

Vilma Espín, Rebel and Wife of Raúl Castro, Dies at 77

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Vilma Espín, an idealistic socialite who fought alongside Fidel and [Raúl Castro](#) in the mountains of [Cuba](#) and later, as Raúl Castro's wife, became a prominent advocate of women's rights and a powerful member of the Cuban Communist Party, died Monday in Havana. She was 77.



Ms. Espín at Parliament in Cuba, in her last public appearance.

Her death was announced on state-run television. No specific cause was given, but Granma, the Communist Party newspaper, said she had succumbed to “the long illness with which she was afflicted.”

As sister-in-law of [Fidel Castro](#), who is divorced, Ms. Espín was Cuba's unofficial first lady for decades, often appearing with him at official events.

Ms. Espín, a widely recognized symbol of the Castro family's half-century grip on power, died at a critical moment in Cuban history. Fidel Castro, 80, provisionally handed over power to his brother Raúl, 76, last July after abdominal surgery. Since then Fidel Castro has been seen on television only a few times, and his health has been kept a state secret.

Yesterday, thousands of Cubans filed past a large black and white photograph of Ms. Espín at the vast Plaza of the Revolution in Havana. Raúl Castro was in the receiving line. Fidel Castro did not attend. A floral arrangement was delivered in his name.

Ms. Espín was a revered figure of the revolution. The image of her and several other prominent women shouldering rifles and wearing combat fatigues during the rebel war helped change attitudes about the role of women in Cuba. She founded the Federation of Cuban Women in 1960, and remained president of the organization until her death. Although few women were allowed into Fidel Castro's inner circle, women advanced in most other fields in Cuba, and Ms. Espín became an international figure in the struggle for women's rights.

Speaking before an International Women's Year conference in Mexico City in 1975, she said: "We have already obtained for our women everything that the conference is asking for. Women are part of the people, and unless you talk about politics, you are never going to change anything."

Vilma Espín Guillois was born on April 7, 1930, in Santiago de Cuba to a wealthy family with ties to the Bacardi Rum Company. She was one of the first women in Cuba to obtain a university degree in chemical engineering. In 1955, she spent a year doing post-graduate work at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#).

"She could have been a simple society girl," said an official account of her life by Granma, "but her formation, combined with her own emotions and personality, made her a revolutionary leader."

After returning to Santiago, Ms. Espín became deeply involved with the opposition to the dictator Fulgencio Batista. She joined with a local political leader, Frank País, and helped organize an armed uprising in late 1956 to coincide with the landing of armed rebels under the command of Fidel Castro.

She later joined the armed rebels in the Sierra Maestra. There she met Raúl Castro and fought beside him under the nom de guerre Deborah in a second front in the Sierra Cristal. She spoke English

fluently, and sometimes served as an interpreter when American journalists trekked to the mountains to write about the rebel movement.

She married Mr. Castro in 1959, four months after Mr. Batista abandoned Cuba and the Castro brothers seized power.

Ms. Espín's education and background prepared her for a public role in the new government. "She had this certain kind of regality about her by background, marriage and her own accomplishments," said Ann Louise Bardach, an author who interviewed Ms. Espín in the early 1990s for her book "Cuba Confidential." "She was always aware that she was the first lady of Cuba."

Ms. Espín was named to the Communist Party's ruling Central Committee in 1965 and belonged to the elite Council of State until her death. Besides Raúl Castro, she is survived by their four children, Mariela, Deborah, Nilsa and Alejandro, and eight grandchildren.

Although it has been widely reported that Ms. Espín and Raúl Castro were separated or divorced many years ago, they appeared together regularly, and the Cuban government has never confirmed the status of their marriage. In the receiving line yesterday at the Plaza of the Revolution, Mr. Castro's eyes were reported to be filled with tears.