

## CUBA'S FIRST LADY

Karen Lee Wald, April 26, 2018

Amidst the avalanche of false news, disparaging reports and other imperialist media spin about Cuba's new president is the misleading story popping up all over the place that Lis Cuesta, the wife of Cuba's new president, Miguel Diaz-Canel, is Cuba's first acknowledged "First Lady".

I would like to unspin that.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION HAS ALWAYS HAD A FIRST LADY. But in the Cuban case, it wasn't based on who she was married to, it was based on what she herself did.

As Cuban journalist Arleen Rodriguez Derivet pointed out, there is no legal definition of "first lady" in Cuba, and no budget for an office and staff for someone to play this role.

But actually, we could say that Cuba had several "first ladies".

The best known among these — well-known to anyone who visited, interacted with or studied the Cuban Revolution — was VILMA ESPIN.

She was a leader of the clandestine movement against the Batista dictatorship of the 1950s. She was among the first and foremost (but definitely not the only) of the woman guerrilla fighters in the Sierra Maestra mountains. She was the founder and lifelong leader of the Cuban Women's Federation whose members counted almost every Cuban woman over 14 years of age, and which achieved advances (in terms of education, jobs, equal pay for equal work, political leadership, women's health and control over their own bodies) that still make Cuban women the envy of most others in the world.

She was also married to Raul Castro, another 26th of July Movement guerrilla leader in the mountains, and incidentally Fidel's brother (although that is not why he became president after Fidel's illness forced him to pass the mantle on to the second in charge.)

In Cuba, it is not who you are related to but what you have done in your life that determines your status.

Vilma Espin's marriage to Raul and relation to Fidel is never what made her "First Lady". She was the foremost woman in a land of many exceptional women because of all her achievements.

She was actually one of a number of outstanding historical women, as well as women who fought in the guerrilla movement (some of whom, like Tete Puebla,



rose to the rank of General!); but the most significant other “first ladies” died before her. [*photo: Vilma Espin Left, Celia Sanchez Center, Haydee Santamaria Right*]

Haydee Santamaria and Melba Hernandez both participated in the rebel

attacks against the Batista dictatorship's Moncada Fortress, the 26th of July (1953) event that touched off the rebellion that finally unseated Batista and ended hundreds of years of colonialism and neocolonialism in Cuba.

After 1959, Haydee founded and, until her untimely death, led Cuba's (and arguably Latin America's) foremost cultural center, Casa de las Americas. Haydee was First Lady of Culture.

Melba Hernandez, an attorney like Fidel, was given many important national and international responsibilities throughout her life, one of which was leading the Organization of Solidarity of the People's of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL), the tri-continental organization conceived by Che when most colonized countries were still fighting for their liberation. Melba was First Lady of Solidarity.

Celia Sanchez Manduley was perhaps the first “First Lady” -- the one who helped prepare all the post-Moncada conditions for the exiled rebels led by Fidel to return to Cuba, take up arms in the Sierra Maestra mountains (in coordination with the underground movement in the cities and the countryside), the person without whom (as Fidel said repeatedly ) the revolution would have been impossible. After the 1959 victory she was the first “go to” person for an enormous range of tasks that needed to be done. And not because she was “married to” Fidel, but because she, like Vilma, Melba and Haydee, played a vital role in her own right.

So don't get dragged into letting the US and western Europe's view of the world define the roles that women play. Lis Cuesta is not Cuba's FIRST "first lady".

And her achievements have been and will be her own.

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