Family', p.324–5; Pearson, 'Renegotiating the Productive Bargain', p. 698.

⁴⁰ Molyneux, *Gender, State*, pp. 31–5.

the nail polish in dollar shops, but many jars of polish were gifts from her clients and friends who have travelled or received visitors from overseas. Elisabeth charges ten Cuban pesos per manicure and also offers artistic designs that attract a higher fee. Although there are many other women who do nails within the area, Elisabeth has a loyal clientele, partly because she often works on credit. As nobody has money all the time, she is very flexible about receiving payment at a later date; in return, she is able to buy other items or services from neighbours on credit when necessary.

Elisabeth's case demonstrates that having household members who are part of the salaried workforce is useful, and that salaried work is still regarded by many as socially worthwhile. However, Elisabeth's relative material comfort – she neither flourishes nor suffers in terms of meeting her needs of food and housing – is also due to her capacity to generate income through her business. Her costs are also subsidised through domestic production and familial support. Elisabeth considers herself lucky because most of her family members still live in the countryside near Santiago and come almost weekly to town with large supplies of fruit and vegetables for the household. Her food costs are therefore much lower than those of many neighbours. Elisabeth also usually keeps at least one pig in their internal patio, which she buys as a piglet and rears until adulthood to be slaughtered, at which time parts of it are kept for her family to eat and other parts are sold to neighbours.

Many (re)emerging sources of income generation since the 1990s (such as Elisabeth's manicure business and her rearing of animals for meat) rely upon gendered notions of women's work that do not include, and may indeed be hindered by, involvement in waged labour. Other forms of getting by that invoke traditional understandings of women's work are less tolerated by state institutions. The most controversial strategy employed by women to generate income in the post-Soviet era has been sex work and/or seeking relationships with foreign visitors with the hope of material benefit.⁴¹ For women who have engaged in more or less organised forms of sex-for-money, such encounters have been a crucial determinant of their household's wellbeing. Even though exchanges of sex for money are likely to be justified in terms of meeting 'respectable' women's needs to provide for children and maintain a household, women who engage in explicit prostitution are disapproved of by most of their neighbours in contemporary Santiago. However, many women are ambivalent about the more common occurrence of Cuban women finding boyfriends, whether foreigners or locals, upon whom they rely for economic support.

⁴¹ Mette L. B. Rundle, 'Tourism, Social Change and *Jineterismo* in Contemporary Cuba', *The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers*, vol. 2. <http://www.sconline.freeseerve.co.uk/olvol2.html> 2001. Pearson, 'Renegotiating the Reproductive Bargain', p. 690.

Reina is an example of a woman whose existence within her community was quite marginal, both economically and socially, and for whom sexual relations was one of a number of resources she would use periodically to help her family get by. When I first met Reina, her household of five did not include anyone with access to the dollar economy or even to a full-time peso salary. In the later months of my fieldwork, Reina was working on a contract basis in a local government initiative that improved her income but also increased her stress levels considerably, as she also had to care for her sick and demented grandmother. Reina gave me many examples of strategies she had developed over the years to support herself and her children. She said she was not ashamed to do whatever is necessary to get by. When her first child was born, Reina was a teenager and had left high school, so she made milk caramels to sell to neighbours. In the early 1990s when the economic crisis hit Cuba, Reina took in the laundry of better-off neighbours for a fee, and this formed her major access to income during the height of the Special Period economic crisis.⁴² More recently, Reina sold food products, acquired by her partner, to neighbours. But when necessary she has also supplemented her income with informal sex work; as she explained, 'if I need to find money then I will dress up and go out on the streets to find it', or 'if I have to open my legs to feed my children, I do it without a problem'. She does not have a clientele, nor does she identify as a prostitute, but rather, accepts money from men who have sex with her if the opportunity arises and she is in need of cash. She categorises this as a slightly less publicly acceptable way of using her body than washing laundry or making sweets. In 2003, Reina met an Italian tourist who spent several weeks in Santiago over two visits. They developed a relationship and Reina was his girlfriend for the duration of his stays. In addition to enjoying the activities they were able to engage in together, such as eating out and visiting tourist sites, Reina acquired several sets of clothing (bought in dollar shops in Cuba), as well as shoes, certain items for her children and cash as a result of this relationship. Reina was very careful in caring for the clothes the Italian had bought for her, as they were her only 'good' clothes which she used both for going out and for working in her local government job. At the time of the Italian tourist, Reina was not in her current relationship, and in 2004 she had hoped the Italian would return to Santiago, because she needed the material help he could give her. However, she also indicated that as she was in a committed relationship she would not have sex with people other than her partner.

⁴² Some neighbours were able to pay Reina because in 1993–5 many Cubans still had money; the problem was that there was nothing to buy, and subsequently black market prices for commodities skyrocketed. Services such as those which Reina performed would have been very affordable, but the 'better-off' neighbours would not have been rich or even sufficiently fed during this time.

Reina's case highlights a finding of my research that the major determinant of economic wellbeing was neither formal employment nor informal or small business, but rather whether household members received remittances from outside Cuba. By 2002 remittances formed an estimated 70 per cent of all dollars informally accessed by Cubans, which suggests that in moving towards an economy reliant upon tourist and emigrant income, post-Soviet Cuba shares more characteristics with other Caribbean economies than in previous decades.⁴³ Reina's relationship with the Italian tourist demonstrates how strong an impact an influx of foreign money can have upon a Cuban household, such that Reina continued to rely on the clothes and household goods she had obtained through the Italian over one year later. Likewise, during my 2004 fieldwork, Elisabeth anticipated to be soon receiving more dollars, as one of her sisters had recently married a Spaniard and left for his home country. It was expected that, after a period of settling in, her sister would send money and gifts several times a year.⁴⁴ Similarly, although Nilda was not a regular recipient of remittances, a cousin who moved to Miami in 2002 sent her around US \$100 approximately every three months, which Nilda would put towards major costs such as renovating her house.

The reduced dependence upon state salaries and workplace benefits has been a major – if not *the* major – transformation of domestic economies in Cuba since the decline of Soviet socialism. In the 1980s state-provided benefits such as the provision of subsidised consumer goods, pensions, health care and education, in combination with salaries, formed the economic basis of almost all households.⁴⁵ Income generation through informal businesses such as buying and selling black market goods did take place, but was a supplementary rather than core economic activity. Similarly, although family support did occur, remittances from relatives abroad were heavily restricted. In contrast, by 2004 state-provided benefits and salaried incomes remained a significant basis of domestic economies in urban Santiago. Yet, my research indicates, the two crucial factors that determined the economic success of households were: first, the degree to which they engaged in their own income generation, and; second, the degree to which they received support in the form of remittances.⁴⁶ As the brief ethnographic cases of Nilda, Elisabeth and Reina have indicated, women rely upon longstanding norms of femininity to achieve economic security through these two avenues. Whether in running a business, overseeing food production, maintaining

⁴³ Safa and Antrobus, 'Women and the Economic Crisis', pp. 69–74.

⁴⁴ When I returned to visit Elisabeth in 2006, her sister had been sending money to her parents regularly for over a year, and had sent Elisabeth items such as baby clothes, bras, perfume and souvenirs.

⁴⁵ Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution*, pp. 28–50.

⁴⁶ See also Jorge Pérez-López, *Cuba's Second Economy: From Behind the Scenes to Center Stage* (New Brunswick, 1995).

family ties or developing romantic relationships, women in contemporary Cuba base their economic activities upon their gendered association with the qualities of nurturing and loving. Many of these economic activities are therefore not only physically located within the house, or personally justified as necessary to maintain a household, but also reinforce the symbolic importance of the family home as the representation of womanly virtue. The symbolic significance of the house became more important than ever for women after the economic crisis of the Special Period.

The Household as Social Centre: Gendered Identities in Times of Crisis

Although the experiences of women profiled in my study show the relevance of Caribbean and Latin American research on women and households for understanding contemporary developments in Cuba, my own research focus was rather on how the practices that are created by a gendered orientation to household management relate to identity formation through the problems of domestic consumption. The single most important source of status for adult women in Cuba continues to be the state of their household, measured through the physical state and cleanliness of their house, and the quantity and consistency of their food provision. As the example of Nilda shows, women also continue to draw status from their employment, and undoubtedly many other forms of hierarchy operate in Cuba to classify women; particularly notions of race, but also religious orientation, revolutionary commitment and educational achievement. However, across all of these divides, very few adult women engage in activities such as education, work, business or even leisure at the expense of running their household. In Cuba, a dirty or poorly run house is a reflection upon the character of the women who live there; it is therefore unsurprising that when the economic difficulties of the Special Period made provisioning and cleaning a household much harder, women perceived this as a considerable threat to their moral virtue.⁴⁷

The clearest expression during my fieldwork of how women felt that their very moral virtue or dignity was under siege, through the damage economic downturn brought to their households, was through the recurring stories that women told me of the need for creative invention (*inventar*) during the peak of the Special Period crisis. Women in Santiago de Cuba regularly told me of the 'inventions' (*inventos*) they devised during the mid 1990s in order to maximise any available food, at times also learning to prepare entirely new kinds of food. Neighbours shared recipes to use food in previously

⁴⁷ A fuller discussion of this point can be found in Anna Cristina Pertierra, *Battles, Inventions and Acquisitions: the struggle for consumption in urban Cuba*, unpubl. PhD diss., University of London, 2006, pp. 143–55; 170–213.

inconceivable ways; a most famous example of Special Period cooking was the introduction of *fongo* plantains (which were previously seen as food fit only for pigs), with even the plantain skins being softened and fried as ‘steaks’.⁴⁸ During these years, the Federation of Cuban Women assumed a public leadership role in encouraging women to invest more time in domestic labour in order to cope with the effects of the economic crisis. Eckstein reports that the Federation encouraged women to take on non-industrialised household tasks such as soap-making and candle-making, while newspapers and magazines published handy hints on running a home and managing meals in adverse circumstances.⁴⁹ The chirpy advice of *Bohemia* magazine seemed to suggest that using local plants as alternatives to toothpaste or deodorant might be the result of casual mishaps rather than an ongoing nationwide shortage in consumer goods.⁵⁰ In the popular media as well as at home, women were applauded for their resilience and resourcefulness in finding new ways to keep their families fed and clothed despite economic adversity.

Thus, the increased need for women to work within the household in the post-Soviet era was officially encouraged and represented by institutions such as the Federation of Cuban Women and national media as being valuable and even heroic ‘women’s work’ in a time of crisis, such that the house was quite literally the ‘home front’ of Cuba’s battle to retain state socialism in the face of a collapsing socialist world order. Clearly, women in Santiago de Cuba responded in a variety of ways to this refashioning of Special Period scarcity as yet another incarnation of socialist struggle. However, whether they were committed to this ideological premise, or whether they were resentful that their heightened suffering should be represented in such a manner, it is clear from the popular ‘war stories’ from the mid 1990s, that continue to be retold by woman today, that such domestic and financial responsibilities are undoubtedly sources of prestige and power for women, even while they are the outcomes of gendered and other inequalities. The prestige that women draw from having a superior capacity to manage households in difficult times also helps to explain how men’s absence from domestic labour is tolerated, and even encouraged by women.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Stories of the *fongo* plantain skin ‘steaks’ were told to me independently by several women in Santiago as the example *par excellence* of the desperate creative lengths to which people resorted with their food preparation in the mid-1990s. Although I was unable to find evidence in newspaper and magazine archives from the period, some residents recalled television programmes and print columns advising on the properties of *fongo* and offering recipes for *fongo* ‘steaks’. Holgado Fernández has also recorded an interview in which a recipe for ‘plantain mince-meat’ (*picadillo de plátano verde*) was given as evidence of the hardships of the early 1990s (Holgado Fernández, *¡No es fácil!*, 2000, p. 63).

⁴⁹ Eckstein, *Back from the Future*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ *Bohemia*, 18 March 1994, p. 61.

⁵¹ Pearson’s study discusses how women ‘put a premium’ on their domestic reproductive labour. Pearson, ‘Renegotiating the Reproductive Bargain’, p. 699.

The ongoing resonance that stories of Special Period domestic survival hold for women in contemporary Cuba is just one example of many to suggest that the practices and beliefs of women such as Nilda, Elisabeth and Reina retain a firm association between domestic space and feminine morality. The household is a space that is on the one hand, deeply threatened by economic crisis, but on the other hand is the location through which women can best demonstrate their strengths in overcoming adversity. The household is an especially important sphere from which women can draw status and mark identity, since in the post-Soviet era other avenues for social as well as material distinction have declined. Through the practices of running their household, and in particular by the creative improvisation entailed in practices of *inventar*, Cuban women actively invoke their gendered capacities and responsibilities not only to voice their dissatisfaction with the scarcity and shortages of post-Soviet life, but also to produce a sense of self-worth in an era where their most basic womanly capacities seem to be constantly under threat. As discussed in previous sections of this article, such an association between the household and womanly virtue is neither new nor specific to Cuba. The networks of kinship and concepts of sociality that underlie the Cuban socialist experience overlap considerably with other societies in the region with which Cubans share a long history.

Examining the resurgent significance of the household as a physical, economic and social space for Cuban women provides a very clear case for why it is impossible to reevaluate the Cuban revolution without considering the historical and regional development of cultural beliefs and practices within which the revolution has taken place. In the post-Soviet years the Cuban state has had a reduced capacity to directly influence citizens' activities, and many of the resulting social changes have actually involved the resurgence of pre-existing economic and cultural practices that had declined or disappeared during the decades of Soviet influence. A few examples of this include the resurgence of an informal economy, the importance of tourism to the national economy, the return (despite the efforts of the Cuban government) of organised prostitution, the widespread celebration of Christmas, and the enthusiastic consumption of US American popular music among young Cubans. All of these phenomena can (and should) be examined as significant social transformations in the post-Soviet era, but are all phenomena that were also well-documented aspects of Cuban society before 1959. To understand how these activities co-exist with an ongoing state commitment to socialism requires not only an examination of how the Cuban revolution has been organised at a grassroots level, but also a consideration of Cuba's longstanding connections to regional and global networks of politics, economics and culture.

In the specific example of the resurgent importance of households as a women's space, Cuban women's practices and discourses in the twenty-first

century are neither a product of ‘Soviet socialism’ nor a simple reaction to the onset of the post-Soviet era. Rather, the impact of Cuban socialism, as it has changed over time, has been negotiated and enacted within a more complex set of social, political and economic legacies. Only some of those legacies have been touched on here. My specific focus has been to bring together research on the Special Period and on gendered dimensions of households in the Caribbean and Latin American region in order to trace both economic and social influences causing a resurgence of the household as the central space of significance for Cuban women. Such a framework indicates that women’s increased concentration upon the household is *both* the result of pre-existing social orientations towards households as a womanly space *and* a response to specific politico-economic shifts. But the social formation of households as gendered institutions has also evolved through a broader historical legacy within which the Cuban revolution has taken place. Although this article cannot provide a detailed examination of Cuban women and households before the Cuban revolution, speculatively such a *longue durée* approach would include analyses of the impact of Spanish colonisation, the development of plantation economies and the subsequent development of social hierarchies of sex and race, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, an ongoing transnational relationship with Cuban communities in the United States, and a dependence upon export markets for raw commodities.

The increasing importance of the household in Cuba does not necessarily represent a reversal or erasure of the changes to women’s lives that occurred in earlier phases of the Cuban revolution. On the contrary, many of the contemporary activities and discourses that form the basis of gendered identity have been encouraged or enabled by policies directed at women since the earliest days of the revolution. Although socialist policies increased women’s participation in the workforce and secured their reproductive rights, women have also been encouraged to contribute to the revolution from within the household, by raising their children as responsible citizens and by maintaining their domestic well being as the ‘home front’. The Cuban revolution has not been effective in convincing men to take on greater responsibilities for domestic practices, with the consequence that pre-revolutionary gender ideals and gendered divisions of labour were maintained in as many ways as they were challenged by revolutionary political and economic transformations. The continuing role that women typically maintain in running domestic economies and undertaking domestic labour has been intensified by the lack of material resources and declining urban infrastructure that characterises daily life since the Special Period. At the same time, emerging sources of social status and income generation since the 1990s rely upon gendered notions of womanhood that do not include, and may be hindered

by, involvement in waged labour. The decreasing value of Soviet-era wages, an overall decline in infrastructure to support women in the formal workforce, increased possibilities of home-based income generation and the social and economic opportunities offered by emigrant remittances and transnational relationships, have converged in such a way that the household has been revived as the major basis for social and economic status among Cuban women.