

Photos from a Cuban Diary: Forty Women on Forty Years Reflections on the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign

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In 1961, the Revolutionary government in Cuba initiated a massive literacy campaign that became the vehicle for social and ethical change in the country; an initiative that affirmed the value of education, healthcare, professional development, citizenship and community. Inherent to the impact and value of the *Campaña de Alfabetización* as a social movement is the solidarity and humanity that ensued in the spirit of social justice, civic engagement and human exchange.

While many of the Revolutionary heroes have been mythologized as male, more than 50% of the 250,000 *maestros voluntarios* in the *Campaña de Alfabetización* were women. As the cultural and social mosaic of pre-revolutionary Cuba provided little opportunity for women to take on active lives beyond the expected familial role of wife/mother, the *Campaña de Alfabetización* marked a definitive change in the way the young literacy *brigadista* would begin to view her world. As women's contributions to social development are often overlooked, cultural information is historicized as these women reflect back upon their role in a collective event, their participation itself the pedagogical moment.



Enoida, Santiago de Cuba



Elsa, Ciego de Avila

“It was the first major task of the Revolution, one that invited the people to become involved, en masse, to resolve whatever challenges faced by the country. And for this reason, the *Campaña* held great value: social value, economic value, political value ... it was the formation of our consciousness.”

-- Romalinda, 71 years old, Havana

“An enormous shift occurred, as if before Christ and after Christ:
before the *Campaña de Alfabetización*, and after the *Campaña de Alfabetización*.
The thinking of the people: of parents, of children, of aunts and uncles.

Everyone changed.

Everyone left their houses, everyone became literacy teachers.
It was like an explosion: a desire to know, and to help those who did not know.”

-- Carmen, 62 years old, Santiago de Cuba



Young literacy *brigadistas* en route to the countryside, 1961¹

“Many *campesinos* had not yet received the bread of knowledge.
The young people thus journeyed into remote areas of the country
taking on the pleasure of teaching all how to read and write.

Their workbooks, their pencils, and their manuals:
these were the arms they had, without a fear of anything.”

-- Luris, 74 years old, Baracoa

”It was quite a joyful event

¹ Cited in *Mirar de los 60s*, 2004.

to watch the young people take on
a task that for many of them, became larger than life...
And so they left their homes, and their families ...”

-- *María*, 69 years old, Santa Clara



Magdalena, Viñales



Carmen, Santiago de Cuba

“To take on the challenge, to raise the cultural awareness of our people,
the *Campaña de Alfabetización* was a necessity.
Libraries were built, and classrooms in remote areas,
high in the mountainous regions.
Museums were opened, as venues to invite culture.

With an illiterate people, it is not possible to realize this type of social transformation.
Indeed, this *Campaña* was a necessity.”

-- *Involvis*, 62 years old, Baracoa



Oneida, Santiago de Cuba



Humbelina, Pinar del Rio

“This *Campaña* was such a gesture of humanity. It seems to me, it simply couldn’t have happened without the participation of women.

Those of us who were part of it, proved that together we could overcome obstacles, despite all the challenges we would undoubtedly face, socially or economically.

Yes, women ARE capable of taking on such tasks.”

-- Zeida, 65 years old, Pinar del Rio



Death to Illiteracy!
homage to Conrado Benítez García²

² Cited in Keeble, 2001, p. 17. The unexpected slaying of 18 year old *maestro voluntario* Conrado Benítez García in early January 1961 in the Escambray region consolidated the Revolutionary directive for the *Campaña*. A young black man, Benítez had joined the First Contingency of *Maestros Voluntarios* in solidarity for the 1959 race equality bill, for negroes in the previous regime had not been allowed to attend quality schools. That Benítez died in the line of duty as a *maestro voluntario* was significant, as his name was immortalized into brigades to incorporate teenage volunteers—*brigadistas*—

“An illiterate woman is chained to all of her responsibilities in the household.
 She takes care of her husband...
 she cooks, irons, and attends to the children...
 but an illiterate woman can't participate in society as a *person*,
 as a human being.

It's clear to me, that she can be taken advantage of,
 that she can't defend herself.
 Someone who is illiterate just doesn't *know*.
 And *that* is exploitation.”

-- *Humbelina*, 66 years old, Pinar del Rio

“At the time of the *Campaña de Alfabetización*
 thousands and thousands of Cubans were illiterate.
 The *Campaña* was a definitive point when everyone could better themselves.



Young literacy *brigadista* teaches a *campesina*.³

From that moment on,
 Cuban women began to envision different possibilities for their lives ...
 that they too could take on professional roles and responsibilities in their country.
 As a result, many Cuban women today have a place in society,
 outside the family home.”

-- *Mirta*, 55 years old, Ciego de Avila

into the *Campaña*; a move facilitated by the Ministry of Education closing of all urban schools so that those meeting the minimum age and grade requirement could join the literacy brigades as an exercise of citizenship building. About 90,000 young people between the ages of 11 and 19 would thus participate in the *Campaña* in 1961 as literacy *brigadistas* in *Brigada Conrado Benítez*.

³ Cited in *Mirar de los 60s*, 2004.



Lucy, Viñales



Isabel, Havana

“Throughout the *Campaña*,
women discovered they had the capacity to learn!
To build upon the knowledge they knew they had,
many traveled to Havana to continue with their studies.”

-- *Anays*, 57 years old, Baracoa

“This *Campaña* was the first significant Revolutionary event for those of my age.
Myself, I was only 13 years old.

To participate in such a massive undertaking,
well, it was a point of departure for me,
in respect to my personal independence and identity,
and the responsibilities that I took on as a young woman...”



*Young people, join the contingency of literacy workers.
The home of a peasant family who cannot read and write awaits you.
Don't let them down!*⁴

⁴ Cited in Lamas, 1981, p. 6.

“...then, at that time, to see the conditions in which other women lived, those my age or younger, already married with children, when my friends and I still enjoyed the life of a student.

Living and working with the *campesinos*, and then teaching them!
Everything about life in the countryside was so hard!
Carrying water up from the rivers, cooking over open fires,
we learned so much from these women.”

-- *Rosa*, 54 years old, Havana



Moraina, Ciego de Avila



Melva, Camagüey

“For Cuban women, this *Campaña de Alfabetización* was one grand life lesson.
For me, as a young woman I became more independent.
Becoming a *brigadista*, this was the moment I took charge of my life.
I became outgoing . . . I became conscientious.
I wasn’t going to be tied down again!”

-- *Dora*, 57 years old, Santiago de Cuba



Literacy *brigadistas* in *Brigada Conrado Benítez*⁵

“One young woman I met, a mother of two children,
Her husband wouldn’t allow her to leave the house to come to class!
This was an example of *machismo* at that time!
I gave her lessons in her home, so that she, too, could learn like the others.”

-- *Romalinda*, 71 years old, Havana

“I’d say that this *Campaña* had an enormous impact on women in Cuba,
because they could then take on the same activities as men.

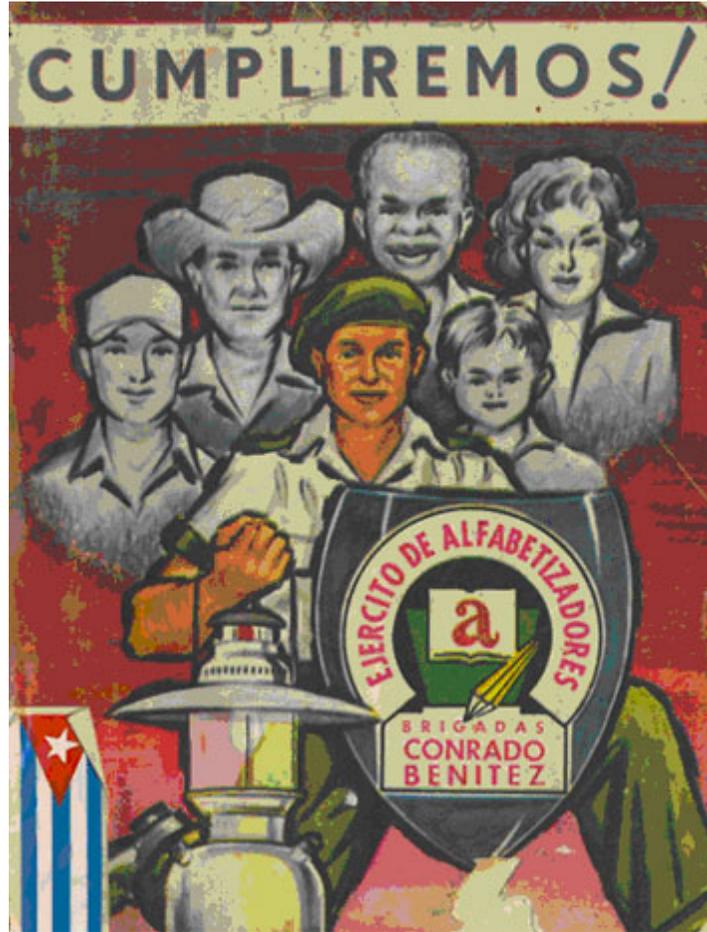
Before, she only knew how to take care of the household, the family.
Before, women were--*what is that word?*--ah, yes! *subordinate* to men!
Afterwards, she could participate more fully in society.”

-- *Eneida*, 62 years old, Santiago de Cuba

“The previous government was not interested in teaching
the illiterate how to read and write.
Those who could not read and write, well, they could be more easily exploited!”

⁵ Cited in *Mirar de los 60s*, 2004.

-- *Humbelina*, 66 years old, Pinar del Rio



*Let's work Together!*⁶

“The significance for women?! Now that’s a commentary!
Before the Revolution, all women were masters of the household –
which meant they were not allowed to go to school and study.
Before, very few women went to school.”

-- *Eneida*, 62 years old, Santiago de Cuba

⁶ Cover image, *¡Cumpliremos!*, 1961. Reading material for literacy *brigadistas*.



Rosa, Havana



Ovidia, Camagüey

“Illiteracy can destroy a people,
For without the power of knowing, it isn’t possible to realize anything.

With this *Campaña*, it was more than learning how to read and write.
Those from the city came to know those who lived in the countryside.

Deep in the collective, in the communities,
Afterwards the country was like one big family.”

-- *Elsa*, 61 years old, Ciego de Avila



Bienvenida, Ciego de Avila

“The *Campaña* left a definite mark on my life...it changed everything for me.

I had thought of studying medicine,
But when I first went into the countryside and saw the need for teachers,
I changed my professional direction at once, and dedicated myself to teaching.
All of this was confirmed in my personhood
after the assassination of the young *brigadista*, Manuel Ascunce Domenech.⁷

This was a terrible moment for the other literacy *brigadistas*,
Most of those in my group were young women.
We met together at one of the houses
to watch the funeral on television, and to listen to the words of the President.

Then, at the end of the funeral procession
we got together once again to make a pact amongst ourselves:
to dedicate our lives to the educating of our people.”

-- *Nuria*, 57 years old, Santiago de Cuba
“As a Revolutionary event, the *Campaña de Alfabetización*
sparked the consciousness in the Cuban people to then help others.
Those who became literate went on to become teachers themselves,
or doctors, qualified technicians, skilled workers.

Certainly, as we became educated as a people,
we came to realize what we had *achieved* as a people.”

-- *Alida*, 57 years old, Ciego de Avila

⁷ Throughout 1961 counterrevolutionary attacks against the efforts of the *maestros voluntarios* would continue, including the murder of 16-year-old *brigadista* Manuel Ascunce Domenech and his *campesino* ‘student’, Pedro Lantigua, on November 26—a month before the end of the *Campaña*—not far from where Benítez had been killed.



Nuria, Santiago de Cuba

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