Overview:
This presentation will include a visual overview of the 1961 Campaña de Alfabetización / Cuban Literacy Campaign; with a selection of photographs and poetic testimonials from Cuban women as they reflect upon their role in this massive social event, in how they view the social transformation that has occurred in Cuba during the past 40 years.

Background:
According to UNESCO, before the 1959 Revolution the illiteracy rate in Cuba was 24%--one in 4 adults--with figures in the countryside twice the rate than those in urban centers. In 1961, the Cuban government appealed to the Revolutionary spirit of its citizens to join a nation-wide battle to eradicate illiteracy. Fuelled by ethical exhilaration in the growing consciousness of the social inequities in Cuba, more than 250,000 literacy brigadistas came forth to join the Campaña de Alfabetización. Many were middle-class urban youth who traveled to live in the country with campesino families, sharing in the labor by day, and teaching classes at night. Their ‘students’ numbered almost one million, those who had been previously denied access to education due to race, class, gender, economic disparity and/or geographical isolation. This Revolutionary act led to great social, cultural, moral and ethical transformation in Cuba; the basis, 40 years later, for it to celebrate the highest literacy level in Latin America, and one of the highest in the world. But, beyond the mechanics of reading and writing, it has been the development of consciousness in Cuban citizens--the brigadista and the campesino--that invited the Cubans themselves into a positive forum to consider new possibilities for their lives with respect to work, health, education and the concept of family and community.

The story of the Cuban Revolution has been told by a myriad of voices in a variety of cultural forms, to the extent that all Cubans forge their identities in relation to this historical event. Popularized into the language of everyday life, the Revolutionary ‘heroes’ have been mythologized, for the most part, as male; even though in the case of the Campaña de Alfabetización, more than 50% of the brigadistas were female. Indeed, the Campaña marked a definitive moment of liberation and transformation for women in Cuba: the young brigadista, inspired by the promise of a better life for all, leaving home to live and work with campesinos; the wife/mother, volunteering as a brigadista beyond her expected familial role; and the campesina, passing on to her children newly-acquired vision and skills, to break away from the repetition of history.