

Transnationalism and Feminist Activism in Cuba: The Case of Magín

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The emergence of the feminist network Magín in Cuba in the mid-1990s challenged the monopoly of the official women's organization over issues related to women. Magín came into being as a result of encounters with feminists in international meetings, and it grew and developed through transnational support. Yet the organization did not extend beyond a small group of professional women and eventually the state closed it down. This article probes the question of why autonomous feminist organizing did not succeed in Cuba, particularly given a window of opportunity presented by the collapse of the Soviet Union. I suggest that the nature of transnational networks, combined with the political hegemony of the Cuban government, limited the scope of Magín as an independent women's organization. Although transnational advocacy networks helped Cuban feminists to create new spaces for dialogue, they also encouraged tendencies of specialization and professionalization that led the women to forgo the possibility of building a broad-based autonomous movement. An analysis of feminist networks in Cuba can contribute to our knowledge of the pitfalls and promises of transnationalism, particularly in non-liberal democratic contexts.

Since the 1960s, the state-sanctioned women's bureau, the Federation of Cuban Women (*Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, FMC), has been the primary advocate for women's interests in Cuba. In the mid-1990s, however, a small network of women known as *Magín* (Image) began to

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engage in feminist activism and advocacy outside the direct control of the FMC. As Cuban society underwent structural changes resulting from the country's increasing integration into a market economy, many women found the FMC unequipped to deal with new problems that were emerging, such as the revival of sex tourism, a growing gender gap, and the circulation of negative images of women in the public sphere. At the same time, Cuba's modest integration into a global economy produced greater contact between Cuban women and the outside world, including feminist groups in Latin America and the Caribbean. Magín came into being as a result of encounters with feminists in international meetings, and it grew and developed through participation in transnational activist circles. Yet the organization did not extend beyond a small group of professional women and eventually the state closed it down. Why was autonomous feminist organizing unable to succeed in Cuba?

Transnational networks, combined with the political hegemony of the Cuban government, explain the limited nature of feminist organizing in Cuba. State monitoring and harassment of independent organizations such as Magín, especially after a wave of crackdowns in 1996, restricted the activities of these groups. But transnationalism was also an important factor in the specific failures of Magín to build an autonomous feminist movement. I suggest that the professional nature of international exchanges, and the pressures to seek funding from advocacy-oriented international foundations, encouraged the women of Magín to form a network of relatively privileged women in the media, rather than to build a broader feminist movement.

Specifying the impact of transnationalism on independent women's organizing in Cuba can contribute to our understanding of the role of transnational networks in contexts of modest liberalization. While most scholars have tended to extol the virtues of transnationalism, others, mainly those working in transitional contexts such as Brazil, Chile, or Russia, have noted the conflicts and divisions that advocacy-oriented networks may introduce into feminist movements. But in contexts of modest liberalization, such as Cuba, China, and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, nascent feminist activism has been thwarted, and not just divided, by the dominance of advocacy networks. While many scholars have encouraged transnational networking in order to promote change in Cuba, the case study of an independent feminist network in Cuba shows that transnationalism may in fact have the reverse effect.

In the next section, I present a literature review, followed by a brief historical discussion of gender relations in postrevolutionary Cuba. I then

proceed to analyze the evolution of Magín, demonstrating how transnational networks created new avenues for feminist activism while simultaneously closing off others. In the final section, I describe the confrontation of the activists of Magín with the Cuban state and the political circumstances that surrounded the closure of the organization. I conclude with a series of comparative reflections on transnational networks and feminism.

FEMINISM, THE STATE, AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

The study of transnational feminist networks in Cuba is illuminated by the literature on state feminism, the developing scholarship on transnational feminist networks, and work on the domestic impact of transnational networks. This literature has focused mainly on Europe and North America, or on non-Western countries that are undergoing transitions to liberal democracy, such as Chile, Venezuela, and Brazil. In this section, I draw on concepts from social movement theory, such as a political opportunity structure and framing, to develop an approach that can help explain the ambivalent effects of transnationalism on women's organizing in late socialist countries like Cuba that have not undergone transitions.

Scholars have tended to see feminist movements and the state as fluid entities engaged in dynamic and complex interaction with each other (Banaszak, Beckwith, and Rucht 2003; Stetson and Mazur 1995; Waylen 1998). Lee Ann Banaszak, Karen Beckwith, and Dieter Rucht (2003) argue that reconfigurations from earlier welfarist systems to neoliberal free-market models have created opportunities for women's issues to permeate a range of spheres, while also leading to the fragmentation of the women's movement. Other studies extend these perspectives beyond the context of North America and Europe, showing that the entry of women into state institutions in countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Chile took place alongside processes of democratization (Alvarez 1990; Baldez 2001; Friedman 2000; Waylen 1997). As in the North American and European contexts, this contradictory process of absorption has expanded the voice and the public legitimacy of feminist concerns, as it has made feminists increasingly vulnerable to state intervention (Alvarez 1998, 304). As Elisabeth Friedman (2000, 51) has argued, the theorizing of state feminism in developing countries requires a reevaluation of the nature of the state, which is more susceptible to partisan politics and is more constrained in policymaking.

The work on developing countries has been useful in broadening the scope of the literature on women's movements and the state, but there has been little written on socialist and revolutionary regimes that have not undergone a transition. Many of these postrevolutionary regimes have a long history of state women's agencies, which sought to promote women's interests and rights within a broader project of state building (Brand 1998; Chun 2001; Howell 1998; Molyneux 2000). This monopoly of the state over women's issues may explain why, even with modest transitions and reconfigurations of the state in Cuba and China, autonomous feminist movements have not emerged in these countries. Scholars claim that, in Cuba specifically, there is no space for feminist movements that exist independently of the state (Shayne 2004; Smith and Padula 1996). Given Valentine Moghadam's (1996, 114) definition of feminism as a shared notion that "women constitute a special category of people with certain traits and experiences in common," and an agreement that women have a disadvantaged position in a male-dominated world, it does seem that there are no feminist movements to speak of in Cuba.

Although scholars are right to point out the absence of a broad-based feminist movement and the general hostility of the Cuban state to autonomous organizing, I argue that we need to go beyond the dichotomous classifications of "state feminism" and "autonomous organizing" as defined by theorists working mainly in liberal democratic contexts. More helpful may be Vicky Randall's (1998, 200) graduated distinctions of "independent movements," which set their own goals, "associational linkages," where autonomous groups choose to work with other political organizations, and "directed mobilization," where authority and initiative come from outside. While the FMC has tended to function under a regime of directed mobilization, the activists of *Magín* created a space for autonomous feminist organizing within Cuban society by drawing on their institutional contacts and working in alliance with official channels and institutions. Randall's distinctions are helpful in the context of Cuba because they capture forms of social activism that may be subsumed or ignored under binary categories.

Moreover, I argue that contrary to Julie Shayne's (2004, 155) claim that "the Cuban state is the antithesis of a political opportunity," the state did undergo shifts in the early nineties that made some new opportunities available for feminist activity. Scholars within Cuba have pointed to what they call a "redimensionalizing" of the state-society relationship in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereby the state

withdrew from various channels of civil society (Dilla 1999; Luis Acanda 1997). The opening up of Cuba to a global market economy, the scarcity of resources that reduced the economic power held by state institutions, and the nature of the economic crisis forced the Cuban government to concede space to other actors. During this period, the government was more tolerant toward opposition groups such as the Cuban Council, a coalition that would come to unite a range of different organizations by the following year. Research groups, such as the Center for the Study of America (*Centro de Estudios sobre América*, CEA) and the Center Félix Varela, and journals, such as *Temas* (Themes), began to gain a degree of independence from the state.

Internal changes and growing transnational connections between Cuba and the outside world provided the conditions for building the feminist network Magín. During the early nineties, the Cuban government pursued a policy of international diplomacy in an effort to replace the loss of its major allies and to counter U.S. regional influence (Domínguez 2000). As the Cuban government made strategic international alliances, activists within Cuba also utilized the opportunities for international contact to establish channels of communication. These networks are akin to what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998, 2) describe as “transnational advocacy networks,” which they define as “those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services.” Feminist networks are one kind of advocacy network. Following Moghadam (1996, 114), I define feminist transnational networks as forms of organization that seek to advance the status of women through access to resources, campaigns for gender equality, and actions for the self-empowerment of women “within national boundaries, but through transnational forms of organizing and mobilizing.” Feminist transnational networks generally focus on particular issues, which link activists to policymakers and foundations that share an interest in the issue (Smith, Pagnucco, and Chatfield 1997).

The literature on advocacy networks has tended to focus on the benefits of transnationalism for social movements. According to Keck and Sikkink (1998, 25), networks can raise the profile of particular issues in a domestic context, provoking “media attention, debates, hearings, and meetings on issues that previously had not been a matter of public debate,” and they can help influence the state to accept international declarations and change domestic policy positions. Advocacy networks enhance the resources available to domestic actors (Keck and Sikkink

1998, x); they provide allies for political actors outside their own states (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 217); they produce new kinds of identities, rights, and citizenship dynamics (Vargas 2003, 195); and their nonhierarchical structure may lead to “innovative ways of sharing responsibility” (Moghadam 1996, 106). The Cuban case bears out these findings to some extent, in that networks such as Magín did benefit from transnationalism through increased resources and contacts that allowed them to organize a collective outside the auspices of the state.

However, the inability of the women to build a broader feminist movement was also linked to certain limitations introduced by transnationalism. Friedman (1999) uses the concept of “transnationalism reversed” to show how transnationalism may be detrimental, as well as productive, for women’s movements. Distinguishing between the solidarity focus of grassroots feminist exchanges and the advocacy orientation of large-scale summits, Sonia Alvarez (2000, 51) argues that these tendencies may clash, as demands that have policy resonance may not coincide with principled claims to change gender power relations. Funding agencies tend to favor larger, more well established feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) over smaller ones; funding creates internal divisions within feminist groups; and strategic planning meetings may exclude certain sectors of women from participation (Alvarez 2000; Baldez 2002; Sperling, Ferree, and Risman 2001). These frameworks can be helpful in understanding the Cuban context. Unlike in Brazil, Venezuela, or Russia, however, the distinction between solidarity and advocacy networks in Cuba was not marked, given the small number of international NGOs. The underdeveloped nature of feminist activism also meant that the potential for division was not present to the degree that it was in countries with a history of independent feminist organizing.

To devise a more specific analysis of the ambiguous effects of transnationalism in Cuba, I follow the previous scholars in drawing on concepts derived from social movement theory. The decision by Cuban women to focus on the issue of the media, rather than on broader questions of gender and power, was partly an issue of “framing,” as activists sought common denominators for cross-national alliances. Framing processes are the psychological factors of social construction and collective attribution that account for collective action (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, 5; Snow et al. 1986). The women who started Magín sought to define themselves in ways that would resonate with transnational networks by selecting issues that were hegemonic in international policy circles. Social movement theory has developed the concept of political

opportunity structure to describe how a broader political system can structure the opportunities for collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). In Cuba, the realities of international conferences and networking represented an opening in the international political opportunity structure that made available new ideas and resources for organizing. But at the same time, the elitist nature of international events, and the search for “outside” contacts, led to the growing professionalization of an emerging feminism. The priorities and funding constraints of international bodies posed risks to the nascent movement by narrowing the broad range of issues that activists from Magín had originally sought to address. Unlike in transitional countries, where transnationalism engaged diverse currents of competing feminisms, in Cuba, where opportunities for autonomous organizing were already limited, advocacy-oriented networks further diverted the attention of activists away from broader goals of movement building.

GENDER RELATIONS AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN CUBA

The development of feminist transnational networks in Cuba is related to the crisis of the Cuban economy in the early nineties. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the loss of billions of dollars of Soviet aid and export income caused a severe economic crisis in Cuba. In an attempt to rebuild the Cuban economy, the government pursued policies promoting tourism as the major source of foreign exchange income, the introduction of mixed enterprises with foreign firms, recuperation of traditional export markets, and legalization of the dollar (Gonzalez Gutierrez 1997, 8; Valdés 1997, 103). In October 2004, Fidel Castro once again banned the circulation of the U.S. dollar. The dollar has been replaced by the convertible peso, which is equivalent to the dollar but has no value outside of Cuba. Despite the continued presence of the state as a redistributive agent in Cuban society, however, economic adjustment has brought about marked inequalities, a reduction in social welfare, and increased unemployment.

What have been the specific gendered effects of the economic reforms in Cuba? Carollee Bengelsdorf (1997) identifies an increased weight on women to shoulder the burden for survival given their continuing responsibility for the household, women’s relegation to an emerging informal and illegal sector, and a rise in attitudes of machismo. Prostitution, known in Cuba as *jinetismo*, has increased, especially

among black and mulatta women. Conservative estimates give a figure of around six thousand *jineteras* in Havana in 1995 (Azicri 2000, 78). Given the need to market Cuba to a global clientele to attract tourism and investment, images of black and mulatta women as erotic, sexualized, and available have become more common, especially in tourism brochures and magazines such as *Sol y Son* (Sun and Son) (Fernandez 1999; Guillard 2003).

It is not within the scope of this article to give a complete history of gender policy in Cuba, but I provide some background here in order to locate the topic of gender relations in the contemporary period. The Cuban revolutionary leadership that came to power after the revolution of 1959 maintained that liberation from sexual oppression was to be found through women's participation in the workplace (Bengelsdorf 1997, 238). The Cuban state set up a mass women's organization, the FMC, to educate women and to eliminate practices such as prostitution, but it proceeded on the basis that the revolution had ended patriarchy and that women were free to embrace their new role in society (Smith and Padula 1996, 39). However, by the early seventies, there was some recognition within official sectors of continuing sexual discrimination, and a bill known as the Family Code was passed in 1975. The Family Code sought to legislate in favor of joint responsibilities of husband and wife for household maintenance and child care (Smith and Padula 1996, 154). For the first three decades of the Cuban revolution, some fairly dramatic changes occurred in the lives of women, including an increase in female employment and education, declining rates of poverty, and a reduction in other social problems, such as prostitution and illiteracy. These changes in Cuban society continue to structure the entry of Cuba into a global market system, reducing the severity of social inequalities and cushioning women from drastic change. As Max Azicri (2000, 82) reports, although health care in Cuba declined and social indicators dropped relative to other countries, life expectancy for Cuban women was still higher than for women in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. These relative successes have had ambivalent effects on women's ability to organize, both by reducing their incentive to mobilize as feminists (Shayne 2004, 156) and by providing the social resources for a vibrant feminist movement (Kampwirth 2004, 193). The emergence of Magín is a testament to the contradictory legacy of the Cuban revolution for feminist organizing.

In the following section, I analyze the emergence of the network of women communications professionals, Magín, active from 1994 to 1996. My analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba, interviews with

former activists of Magín, and a review of Magín documents. During two lengthy trips to Cuba in 2001 and 2002, I got to know the women of Magín, I interviewed them and had numerous informal conversations with them, and I collected documents and other data. During a trip in March 2004, I carried out further interviews with some of the women. In April 2005, I did follow-up interviews by telephone and I commissioned a research assistant in Cuba to carry out follow-up interviews.

The Development of Magín as a Transnational Feminist Network

As a network of professional women active in issues of media and communications, Magín gained impetus from the growth in transnational organizing, conferences, and networking that began in the 1980s. Representatives from feminist and women's groups across Latin America met in various regional meetings or "*encuentros*" (Alvarez et al. 2002; Sternbach et al. 1992). International public events—such as the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing and an alternative NGO forum held in the smaller town of Huairou, China, in 1995 and later the World Social Forum in 2001, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil—provided the catalyst for new actions and perspectives on gender and feminism in Cuba. FMC representatives began attending the regional meetings in 1987, but it was not until the 1999 meeting in Juan Dolio that non-FMC activists attended from Cuba. Only official representatives from the FMC and the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) were sent to the Beijing conference. The FMC gained most from international funding agencies by converting itself into an NGO for the purposes of attracting funding from the United Nations (Craske 1999, 147), but other women had a chance to read the documents and participate in the offshoot encounters produced by broader meetings.

One of the features of transnational organizing has been the formation of issue networks. In 1993, the Iberoamerican Women and Communications Network formed and held its first conference in Havana. The conference was attended by a group of female communication professionals, who heard topics of gender being discussed for the first time. One of the women who had attended recalled, "We heard them speak of 'gender,' analyzing 'from the perspective of gender.' We didn't know how to talk or what to say. . . . We realized that we had to bring ourselves up to date" (cited in López Vigil 1998, 40). The idea that gender differences are socially constructed, and not innate properties deriving from

biology, was a radical insight for the communications professionals present at the forum. The women decided that they needed to form a Cuban organization distinct from the FMC to address issues related to gender and communications. In 1994, the group *Magín*, meaning “image,” “mind,” or “imagination,” was formed among Cuban communications workers. The large number of women working in the Cuban communications sector gave impetus to the project. Women comprise 54% of television technicians, 40% of radio workers, 45% of those who work in the Agency of National Information, and 50% of communications students in Cuba (López Vigil 1998, 41).

The women of *Magín*, who were baptized “*magineras*” by Brazilian feminist Cristina Cavalcanti, sought to establish themselves as an official organization. They formed an organizing committee that consisted of 15 communications professionals working in different fields. The newly constituted organization applied to the Cuban state for NGO status but did not receive it. Nevertheless, *Magín* was supported by the FMC because, as Shayne (2004, 147) notes, the women initially distanced themselves from feminism. The FMC had traditionally seen itself as a feminine, not feminist, organization. Given the stigma of feminism in Cuban society, the *magineras* had to find alternative ways of “framing” their project. The women made practical use of the theoretical frameworks offered by international actors, talking about gender rather than directly about feminism. According to *Magín* member Norma Guillard: “Gender, as a category of analysis and transformation was more easily assimilated. It didn’t carry a negative connotation as a word.”¹ In later years, it also became beneficial for women to use the term “gender” in funding proposals to international organizations, given its currency in those circles. The use of this term gender by the *magineras*, however, was similar to its use by rural Brazilian feminists who, as Millie Thayer (2001, 31) describes, took what was an academic concept in the North and “linked it to activism, by stressing the way gender relations structure all of social life.” The women did not intend for gender to remain a purely analytical category. According to Guillard, the task of *Magín* was to introduce the concept of gender and connect it to a concept of feminism that could be associated with a project for liberation. By framing their project in terms of gender and gradually reintroducing the idea of feminism, the *magineras* avoided alienating people from their project and were able to win support from various sectors.

1. Norma Guillard, interview, August 2002, Havana, Cuba.

Magín activists sought to provide alternative channels for discussion about issues of gender. One of their acts was to institute a Program of Development, whereby they set their goals and projects for the year. Guillard, who kept the records of the organization, notes that Magín had about 385 members in Havana.² In addition, there were smaller groups of about 20 members each in the provinces of Pinar del Rio and Santiago de Cuba. Each time Magín held workshops or forums, it would attract between 35 and 60 people who were generally, but not always, communications professionals.³ Since Magín had few resources for publicity, it had to rely mainly on unofficial networks of friends, family, and colleagues to pass on information. Magín met on alternate Fridays to debate various themes, including sexism in language, racial imagery in the media, women and change, and film portraits and female subjectivity (Rodríguez Calderón 1996, 6–7). It released Number 0 of a journal *Magín*, which, given the costs of producing journals, was the only edition the members ever produced. They put together several pamphlets dealing with such themes as the Beijing conference and post-Beijing strategies (Rodríguez Calderón 1996, 10). The activists of Magín also organized workshops dealing with broader, more politically provocative themes, such as “Jineterismo and prostitution,” and “What’s happening with civil society in Cuba?” (Lee 1995). By means of their meetings, workshops, and publications, supported in part by donations from international organizations, the women of Magín were able to reach a limited but important constituency within Cuba.

Many of the founding members of Magín became key players in regional movements and networks to promote gender awareness in the media and challenge negative stereotypes and images of women. Two leaders of Magín traveled to Brazil in 1994: Norma Guillard participated in a forum of publicists in Rio de Janeiro and Niurka Pérez Rojáz presented a paper at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (“Nuevas Amistades” 1995). Magín maintained close contact with networks of communications professionals in other countries, such as *Primera Plana*, a “Network of Journalists of the Dominican Republic with the Perspective of Gender,” and CIMAC, “Communication and Information of the Women of Mexico.” In 1995, Magín brought together women from Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Cuba for a conference on women in communications. The conference partici-

2. Norma Guillard, telephone interview, April 2005.

3. Norma Guillard, telephone interview, April 2005.

pants decided to create a network for the circulation of information, such as articles, videos, and graphics by and about women (Lee 1995). It was decided that the network, called *Imagen* (Gender-Focused Images and Information) would be based in Havana with a redistribution point in Brazil.

Transnationalism clearly benefited Cuban feminists who worked in the independent organization Magín, providing them with new theoretical perspectives and financial resources, as well as boosting their legitimacy within Cuba. Solidarity networks represented by grassroots organizations, such as the New York based–human rights group Madre and the Washington, DC–based women’s group Sister and Sister, would pay visits to Magín, bringing them medicines, paper, food, and other resources for their workshops.⁴ There was also a more official international presence with such groups as the United Nation’s Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and the relief agency OXFAM. These official organizations offered Magín more financial resources and a larger international profile. For instance, Magín received some startup funds from OXFAM, which allowed them to purchase their first photocopier (Lee 1995). Most of Magín’s meetings were held in the Havana offices of the Cuban Association of the United Nations (ACNU). Official advocacy networks provided Magín with infrastructure and financial support, but they also introduced an advocacy logic that began to dominate emerging feminisms and distract women from creating a broader activist work.

The decision of the Magín women to work within the media came partly from their own experiences working in this profession. Given the funding available from international organizations for issues such as the media (Thayer 2000, 212), feminists also chose to focus on these issues in order to make themselves attractive to donors. The women of Magín began with a more expansive notion of the media than that proposed by international organizations. An anonymous member, interviewed by María López-Vigil (1998, 41), claims that “in creating Magín we decided to begin through the media, but starting from a very broad concept of ‘media.’ We didn’t want only journalists, radio broadcasters, publicists. . . . We also began to bring in teachers. Who’s a better multiplier of messages than them? And family doctors, who also multiply messages.

4. Norma Guillard, telephone interview, April 2005; Georgina Herrera, interview with Norma Guillard, April 2005, Havana, Cuba.

And popular power representatives and academics and researchers.” This broad concept of the media was always strong within Magín, but through their engagement with official international donors, a notion of media as “products” for consumption began to gain currency in the organization. Mirta Rodríguez Calderón (1996, 7) reports that in 1995, Magín received financing from the OXFAM Regional Office of the Caribbean in order to begin a training program for the creation of communicative products with a gender focus. The women of Magín adopted the concept of “communicative products” as a professional tool. As Guillard told me in 2005, “By communicative products, we mean that if you work in radio, musical programs, if you write novels or work in television, you should work with the perspective of gender. . . . When you create your product, it should be permeated with a gender focus.”⁵ The market-oriented focus on media as communicative products for consumption narrowed the strategy of the women from building a broader movement involving teachers, doctors, and all those involved with education and communication to creating a professional tool for workers in the mass media.

The turn inward to questions of self-cultivation and self-esteem in Magín can also be attributed to the influence of transnational organizations. This turn was partly a reaction to the exclusive focus by the FMC on gender equality as legal and economic equality. Individual identity and subjectivity had been submerged by a focus on the collective over many years. Also, as Thayer (2000, 212) argues in the case of Brazil, the turn inward by the women of Magín took place at a point when the socialist state was beginning to open up; although women could still not assert themselves publicly and officially, they could assert ownership of their own selves. The turn to the self was a tendency in Cuban society before international agencies arrived, but these agencies played an important role in shaping and promoting this particular orientation. In 1993, María Ester Mogollón, a specialist from a Peruvian NGO known as Centro “Flora Tristan,” carried out a training course in Cuba on “Self-Esteem and Feminism” for many of the women who were to form Magín. These kinds of courses by foreign specialists influenced Magín activists, who themselves conducted more than 50 workshops on “Individual Growth” (Acosta de Armas and Narváez 1996, 14). In the workshops, one of the primary guides used was a manual designed by UNICEF, UNIFEM, and the Panamerican Health Organization/World Health Organization (OPS/OMS), known as “Fostering Our Self-Esteem.” According to Leticia

5. Norma Guillard, telephone interview, April 2005.

Artiles (1996, 49), the women would discuss the following questions from the manual: "What is self-esteem? What is the purpose of self-esteem? How can self-esteem be used to confront the crisis?" Given the extraordinary conditions of hardship facing Cuban women at this time, these workshops functioned as support groups and spaces for catharsis. But by focusing on issues of self-esteem, foreign manuals and specialists encouraged women to devise individual solutions for confronting the crisis, rather than more collective solutions.

The need to appeal to transnational advocacy NGOs for funding encouraged a greater professionalization of feminist activism within Magín. In their engagement with international agencies, local women's groups have had to make themselves visible, given the competition with other organizations for funding and resources (Thayer 2001, 20). Among the women of Magín, this usually meant emphasizing their professional qualifications. In a form letter sent to various international organizations by members of Magín asking for funding to attend the Beijing conference, the women define themselves as "highly trained professionals" and describe themselves as "highly qualified," emphasizing their influence within the media in Cuban society (Magín's Managing Committee 1995). The letter requests personal sponsorship for individual women, whose professions are brought to the forefront: "a sociologist," "a prestigious director of TV serials," and "a journalist" (Magín's Managing Committee 1995). In the end, none of the women from Magín received international funding to go to Beijing, and Cuban representation consisted solely of delegates from the FMC and the Artist's Union, UNEAC. Professionalization of the organization was also apparent in the training workshops that were organized for media workers. Alvarez (1999, 195) points to "training in gender perspectives" in other contexts, such as Chile and Colombia; she argues that this growing bias in favor of technical-professional endeavors has gradually reduced the mobilizational component of women's groups. Similarly, while the women of Magín originally sought to link gender analysis to a broader liberatory project, their work increasingly came to be seen in terms of "gender-sensitivity," as a skill that needed to be taught by specialists.

Following international trends, women also sought to gain entry into state institutions and to "penetrate" official sites. The Magín journal reproduced a strategy document from the regional preparatory meeting for the Beijing women's conference held in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in September 1994. The document ("Cartas de Triunfo" 1995) focuses on the participation of women in political power as an important objective,

while recognizing that “the process of women’s participation in political power has only just begun.” The women considered these strategies an important part of their work and used their international contacts to penetrate state media organizations, including such traditionally patriarchal and conservative institutions as the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (*Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión*, ICRT). Members of Magín worked closely with state institutions for gender reforms. A bulletin to the Magín committee reports that the Vice-President of the ICRT commissioned a study on representation of women in the media (“Seis meses que se han hecho sentir” 1995). It states that the presence of the vice president at the Beijing women’s conference was one factor inducing this study; another factor was the influence of Orietta Cordeiro, a professional working in the ICRT and a member of the Magín committee who was involved in their program for the “Creation of Communication Products with a Gender Perspective.” The incorporation of feminists into state institutions gave them a degree of control over such aspects as the representation of women in tourism and gender-specific programming.

The Bureaucratic Offensive of 1996 and the Closure of Magín

Despite the close “associational linkages” between Magín and state institutions, there were differences between Magín and the official women’s organization, particularly over questions of jineterismo and sex work. The FMC had consistently upheld the official position of jineterismo as immoral, and they participated in government offensives to “clean it up” (Azicri 2000; Sawyer 2000). Coco Fusco (1998, 161) cites FMC leader Vilma Espina denouncing jineteras as “decadent trash whose parents had lost control of them.” The women of Magín criticized the moral conservatism of the FMC. In an interview with Pedro Pérez Sarduy, Magín member and poet Georgina Herrera (2000, 123) claimed that “the FMC has a completely bourgeois concept of moral values.” By contrast, the *magineras* defended the rights of women to engage in jineterismo, as long as they retain their dignity and self respect: “we say that the women who go into jineterismo must hold themselves in very high esteem” (Herrera 2000, 123). These differences over the question of jineterismo were related to broader differences between the groups in conceptions of morality and women’s sexuality.

The independent stance that the *magineras* sought to take on various issues was a threat to the state, but the closure of Magín was more closely

linked to what Haroldo Dilla (2005, 36) has called the “bureaucratic offensive” in 1996–97. This offensive was spurred by a range of factors, including the limited economic recovery of the country, which put the Cuban state in a better position to reassume control over the provision of services; its reestablishment of trade links with a range of countries, which reduced the urgency for securing Western investments; internal adjustments resulting from the Fifth Party Congress of 1997; and the tightening of the U.S. embargo, which increased the defensiveness of the political leadership (Dilla 2005; Mesa-Lago 2003). The offensive included a crackdown on dissident organizations and independent groups. In February 1996, the Cuban government arrested more than a dozen of the leaders of the Cuban Council. On March 23, 1996, Raul Castro gave a speech denouncing the activities of Cuban NGOs, independent organizations, and research groups, especially those that had relationships with foreign NGOs. This speech preempted the attacks that were to be launched against several groups, including the research group CEA and Magín.

In September 1996, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba (*Partido Comunista de Cuba*, PCC) called a meeting of its executive committee and the steering committee of Magín to dissolve the organization (López Vigil 1998, 42). According to one Magín member present at the meeting, the political leaders said that the women’s projects were valued, but the leaders emphasized that many people were being seduced by the enemy with scholarships and money, and that 70% of independent organizations were subversive in some way because foreign money was always given in exchange for political loyalties (cited in López Vigil 1998, 43). The leaders also claimed that Magín was duplicating the Cuban Journalists Union (*Unión de Periodistas de Cuba*, UPEC), the Cuban Association of Publicists and Advertisers (*Asociación de Publicistas y Propagandistas de Cuba*, APPC), and the FMC (López Vigil 1998, 43); such duplication of an existing organization is illegal in Cuba. The women insisted that with Magín, they were not duplicating existing organizations: “Magín’s specific purpose was to change the image of women in the media by introducing the concept of gender, and by means of self-esteem workshops—things that nobody else was doing. They [the party leadership] didn’t accept that argument” (cited in López Vigil 1998, 43). The women also suspected that behind the arguments about duplicating organizations lay a deeper fear about women’s potential for autonomy: “In Cuba, there’s a real fear about duplicating organizations, but there’s an even greater fear of women organizing independently” (ibid.). The party leaders concluded that an autonomous organization of women

presented a risk of division to Cuban society and that in order to maintain national unity they would have to disband it. As one member interviewed by López Vigil (*ibid.*) stated: “It was clear that behind all the arguments was a basically machista line of thinking: ‘you, naïve little ladies, can be easily seduced by the enemy’s bait, unaware that they want to buy you off with money, with different ideas, and with individualism. We, big strong men, understand how politics works, and must save you from temptation.’” Claims of a threat to national unity were clearly unjustified, but the women accepted the decisions because they knew there were no other options if they did not want to be considered dissidents and have their professional lives in Cuba curtailed. The cordial nature of the meeting was partly due to the status of several prominent Magín members who were also PCC members, which may have protected the *magineras* from more open repression.

The closing down of Magín by the state ended a productive period of feminist activity in Cuba. Transnational influences had already encouraged the *magineras* to develop a narrowly focused professional association, rather than building a broad feminist movement. In interviews with the members of Magín, the women recognized this. As Daisy Rubiera said, “I can’t say that we were a feminist movement; we were only professional women in the media seeking more knowledge.”⁶ According to Sonnia Moro, “The majority of Magín’s members were professionals with experience and work.”⁷ Guillard also noted that “Magín didn’t have a force of broader change in its work. It was only about changing consciousness in ways that would influence the work you did.”⁸ While Magín was focused on goals of gender and communication, the women did not take these goals much beyond their individual professional work.

CONCLUSION

Several scholars have shown that transnationalism can provide resources and support to local actors as they confront power relations within their society. In this article, I have also talked about the ways in which transnationalism helped women to raise issues of feminism and gender in Cuban society. But unlike the transitional contexts of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, the space for autonomous women’s organiz-

6. Daisy Rubiera, interview with Norma Guillard, April 2005, Havana, Cuba.

7. Sonnia Moro, personal communication by email, April 2004.

8. Norma Guillard, telephone interview, April 2005.

ing in Cuba remains limited. This has prevented the emergence of what Alvarez (1998, 294) sees as a “dramatic proliferation or *multiplication* in the 1990s of the spaces and places in which women who call themselves feminists act.” “Transnationalism reversed” could help promote decentralized networks with a degree of autonomy in contexts such as Venezuela (Friedman 1999), but in Cuba, the influence of transnational advocacy networks ultimately led to a further marginalizing of autonomous women’s groups in relation to both state and society.

Cuban feminist organizing may have more parallels with feminist projects in developmentalist, socialist, and authoritarian states in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. In these cases, the monopoly exercised by the state over women’s bureaus has reduced the space for independent feminist activity. Liberalization did give rise to new feminist groups outside of official women’s bureaus in Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, and China (Brand 1998; Howell 1997), but most of these alternative projects have had to rely on funding from external agencies. This foreign funding is generally funneled into such activities as issue-based networks, women’s studies research groups at universities, small professional groups, and entrepreneurial associations, rather than grassroots feminist organizations with broader demands. As Laurie Brand (1998, 91) argues in the case of Tunisia, funding from charitable and development NGOs promotes activities that “are generally not constructed with greater empowerment of women in mind.” Feminists who try to organize autonomously find themselves caught in a vicious cycle, vulnerable to state repression and reliant on small handouts from foreign donors that further marginalize their position within society. In contrast to a celebration of the liberatory potential of transnationalism, evidence from late socialist and authoritarian contexts should urge scholars to reconsider the role of transnationalism in promoting change.

In contexts where state institutions are unwilling to relinquish power to autonomous feminist groups, it may be more productive for feminists to work within state-sanctioned organizations, in order to build and develop their perspectives. In Tunisia during the 1990s, women found it easier to work within the official National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT), which was able to reach a large number of women due to its structure and cadres (Brand 1998, 219). There have also been opportunities since liberalization for activists in China to demand more organizational autonomy within the official women’s bureau, the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) (Howell 1997, 238). But whether women decide to participate in official women’s bureaus also depends on how

open these structures are. As Christina Gilmartin (1995) has argued, the strong women's movements preceding the establishment of the ACWF gave women greater leverage within this institution. Feminists, such as Liu Bohong and Li Xiaojiang, have found avenues for productive engagement within the ACWF (Barlow 2001, 1288). In contrast, Cuban feminists have found the FMC highly resistant to change and so have chosen to work within other state institutions. As director of the Cuban Society of Psychologists, Guillard started a "Section on Identity, Diversity and Social Communication" in 2003. This section has an e-mail list-serve that reaches groups and individuals internationally, and it organizes regular events in Cuba in collaboration with the National Center of Sexual Education (*Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual*, CENESEX) and other institutions. Another option may be participation in regional solidarity networks, such as Moghadam (2005, 174) describes in the case of the Association of Women of the Mediterranean Region (AWMR), which can provide an alternative to dependence on both the state and large-scale transnational funding agencies.

The women of Magín have also sought to collaborate with local cultural movements like hip hop in recent years. Indeed, the emergence of a feminist consciousness in Cuban hip-hop (Fernandes 2005) shows that Magín was not an aberration in a context hostile to feminism. Guillard notes: "We cannot say that in Cuba we have a feminist movement, but there are many feminists in different organizations outside the FMC who have been inspired by this process of liberation. I think that Magín was an association of feminists who were discovering a liberating theory and now each of its ex-members is fighting to create new spaces for feminism."⁹ For Sonnia Moro, "Magín doesn't exist, but the *magineras* do exist."¹⁰

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9. Norma Guillard, telephone interview, April 2005.

10. Sonnia Moro, personal communication by email, April 2004.

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