



Women's Work
Gender Equality in Cuba and the
Role of Women Building Cuba's Future



THE CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS (CDA) is devoted to changing U.S. policy toward the countries of the Americas by basing our relations on mutual respect, fostering dialogue with those governments and movements with which U.S. policy is at odds, and recognizing positive trends in democracy and governance.

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About This Project

RESEARCH SERIES: 21ST CENTURY CUBA

The Center for Democracy in the Americas received support from the Ford Foundation for a research project to assess important developments in Cuba, including actions taken by Cuba's government to modernize its system, and analyze the implications for U.S. policy. We provide our findings to policy makers in the White House and Congress, foreign policy experts, academics and advocates, and release them to the media and general public.

Our first 21st Century Cuba report, **As Cuba Plans to Drill, U.S. Policy Puts Our National Interest at Risk** documented Cuba's plans with its foreign partners to extract oil from its offshore fields in the Gulf of Mexico, and how the limits imposed by the embargo harm U.S. environmental, economic, and foreign policy interests.

Our second report, **Cuba's New Resolve: Economic Reform and its Implications for U.S. Policy**, focused on the extraordinary steps Cuba is taking to address its economic crisis by introducing the biggest changes in its economic model since 1959.

Following publication of this volume, our fourth study, on Cuba's program of medical internationalism, will be completed and released in 2013.

Preface

The Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA) has made numerous research trips to Cuba and Chile to look at women’s participation in political leadership, women’s impact on the national economy, and their status in society. In those countries and elsewhere, we met women and girls struggling to live fuller lives while bound by male-dominated traditions, economies structured in inequality, and political systems that relegate women to second place. We encountered women working for themselves and others to achieve greater access to education, health care, economic opportunity, legal rights, and civic power—all key to improving life circumstances for themselves and others. Their commitments have inspired us.

This report focuses on the progress Cuban women have made toward gender equality since the 1950s, and examines whether that progress can be sustained into the future.

Since Cuba was colonized, patriarchalism has been a strong force; partly because of European and African heritages, but also because Cuba was largely an agricultural society with heavy burdens on a rural labor force. These challenges required women to work both within and outside the home, a condition commonly referred to as “the double-shift.” As Cuba urbanized in the twentieth century, and a stable working class developed in some areas, women were absorbed into the labor force in offices, factories and the booming tourist sector. But, while Cuban men had a more privileged position in the labor force, more free time, and fewer social strictures; for women, the burdens of the double-shift continued.

While the Cuban Revolution made an early political commitment to gender equality, the impetus for its implementation came primarily from its leaders, especially Fidel Castro and Vilma Espín, and its program was passed down to women at the grassroots who had limited chances to participate in the agenda's design. As one scholar lamented, "the women's movement in Cuba has not been the architect of its own success."¹

Their well-intentioned policies produced quantifiable successes, but Cuba's gender equality laws have not yet effectively changed Cuban society. Yes, women were incorporated into the work force in greater numbers, but there remains resistance to and rejection of women in charge. There are laws promoting greater equality in the home and workplace, but studies show that Cuban women still spend in excess of thirty-four hours every week doing chores and child-rearing, while men contribute just twelve hours of their time.²

Despite these challenges, the progress Cuban women have made toward gender equality is striking, and the world has taken notice. When international institutions rank nations around the world on gender disparities in opportunities, resources, services, and benefits, Cuba consistently performs well.³

Although data vary year to year, Save the Children consistently rates Cuba first among developing countries (ahead of democratic nations such as South Korea, Mexico, and South Africa) for the wellbeing of mothers and children.⁴ The Overseas Development Institute, a leading British think tank on development and humanitarian issues, rates Cuba in the top twenty nations for its progress relative to the Millennium Development Goals.⁵ The World Economic Forum ranks Cuba 20th among 135 countries on the health, literacy, economic status, and political participation of women, outperforming all but Trinidad and Tobago in Latin America, and many of its peers in the developing world.⁶

How is this possible? At roughly \$50 billion, Cuba has a tiny economy. It isn't capitalist. It isn't rich. By U.S. standards, it isn't free. These results are especially hard for some in the United States to accept because they reject the legitimacy of Cuba's government and its socialist system. But the facts speak for themselves.

For this report, we reviewed scholarly studies and detailed insider accounts of Cuba's most consequential movements and historic figures in gender equality. Our aim is to provide an updated analysis examining early efforts to promote women's equality in the face of deep-rooted impediments to progress, and also assess difficulties encountered since the early 1990s resulting from Cuba's economic limitations.

In this effort, we were assisted by Cuban and U.S. scholars who have devoted much of their professional work to the issues considered here. With their help, CDA reviewed considerable research on the social, economic and political standing of women in Cuba, and on the comparative status of women the world over.

We also interviewed and spent time with Cuban women in Havana and other provinces. During CDA research trips, we met Cuban women of every hue, religion and character; privileged and poor; isolated single mothers and members of enormous intertwined families; lesbian and straight. We talked to academics, professionals, factory workers, entrepreneurs, agricultural cooperative members, artists and activists; grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. They live in regions different in culture, geography, and climate. Their political opinions vary. Some have migrated between regions; others have little experience beyond the community where they have lived their entire lives.

From these encounters, we are able to offer the views of Cuban women—their experiences, their gripes and problems, and their aspirations—in their own words. As a consequence, our admiration for the women we've met on the island continues to deepen as we better understand the historic, cultural, and political barriers they face.

STRUCTURE

Our report begins with a section titled **The Inheritance**, describing conditions beginning in the 1950s. Under the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952-1959), Cuba had a more prosperous economy than many Latin American countries at the time, but this prosperity co-existed with stark income inequalities: great disparities developed between black and white Cubans, between rural and city dwellers and, importantly for our consideration,

between women and men. Prospects were bleak for many Cuban women to improve their lives.

Since the Revolution, however, women have seen substantial changes in their status. Scholars differ over which factors mattered most or what causes created the greatest effect, but as we conducted our research, spoke to Cuban women, and reviewed data from global institutions, we kept returning to six fundamental elements that help explain Cuba's progress.

In the section titled **Cuba's Commitments to Gender Equality**, we discuss the actions that favored success and provided the building blocks for major improvements in gender equality.

- The early decision by revolutionary leaders to incorporate women's equality and rights as a core component of their political and social project.
- Initiatives by the new government to tackle gender inequality and form women's organizations to serve as advocates for change.
- An early transformative victory in a campaign that eliminated illiteracy for all Cubans, including women and girls, and empowered women to teach others to read and write.
- The adoption of a legal architecture to incorporate gender equality rights in Cuban law.
- National commitments to education and health care, including substantial state spending for programs that improved the skills and well-being of all Cubans, and programs that addressed the special concerns of women's health.
- State employment opportunities that steadily increased labor force participation by women, and the creation of social services to reduce their workload at home.

The objectives of these commitments—e.g., achieving access to higher paying jobs, producing a fair division of labor in work and domestic life, and seeing more women ascend to positions of real political power—have not been fully met. There are many critical actions that must take place before women can achieve further progress on the road to true equality.

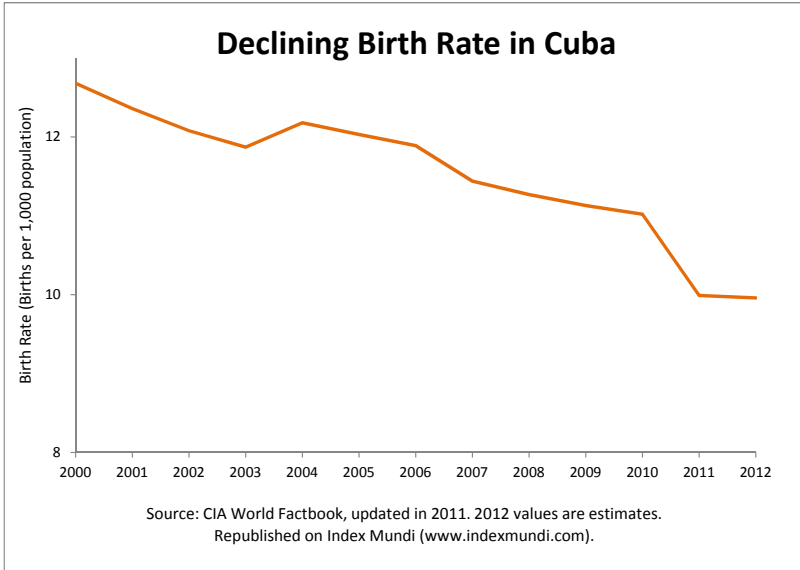
That goal—making life better for women—was always ambitious, and is especially so under today’s circumstances. Periods of economic crisis, like the “Special Period” of the 1990s, saw sharp cuts in many programs, especially those affecting gender equality. Despite positive indicators and measurable progress for women and girls, conditions were never ideal. For Cuba to preserve its existing achievements, it must address the serious crisis affecting its economy today.

In the section titled **The Risk of Falling Back**, we describe the complex moment it now confronts. For more than fifty years, gender equality policy has been part of commitments to an expansive welfare system developed within a centrally-controlled state. Now, however, Cuba’s economy is burdened by low productivity, an imbalance of trade, and high external debt. The country imports over eighty percent of its food. These factors—in the face of a global economic crisis, ruinous hurricanes, and an unyielding U.S. embargo—have made improving the standard of living and women’s status in Cuba stubbornly intractable. Adding to their troubles, Cuba potentially faces years to recover from the damage inflicted by repeated hurricanes, including Sandy in October 2012.

Cuba is also threatened by another crisis: a population aging out of the labor force that will need support from diminishing numbers of new workers, falling birth rates, and steady increases in emigration. Together, these have produced what one scholar calls a “demographic time bomb,” placing enormous strains on the state’s capacity to provide services for social welfare.⁷

In 2011, nearly 40,000 persons emigrated from Cuba, more than half of them women.⁸ They took expertise and skills with them. Many departed because the economy doesn’t produce enough good jobs to satisfy and engage them. “Cubans are leaving the island because they think it will take 20 years for Cuba to straighten out its problems,” a psychologist told CDA. “They don’t want to delay their life projects until then.” They are educated for jobs that do not exist and are tempted by images from abroad.

Such departures undercut the networks of school classmates that traditionally facilitate life and provide an important social base. Youths who otherwise might make their peace with domestic opportunity are prompted to look elsewhere. “I’m the only one left. All my friends are abroad.



It's lonely," said a young woman, employed as a secretary, who stays to take care of her mother.⁹

Among those who remain, there is a pronounced weariness. A woman in Havana told us, "People live as they can, not as they want to."

Since 2006, the government has been working to update its economic model. Changes include reducing the size of the state's payrolls, and eliminating certain social benefits while using the savings to invest in activities it hopes will increase Cuba's productivity and exports. Cuba's government is loosening certain restrictions grounded in socialism and banking on an emerging private sector to absorb workers who will lose their state jobs.

It's not at all clear that this effort will work in the long run, but in the short term the reforms have already posed a challenge to gender equality. Aspects of the system that propelled women forward—such as state employment and Cuba's commitment to providing universal access to education and health care—are being cut back and reorganized as Cuba seeks to balance its budget.

"The current 'updating' of the economic model in the country could have repercussions on the development that women have achieved," cautioned

Norma Vasallo, President of the Women's Studies Department at the University of Havana, in an interview.¹⁰

This would not just be tragic in a historic sense, putting at risk hard fought gains in equality and social justice, but also counter-productive economically. As the World Bank,¹¹ the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),¹² and the Millennium Challenge Corporation¹³ have all found, gender equality contributes greatly to productivity and economic growth.

Thus, we argue in **The Role of Women in Building Cuba's Future** that by broadening rather than curtailing their participation, contributions by women to economic growth, social well-being, and family formation will advance Cuba's prospects for economic recovery while preserving its commitment to equality. There is much that Cuba can do acting alone—or in concert with NGOs, foreign governments, and other actors—to enhance women's participation. Cuban women must play a major role in this process, particularly in the design of policies and programs for updating their country's economic model currently underway.

We believe their success is not just in Cuba's interest, but in the U.S. interest as well.

For three centuries, the U.S. has sought—at times successfully—to control Cuba's destiny. That impulse intensified after the Cuban Revolution occurred in the midst of our Cold War with the Soviet Union. Whether influenced by opposition to communism or motivated by concerns over human rights, the U.S. has rarely viewed Cuba as a sovereign nation capable of determining its own course.

Today, policy makers who advocate for wholesale regime change in Cuba consider evidence-based discussions of progress in Cuba as mere apologies for the Castro government.¹⁴ Yet, Cuba has not bent to U.S. pressure and shows no sign of doing so. The U.S. has a choice of sticking with policies that have proven to be a failure or doing something different.

We share a region—and a world—with countries struggling to break free of the burdens of underdevelopment and inequality. Empowerment of women is commonly understood as more than a powerful instrument of social justice to alleviate those conditions, but also as a means of creating a more broadly shared prosperity.

In spite of impediments, the progress made in Cuba to substantially increase gender equality carries with it important lessons for other societies. In today's increasingly interconnected world, progress or regression in one country is likely to have a transnational impact. Cubans are in a position to share programmatic insights, especially with those countries where the status of women is highly deficient. Since women constitute the majority of the world's population, supporting, fortifying and disseminating Cuban women's experience could contribute to improved welfare in other countries that have not progressed as much.

This brings us to U.S.-Cuba relations. Virtually everywhere *except* Cuba, U.S. policy recognizes that countries with declining living standards and unequal societies are more unstable and pose greater challenges to our interests and security than those with improving conditions. Thus, it would seem logical and consistent for the U.S. to consider how to promote economic stability and social welfare in Cuba, only 90 miles off the coast of Florida.

Women in the Americas have much to offer to help their Cuban contemporaries meet development and social welfare needs. The U.S. already supports efforts by women in other Latin American countries that could be part of an exchange with Cuban women. There are also steps that can be taken by women in our country who want to share their experience and offer support for gender equality in Cuba.

Many, especially from the humanitarian, academic, and non-governmental sectors have worked alongside Cuban women for years. We would like to see such activity increase substantially, with these voluntary actions reinforced by policies adopted by the U.S. government.

The future of Cuba's gender equality will be determined by the women and men of Cuba. But if the U.S. were to pitch in, we wouldn't be alone; many U.S. allies in Latin America and globally are already engaging. Against the backdrop of their involvement, our sitting on the sidelines makes little sense.

Profile: Emilia Fernández



Emilia Fernández, age 48, has lived in “Jesús María,” a neighborhood in the city of Havana, all her life. Thirty years ago, Emilia, her mother, and two brothers moved into the austere apartment they currently share. Her father was a carpenter. Her mother taught the literacy promoters in the 1961 National Literacy Campaign. She, along with her two sisters, encouraged Emilia and her brothers to take advantage of emerging educational opportunities. Emilia was sent to the Ukraine in the Soviet Union for five years where she studied computer science. She graduated as an Information Technology Engineer, and later studied accounting. Today, she works at a center for ocular health that serves international patients. Emilia is currently working on her Master’s thesis in Occupational Health and Safety.

Emilia’s Life

Emilia: “My maternal grandfather was of humble origins. He came from Rodas, Cienfuegos, and came to work in an *almacén* [warehouse]. My father was a carpenter, who was orphaned at age 8. He lived in the street. The revolution made [our family] a collective offer. My father encouraged us to ‘take advantage of the opportunity.’

“When I was 18 years old, I studied outside of Cuba. I was in the Soviet Union from 1983 to 1988. It was a great experience. People from thirty-two countries were present at my school, and it was a way to meet the world. I graduated as an Information Technology Engineer.”

Emilia returned to Cuba and worked for twelve years in state IT jobs as a software developer. Then, her career path changed, and she studied auditing.

“In 2005, I went to work as a consultant in Venezuela, at MERCAL, which focuses on food markets for low income persons. I had to do a marketing study in Venezuela and Cuba. What I saw was Venezuela was a rich country with a lot of poverty. To see children begging in the street was shocking for me. In Venezuela, there are so many resources, but how are they distributed? Whereas, here, we do not have such resources.

“I work now at a clinic, the ‘International Center for Retinitis Pigmentosa,’ which is for international patients. Since its founding, it has served patients from over 100 countries. It is an atypical place, better than our national hospitals. All the doctors are Cuban medical graduates. The clinic has been operating for 20 years.”

Race and Gender

We asked Emilia Fernández if there were special problems in Cuba for women who are Afro-Cuban. She responded, “Ethnicity does not affect the stress level of a Cuban woman’s life. Stress is related more to the type of work and the workplace of the woman.”

She acknowledges, “there is a historic debt to the black race, which has been discriminated against throughout time. Also, there is self-discrimination that historically drags down black people. There are policies here to address the discrimination. We have laws to deal with this. But when a person feels that they are inferior, you can’t make that leap forward. You cannot leap without raising your status. We have problems with racism here and people don’t want to talk much about it.

“Intermarriage in Cuba is common,” she said, “although there are still some families in Cuba where intermarriage is a ‘crime.’ Changing consciousness is a matter of time.

“You cannot change people just by making laws. Black women’s lives are harder than white women’s lives. But if you keep to your ideals, you will succeed. If you do the right thing, people will forget the color of your skin.”

Health Care

“In regards to rights, they are complicated. The Constitution states that I have to be treated at the hospital. The person who is in the reception area does not give you a smile. But, if you give him or her gifts, it is different. There is social complicity. The doctors also have needs. I know professionals who respect their profession and act with dignity. If you know what you are doing, you stay. At the same time, there are professionals who opt for the gifts.

“I do not have to worry. If I get a pain, I know that someone will come and take me to the hospital. The best doctor at the hospital will treat me. I do believe that people should know how much the medical attention costs. Give medical care a real value and not a fictitious one.”

When asked about the state reductions in health budgets, Emilia responded, “There will always be medical attention for women in Cuba. It is a service.”

Youth and the Cuban Dream

“Today’s youth encounter a different reality than I did after finishing my studies. We had revolutionary values. At the university today, the youth want to have dollars and cell phones, to travel, but most of all they want to study, get their certificates, and leave the country. People at university are there to get knowledge, but they lack a strong commitment to society. They don’t have the Cuban dream.

“Now with the Internet, they are experiencing the world—and it is harder to instill in their minds the kind of dream that I had.

“[The dream] means that I can still fight, that it’s my place. It was my life. I have worked since I was a child to make Cuba better. The dream is part of me.

“Cuba, as a result of the Special Period, lost some of its values in the 1990s; love for work, love for country, solidarity as a principle. Those values are still strong but some people have hope, and some people don’t. When friends lose it, these are the very sad moments in my life.”

Emilia’s Future

“I am currently studying occupational health. This discipline designs measures so that a person can work in safe and secure conditions. This is not a traditional field for women. It was designed by men—they were in the factories with the Revolution. A gender focus can be useful in this profession. Women workers are the most susceptible to stress. You get up and cook breakfast, you take precarious public transportation, you arrive exhausted to work. At the workplace, you encounter stress. And then, you receive a salary that does not resolve your needs. How can this not have health repercussions?”

Emilia, who has traveled abroad, and speaks three languages—Russian, English, and her native Spanish—is still weighted down by unresolved challenges of gender and race, but she is held aloft by a dream that still lives inside her.

I was born in the Revolution. It has given me opportunities.” •

The Inheritance

Emilia Fernández inherited a Cuba that was quite different from the country bequeathed to her parents when they were born.

Cuba in the 1950s was not lacking in resources or commerce. Measured by its GDP per capita, Cuba had one of the wealthiest economies in Latin America.¹⁵ There was substantial foreign investment, especially from the United States, an owner of some of its greatest riches and a consumer of most of its exports. American executives worked alongside Cuban counterparts at the top of the tobacco, soft drink, nickel, electrical, telephone, and sugar industries. Cubans with means sent their children to elite private schools or to study abroad. The fruits of a modern economy enabled Cuba to enjoy a higher standard of living than its neighbors.¹⁶

Scholars disagree over the size,¹⁷ and even the existence, of a Cuban middle class in the era prior to the revolution.¹⁸ The data clearly show that Cuba's prosperity was not broadly or equitably shared, and much of its population lived in poverty.

For many Cubans, it was simply hard to find steady work. This was, in large part, due to the centrality of the sugar industry to the broader economy and a legacy of Cuba's colonial relationship with the U.S. Historian Hugh Thomas noted that sugar had a five-month season, and joblessness gyrated as a result. According to the 1953 Cuban census, unemployment would drop as low as 8% when production was in full swing, but climb to 25% for the remaining seven months of the year.¹⁹ The World Bank blamed Cuba's dependence on sugar for halting the broader economy's progress, calling it "stagnant and

unstable” thanks to the dominance of sugar and the U.S., which owned and helped organize the industry’s productive assets.²⁰

Cuba’s political and economic inequalities created stark differences in life-chances. Well-connected Americans and Cubans lived serene lives in mansions still standing in Havana, while outside those stately homes, people across Cuba lived in severe poverty.

The rural poor had the greatest challenges. “For them, access to education opportunities, health care, regular employment, and the like, was nearly non-existent.”²¹ Their diets were meager and shockingly short of protein, leaving them malnourished and prone to “long lasting medical conditions.”²² Rural illiteracy was estimated at a stunning 41.7% (it was 11% in cities).²³ Rural women, a Cuban academic told us, worked not in the fields but as slaves inside their homes.²⁴

Harsh circumstances landed with particular force on Cuba’s black or mixed race population, half of whom lived at the eastern end of the island in Cuba’s poorest provinces. They suffered extreme deprivation and racial discrimination.²⁵

While Cubans of all colors did better in cities than those in the countryside, the blight of poverty was felt everywhere. Life expectancy at birth was a mere 59.4 years and infant mortality was a staggering 8%.²⁶ The vast majority of Cuba’s hospitals had fewer than 50 beds,²⁷ leaving over 80% of urban poor and rural Cubans with essentially no access to medical care.²⁸ During the revolution, and following its victory, half the island’s more than 6,000 doctors left the country.

In 1953, 23% of Cuba’s women aged 10 years or older were illiterate, 71% were under-educated, and only 2% finished high school.²⁹ Small consolation for their sisters: the reading skills of Cuban boys were even worse. But boys, at least, were schooled with jobs in mind; when girls were given an education, it was most often provided with the aim of making them better mothers. In 1953, girls comprised only about 1% of Cuba’s college students.³⁰

Women were seldom trained for work. In 1953, just 13.7% of women aged 14 and above worked outside the home.³¹ Among these approximately 250,000 women and girls, many worked without pay;³² and 70,000 of them were employed as domestic servants.³³ Childcare was so limited that, when

mothers did work, their eldest daughters were often forced to drop out of school to take care of younger siblings.

As a consequence, conditions of poverty and inequality were replicated generation after generation, passed from mother to daughter, with little hope for change offered by the nation's leadership. By the end of the 1950s, the Batista government had but one female minister, and she served without portfolio.³⁴

Cuba's Commitments to Gender Equality

Starting even before its revolution, Cuba's leadership took these decisive steps that began the transformation of women's lives while also seeking a more equal, sovereign, and dignified Cuban identity for the entire population.

LEADERS FOR CHANGE

"I am not sure how to explain Cuba," Begoña Lasagabaster, a U.N. Women political adviser, said in her office in New York. She suggested it may be the post-conflict trend—"Women and men who have fought together [as Cubans did in the revolution 50 years ago] tend to maintain their positions."³⁵

The U.S. view of Cuba's revolution and government is fixed on two men, Fidel and Raúl Castro, and our understanding of the island's society is influenced by our notions of Latin *machismo*. These impressions while accurate are also incomplete.

In fact, the history of Cuba bursts with courageous women, like Mariana Grajales, the "mother of the country." Grajales was a *mulata* woman born in 1815 in Santiago de Cuba, mother of 13, who gave her sons to fight in the 1868 War of Independence, and who died in exile in Jamaica. Another heroine is Ana Betancourt, born in 1832 in a wealthy family in Camagüey. Betancourt became a leader in the struggle for the emancipation of Cuban women, and an end to colonialism and slavery. These and many other women are indelible parts of Cuban history, symbols of independence, and inspirations for gender equality.

Just shy of 100 years ago, the Women's Club of Cuba was formed as the first expression of a unified struggle for women's rights.³⁶ This led in 1920 to the emergence of the National Federation of Women's Associations of Cuba (FNAF)³⁷ which formed a network of smaller groups around the country to multiply their efforts.

Pilar Morlón de Menéndez presided over the first and second feminist congresses held in 1924 and 1925, which mainly focused on voting rights.³⁸ Nonetheless, women's suffrage was not achieved until 1934. Five years later, the third feminist congress convened to demand civil, labor, and political equality as well as general social changes.³⁹

However, it would be another three decades before their goals could begin to be realized. This would be due, in no small part, to the courage of the Cuban women who fought against the dictatorial rule of President Fulgencio Batista beginning with his coup d'état against Carlos Prío Socarrás in 1952.

Initially, their cause was not feminism; it was nationalism and social justice. "We didn't fight for women's rights. We fought for what was necessary to benefit everyone," said the late Maruja Iglesias, a leader of the Frente Cívico de Mujeres Martianas.⁴⁰

As Cuba's revolution against Batista gathered force, charismatic female figures emerged and took leadership roles. One was Celia Sánchez. A political leader before the revolution, she became a founding member of the 26th of July Movement, ran its urban supply and recruitment network, and served as a member of the Rebel Army's general command. She was later named the secretary of the Council of State and Council of Ministers. She also oversaw the publication of the newspaper, *Granma*, and was known as Fidel Castro's personal counsel and confidant.⁴¹

Others included Haydee Santamaría and Melba Hernández, two women among 160 fighters who took part in the opening assault of the Cuban revolution on the Moncada army garrison in Santiago de Cuba. Hernández formed the Mariana Grajales Brigade, the first all-women platoon. In the aftermath of the assault, Santamaría's brother and fiancé were captured and tortured to death; the two women were imprisoned. Once released, these women undertook documenting Fidel Castro's self-defense given at the Moncada trial. They published and distributed it under the title *History Will Absolve Me*.

Gender equality formally became a part of the political project of the Cuban Revolution in 1955 with the publication of *Manifiesto Number One*, written by Fidel Castro in Mexico, in which the 26th of July Movement committed itself to:

“Establishment of appropriate measures in education and legislation to end all vestiges of discrimination for reasons of race or sex that regrettably exist in the realm of social and economic life.”⁴²

This decision was not uniquely Cuban; it was intrinsic to socialist systems, a common political goal to make all people equal.

The women of the Cuban Revolution emerged from the battle with a new self-esteem, having broken gender taboos and undertaken the work of war. They became advocates for women and evolved into powerful role models for the next generation. Fidel Castro lauded their contributions. Some were given public podiums and positions. Together, the emancipation of women became a key battlefield for the redefinition of Cuba's future: what Castro called “the revolution within a revolution.”⁴³

Vilma Espín, a prominent combatant, and ultimately the most influential in this realm, was an upper middle class woman from Santiago de Cuba, whose father was a lawyer for Bacardi Rum. Espín was the first woman in Cuba to graduate with a degree in Chemical Engineering, and went on to earn a post-graduate degree at MIT in Boston. She became part of the opposition to Batista's 1952 *coup*, saying that “March 10th was explosive for me, it was the drop that overflowed the cup, possibly it created in me, truly, a rebellious spirit.”⁴⁴ She and Raúl Castro, comrades in arms, were married January 22, 1959. Cuba's new government was barely three weeks old.

Appointed to lead a new organization, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC),⁴⁵ Vilma Espín served as its president for the next forty-seven years. When she died in 2007, *The Washington Post* quoted Ileana Fuentes, a Miami-based advocate for women in her obituary:

“From the feminist perspective, she empowered women in a home to say to a husband, ‘It's my national, patriotic duty to work [and] to volunteer in the community.’ Whether you are for or against Castro, that's an empowering tool for women.”⁴⁶

INSTITUTIONAL ADVOCACY

“Empowering women as political and social actors can change policy choices and make institutions more representative.”

—*The World Development Report*⁴⁷

Both the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) have grassroots level functions—to engage, educate, and mobilize women—and also work at the national level to translate concerns for women and gender equity into policies and actions.

The FMC

The FMC, founded on August 23, 1960, was the first mass organization created by the new government. With Vilma Espín at its helm, in the first few months 17,000 women members, called *federadas*, joined.⁴⁸ Named “the governing body” for policy on women in Cuba, the FMC was entrusted to do nothing less than spearhead the realization of women’s emancipation.⁴⁹

Signal improvements in women’s lives—building a legal framework for the advancement of young girls and women, connecting them to social services, education, health, and to the world of work—all bear the imprint of the FMC.

From the beginning, FMC members were deeply engaged in Cuba’s literacy campaign and accompanied volunteers into homes across the country encouraging women to send their children to school. Prior to the revolution, most women could not join the labor force because they had to care for children at home. In 1961, the FMC opened *Círculos Infantiles*, state-operated day care facilities that served newborns as young as forty-five days until they were old enough to attend elementary school.⁵⁰ These centers created a safe and nurturing place where mothers could leave kids while at work.

The same year, in a symbolic but forceful step against racism, the FMC put an Afro-Cuban woman on the front page of the first issue of the Federation’s magazine, *Mujeres*. “The first time a humble—and also black—woman’s smile lit up the cover of a Cuban magazine.”⁵¹

At the grassroots level, the FMC taught women skills so they could make a living in agriculture and in the needle trades. “While sewing,” one scholar

writes, “young women received a basic education and were acquainted with the social and political goals of the revolution.”⁵² It also worked to emancipate women from domestic service and prostitution, offering them education, stipends, and support. Espín created the *Escuela Rural* so peasants could get educated. Its teachers offered lessons in reading and writing, even first aid.

Today, the FMC has four million *federadas* who pay the equivalent of 15 cents a year for membership. It has 1,600 paid professionals in its ranks and 150,000 volunteers. FMC offices nationwide offer women a range of services, conduct research, and engage in advocacy. One hundred and seventy radio stations carry their programming.

The FMC’s primary task is to guarantee justice for women in Cuba, at the workplace and in the home. The Federation provides input to the government on laws relating to women on issues ranging from employment, health and aging, to domestic violence and activities such as raising awareness about hateful language damaging to women in reggaeton lyrics.⁵³

Given its history, the FMC inevitably attracted critics who saw its leadership as rigid and top-down, and its practices highly ideological. Vilma Espín’s term running the Federation was not unlike the lengthy tenure of Fidel Castro. As decades stretched on, the president’s sister-in-law was viewed as increasingly out of touch with young women on issues that concerned them. The FMC left little political space for other organizations to form or serve Cuban women, even as it was inactive in some neighborhoods other than collecting dues. Rather than empowering them to shape their own agenda, or amplifying their voices, many women at the grassroots complained the voice it preferred was its own.

CENESEX

“Vilma was the first person to talk to our people about gender equality and, specifically, about the right of homosexuals and transsexuals to a full life, swimming against the tide of the sort of Victorian Marxism which in our country blended with a native plague of *machismo* that caused much suffering to quite a few.”

—Rosa Miriam Elizalde⁵⁴



March in Santiago, Cuba on the International Day Against Homophobia, 2012. Mariela Castro is wearing a straw hat near center.

As early as 1962, Vilma Espín also advocated for sex education in schools and proposed the creation of a national sex education working group that eventually became institutionalized as the National Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX) program. Today, CENESEX is run by Vilma's daughter, Mariela Castro Espín, with an even broader mandate.

It is worth pausing, just for a moment, to think about how unimaginable and bold it is that in Cuba CENESEX exists at all. For example, in a speech at the University of Havana in 1963, President Castro said this about homosexuals: "The socialist society cannot permit that kind of degeneration. Youths who aspire to that sort of thing? No! For trees that grow twisted, the remedy is no longer so easy."⁵⁵

Gays were denounced by the government during the so-called "Grey Period" in the 1970s. As the gender scholar Ana Karim has written, "Discovered homosexuals experienced societal, political and economic discrimination and were sometimes sent to camps for rehabilitation and reeducation."⁵⁶ In the 1980s, some soldiers returning to Cuba from Africa brought back HIV/AIDS and those with the virus were taken away and put in isolation. Mariela Castro called this action "a violation of their human rights."⁵⁷

CENESEX was born as much of this was taking place. It is now engaged in work that promotes equality and honors diversity. It fights for the dignity of Cubans as individuals, to wring from society the attitudes and practices that exploit women and subject marginalized people to immense suffering. These social justice battles, in play all over the world, have been fought for forty years now in Cuba.

Profile: Isell Calzadilla



Isell Calzadilla is in her early 40s, works as a nurse in Santiago de Cuba, and is the mother of an 18-year-old son whom she loves dearly. Over a decade ago, Isell started meeting with two woman friends; one a doctor, the other, a psychologist. They began sharing problems they held in common related to their sexuality and talking about solutions. Later in 2003, they wrote to CENESEX director Mariela Castro, “because of her mother’s long struggle for the respect of gay rights.” CENESEX sent specialists to train the three women in sexual human rights.

“*Las Isabelas*” was formed and became Cuba’s first organization for lesbian and bisexual women. Initially, the group had a self-help focus and members were concerned about sexual health issues including HIV/ AIDS. Their brochure says that *Las Isabelas* unite women who love other women, and people who have solidarity with them, to give support and share experiences and opinions. They defend sexual rights, contribute to their own development, and raise the awareness of others. Today, there are 30 active members. The majority of *Las Isabelas* are working women, including an attorney, psychologists, economists, theater producers, artists, teachers, secretaries, IT engineers, personal beauty operators, and masseuses, ages 16 to 45 years. Isell is their coordinator.

Isell spoke to us about *Las Isabelas* at a meeting in Santiago:

“The name of our group comes from the name of an Afro-Cuban woman married to a French landowner. Today there is a bar called Café Isabelica that is an open place for gay and straight people. In general, homosexuality in men was more accepted than in women. We do experience violence, so far, verbal. But also, we have gained acceptance from our families, and we do mobilizations with broad participation and receive cooperation from the government, the party and the police. We do a conga line in the streets. We go to the local park and ‘table’ our materials and make speeches. We are working on legal issues, such as the right to same sex marriage. We organize activities around the National Day Against Homophobia celebrated on May 17. More women are joining. We want to educate others about sexual diversity. But, we also want education for ourselves. We want training, we want to participate in research, and we want to help lesbian and bisexual women with their self-esteem and rights. We want to link with others.” •

CENESEX runs a highly effective program for the prevention of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. It campaigns against homophobia and promotes cultural and social diversity. It supports affinity groups for gays and lesbians, such as *Las Isabelas*, whose slogan is: “Homosexuality is not a crime, homophobia IS.” CENESEX has so far enabled 20 transsexual Cubans to benefit from gender reassignment surgery performed by the Cuban health system, free of cost.⁵⁸

Every year, to mark the day when the World Health Organization eliminated homosexuality from its list of psychiatric diseases (May 17, 1990), CENESEX celebrates a National Day Against Homophobia. It gives voice to victims of gender-related violence in the GLTB community, particularly when “coming out of the closet.” Violence against women, including lesbians, is usually committed by people they know, especially members of their families.⁵⁹ It also trains Cuban police to expand understanding of sexual diversity and prevent violence against lesbians and gays.

The organization also works with the Ministry of Education on programs to teach all Cubans in school about health and human sexuality. Ana María Cana, a psychologist, told us:

“Sexual education is mainstreamed into all education, it is a cross-cutting issue. Teachers receive training on these issues as well. Today, if a teacher is lesbian, she can say so. We do not have problems with religion here. Homosexuality is not seen as a sin.”⁶⁰

The issue of civil society in Cuba is complicated, and that complexity affects the pursuit of gender equality. The Federation of Cuban Women and CENESEX are not alone in doing the critical work of advancing the rights of women. Some other organizations try to function independently, but many struggle with lack of support or outright hostility from the more established groups.

Examples of other non-government institutions include:

The *Christian Reflection and Dialogue Center* (CCRD) which engages in social activism based on Christian principles.⁶¹ Although the Center does not have a program focused exclusively on women's rights or empowerment, the Program for Ecological Agriculture and Communal Rural Studies organizes practical workshops for rural women and young people on organic farming and food preservation, sewing and crafts, and computer skills. The Center also holds workshops that promote dialogue and debate on gender relations with special attention given to domestic violence. The Center has established an annual day of reflection and action against domestic violence.⁶²

The *Martin Luther King Memorial Center* (CMMLK), an NGO in Havana, promotes Christian social responsibility and nonviolence as tools for social change. Originally associated with the Southern Baptist Church of Cuba, it broke with the church over its “hostile” and “anti-ecumenical” ideology that included not allowing women to be ordained or have a role in the ministry. The CMMLK began to ordain women as ministers and give them leadership roles in 1992. Clara Rodés, wife of the Center's founder Rev. Raúl Suárez, who also served on the National Assembly, was among the first three women to be ordained.⁶³

The Association of Women Communicators, known as MAGIN, was founded in 1993 by journalist Mirta Rodríguez Calderón, after the First Ibero-American Women and Communication Conference took place in Havana. The organization included more than 100 female journalists, scientists, and artists and was committed to raising gender awareness in the media. Although it was denied legal status in 1996, MAGIN held 50 workshops and established a press bureau to disseminate gender-focused information and publications in its first three years.⁶⁴ Many MAGIN members feel that “jealousy” on the part of those with a “national monopoly” over gender issues, as well as the challenge that such a project posed to Cuba’s historically “top-down, heterosexist” patriarchal culture, explains the official reason that it was deemed “inopportune” by Cuban authorities.⁶⁵

Also founded in 1993, the NGO *Félix Varela Center*⁶⁶ has special consultative status to the UN Economic and Social Council. It is currently run and staffed overwhelmingly by women. One of the Center’s four program areas is specifically dedicated to gender issues. Activities include holding conferences and seminars, providing educational workshops and trainings, collaborating with institutions, and publishing books and videos via *Publicaciones Acuario*.⁶⁷ It receives no funding from the Cuban government, and relies on members, publication sales, and support from international organizations such as several branches of Oxfam. A wide range of Cuban society is found among its collaborators and members including students, economists, homemakers, and engineers.

*The Dove Project*⁶⁸ began promoting a culture of peace in 2002 by creating audiovisual materials and hosting workshops. The group approaches peace building from several angles, including promoting healthy gender relationships. Documentaries produced by the group have focused on themes such as domestic violence, alcohol addiction and recovery for women, sexual orientation and acceptance, masculinity in Cuba, and women displaced by cancer, physical handicaps, and obesity. They also sponsor the Santa Cecilia Group,⁶⁹ a patchwork group whose textile art has been shown around the world.

*The Federation of Latin American Rural Women*⁷⁰ and the *LGBT Rights Observatory* have attracted notice for their work on gender-related issues, including protests against the government, but have been criticized for their dependence on funding from the U.S.⁷¹

These non-mass organizations contribute to the diversity of voices in the national conversation on achieving gender equality.

Improvements in gender equality depend both on laws and cultural change. The FMC and CENESEX aim to influence society, government and the communist party, to increase gender equality and create tolerance for diversity.

Their existence helps explain why international institutions give Cuba high marks for gender equality. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) observed this year, “public gender agencies often lack visibility, authority and resources to effectively advance gender equality across ‘the whole of government.’”⁷²

THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN

“I never felt Cuban until I learned to read and write.”

—*Juan Martínez, letter to Fidel Castro at
the end of the literacy campaign*⁷³

In September 1960, Fidel Castro announced to the United Nations General Assembly that Cuba would wage “a great battle against illiteracy with the ambitious goal of teaching every last illiterate person to read and write. To this end,” he said, “organizations of teachers, students, workers, that is, the people as a whole, are preparing themselves for an intense campaign, and Cuba will be the first country in the Americas which, at the end of a few months, will be able to say that it does not have a single illiterate person.”⁷⁴

Before the address, “Castro and his advisors created the National Literacy Commission, which sought to involve workers and peasants as well as political organizations in the process of planning the campaign.”⁷⁵ The planning included how to mobilize the required number of teachers, the preparation of instructional materials, and efforts to locate and identify *every* illiterate Cuban.⁷⁶ They found 985,000 who could not read.⁷⁷

Women played critical parts throughout the campaign. Leonela Inés Relys Díaz, Ph.D. of Pedagogy, invented the Yo Sí Puedo (Yes I Can) alphanumeric literacy method, which has been used in more than 30 countries,⁷⁸ and María de los Ángeles Periu was in charge of the technical department of

the National Literacy Commission, which created the readers and training manuals used in the campaign.⁷⁹

The Literacy Campaign launched in 1961. Over a quarter million Cubans answered the call; these included retirees as well as 100,000 teachers under 20 years old.⁸⁰ Half of them were teenage girls who needed their parent's consent to participate at all. Just 34% of those mobilized were certified teachers who taught methodology to the non-certified teachers. The state recruited 14,000 workers who joined to battle illiteracy in urban areas and one hundred thousand students were sent to teach in the rural areas. "They were to live and work with the *campesinos*. Work the fields with them. Give classes at night."⁸¹ Lessons were often illuminated by paraffin lamps donated by China's government. Its image became a symbol of the effort.⁸²

By the end of the first year, the percentage of illiterate Cubans decreased from 23.6% of the population to approximately 3.1%. Over 700,000 citizens became literate, and all pupils were reading at least at a third-grade level.⁸³ Prior to 1959, 40% of Cuban children between 6 and 14 did not attend school; by the end of 1961, that figure had been halved.⁸⁴

Twelve months after the campaign began, Cuban illiteracy was lower than in any other Latin American country. It was a euphoric national effort that energized younger generation Cubans, especially women. When UNECSCO declared that Cuba was free of illiteracy in 1962, young people marched in the streets with huge pencils to signify the victory of education. This was a transformative victory because it showed the people what the state was capable of doing.

"I was a child, and I became a woman."

—*Irene Ruiz Narvaez, journalist and former brigadista*⁸⁵

The women and teenage girls who joined the campaign brought reading and writing skills to communities and homes previously denied such opportunities for advancement. Conceived to educate a population, the campaign set in motion a dynamic that would multiply women's options in life and energize their sense of self.

The effort was physically liberating: girls and women literally scaled mountains and forded streams to reach their rural students. It was culturally liberating: they ate and worked with the disenfranchised in urban and rural



A young girl teaches a rural woman how to read.

Photo: Archives, *Juventud Rebelde*

settings; patriotically liberating: they experienced new realities inside their own country; and intellectually liberating: they were empowered as equals with adults and men in a collective effort that had tangible results.

Today, many women now in their 60s speak with pride and reverence about the part each played in Cuba's literacy campaign, how it changed Cuba, and how it changed them.

RIGHTS UNDER THE LAW

“No country can afford to fall behind because it is failing to enable women and men to participate equally in the economy and society.”

—*Report of the Development Committee
of the World Bank Group*⁸⁶

Cuba enshrined basic commitments to gender equality in the nation's laws. In 1975, Cuba adopted a Family Code that covers marriage, divorce, paternity, adoption, and parental responsibilities for the care and education of children. Cuban women have the same landownership rights as men, and there is no legal discrimination in regards to their access to marital property.⁸⁷

The 1976 Constitution of Cuba says that all citizens have equal rights. It bars discrimination on the basis of sex, race, skin color, and national origin. It states that men and women enjoy equal rights in economic, political, cultural, and family matters. The constitution also recognizes the right to an education for all of its citizens. It provides the right of each citizen to free health care.

Complementing these constitutional guarantees are decrees and regulations that protect the rights of women to education, healthcare, social security, and in the workplace. Laws guarantee and facilitate medical care during pregnancy, pay and job protection benefits for maternal leave, flexibility for breast-feeding, and the care of minor and disabled children.⁸⁸

Despite setbacks, these legal guarantees have produced concrete results that international organizations credit Cuba for providing. They are the foundation for policies that made Cubans healthier and more literate, brought Cuban girls into the classroom, tripled the number of Cuban women at work and, by guaranteeing property rights, gave them greater assurance in starting their own businesses as Cuba updates its economic model. They also provide Cuban women with rights and opportunities that are rare in the developing world.

In far too many places, women and girls have no guarantees to education or health, require permission to find a job or marry, can't decide for themselves where they live or when (or whether) to have a child, lack the freedom to travel outside the home or confer citizenship rights to their daughters and sons. They are denied basic property and ownership rights; some can't sign contracts or register a business; others can't divorce or claim the same inheritance rights as men.

As the World Bank noted in 2012, women in Chile and Honduras cannot be heads of households and lack the same ownership rights over property obtained during marriage their spouses enjoy. In Colombia, Costa Rica, and Ecuador, there is no presumption of joint ownership for married women over major assets like land or the marital home.⁸⁹ In societies like these, discrimination against women is alive and corrosive, even deadly. This denial of empowerment holds them and their families back. Studies show that when women lose control over family assets, this leads to lower spending on food and nutrition, and adds to a family's vulnerability to poverty.⁹⁰ That is why women need the protection of law in Latin America and everywhere.

Problems, of course, remain. When Cuba's Family Code was amended in 2003, a provision was added protecting the rights of parents to decide who would stay at home to care for a child and who would work outside the home. In 2009, according to a report filed by the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women, **only 18 men took advantage of this right and stayed home.**⁹¹ The society is not promoting a more equitable sharing of responsibilities.

A local historian told us this story about a friend who decided to be "a househusband" in Santiago de Cuba:

"My good friend did that—he took care of his children and stayed home while the wife went to work. We were cruel to him, he is our friend but we were teasing him a lot, saying 'I will bring my underwear for you to wash.' Only when the income is much higher than the man, would the man accept. I teased my friend, but I also helped him do the laundry."⁹²

Cuban men are taking a long time to change, something that Cuban women didn't hesitate to bring to our notice. An academic in Havana told us,

"Women under age 45 find it difficult to find a young professional man as a partner. Cuban men pine for (the kind of) Cuban women who no longer exist, while Cuban women look for (the kind of) Cuban men who are not yet formed."⁹³

As everywhere, gaps exist between ideals and everyday realities for women and men. The gap is especially deep and troubling when it comes to domestic violence. Cuba has been criticized domestically and by international organizations in the critical area of violence against women.

Although Cuba has been historically reluctant to admit it has a problem, a psychology professor told a CDA delegation that, "Violence against women is present in Cuba across race, class, occupation, and geographic location. This includes rape, psychological violence, and marital rape."⁹⁴ Cuban women chronically under-report violence in their homes and, often, they lack recourse or protection against domestic violence in family court. Cuban law does not recognize domestic violence as a distinct category of violence.⁹⁵

CUBA'S BIG BET ON EDUCATION AND HEALTH

“Fidel,” *The Economist* reported in 2012, “poured resources into social programmes that reached from cradle to grave, providing free world-class health care and education.”⁹⁶

By 2008, Cuba had the highest government spending on social services in Latin America. As a percentage of the state’s budget, education got 20.1%; health got 15.2%.⁹⁷ “According to most scholars,” as Drs. Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Pavel Vidal Alejandro write, free access to education and health were among “Cuba’s greatest achievements in the first three decades of the revolution.”⁹⁸

The commitments to education and health, now under considerable stress, were cornerstones in the effort to build a more equal, sovereign, and dignified Cuban identity for the entire population. Because access to these key public services became universal, the women and girls of Cuba were its greatest beneficiaries.

Education

“Educating girls is the most effective means of improving the well-being of women and children.”⁹⁹

—*State of the World’s Mothers 2012*

Cuban women have a constitutional right to education without exception. Cuba’s social policy regards free education as a duty of the state. After the literacy campaign, the school system was reorganized and expanded, there was a national effort to build and equip schools with trained teachers, to dismantle private schools, and to give boys and girls an equal shot at learning. The doors to the schoolhouse had opened.

Today, the most humble female child can aspire to a free education all the way through university. UNICEF calculates that 99% of Cuban boys and girls are enrolled in primary school, and 83% of girls and 82% of boys are in school at the secondary level.¹⁰⁰ Sixty percent of teachers at all levels are women. Women now outnumber men in the third level of schooling

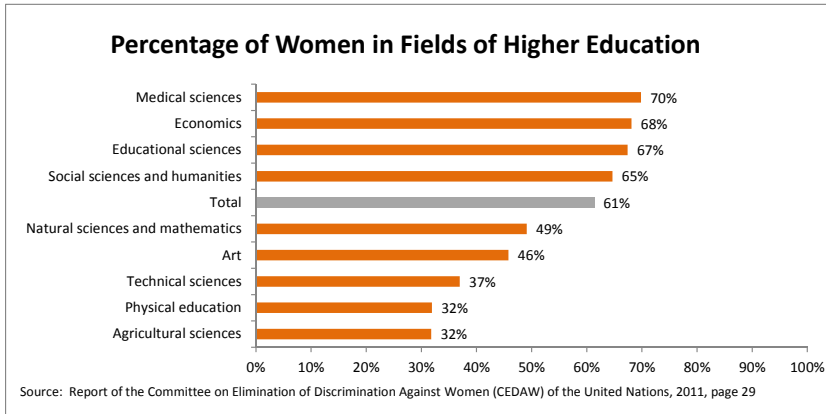


A student uses a speech therapy program at an elementary school for children with physical-motor limitations.

and constitute 68% of students receiving college degrees.¹⁰¹ The pipeline is producing more.

The concept of education is integral to the society broadly; including culture, art, sports, specialized study, professional preparation, post-graduate education and investigation. Research on gender itself is institutionalized.

During the 1980s, social scientists and demographers began applying a gender focus in their work, studying Cuban women's social and economic development. The University of Havana Women's Studies Department was created in September 1991. It brings together researchers from 17 university departments and works jointly with other entities such as the FMC. Since 2005, the university has offered a master's degree in Women's Studies. Scholars examine obstacles to the development of women and that attention contributes to the sense of social justice in their society. Ideally, gaining a better understanding of barriers to gender equality will enable progress to intensify over time.



However, since President Raúl Castro took office, Cuba has stopped the growth rate of its education budget, holding it virtually unchanged as a share of either GDP or the state budget.¹⁰²

Ninety-six percent of community colleges have closed, as have 77% of rural college-prep schools and 44% of rural secondary schools, because these institutions cost three times as much as their urban counterparts and boarding schools in rural areas were quite unpopular among urban parents. The austerity measures and tightened standards have combined to lower overall student enrollment rates in higher education.

According to Cuba’s National Statistics Office (ONE), student enrollment is down 27%. Universities have been particularly hard hit. “The number of students dropped almost 50% to 156,000 in 2011, from 300,000 in 2008, as admission standards were raised and liberal arts careers slashed.”¹⁰³ Reuters quoted Sonya Pérez, a single mom, saying “Opportunities are shrinking and competition increasing. I make my daughter study two hours every day and pay one of her teachers 30 pesos each week to tutor her.”¹⁰⁴

Quotas were created for university majors and entrance exams were established to ensure the best qualified and most serious students were given access to higher education. While overall matriculation in universities decreased 36% in 2010-2011 in comparison to 2007-2008, the number of natural sciences and mathematics students rose 16% in in the same period, with nearly half that increase represented by women. Across the Cuban school

system, however, lower birth rates will produce declines in enrollment for the foreseeable future.

For all women, equality in education has the greatest multiplier effects, because it connects to almost every other indicator of human development and progress. Studies show that educating women reduces poverty,¹⁰⁵ boosts their participation in the workforce,¹⁰⁶ increases their earning power,¹⁰⁷ and enhances theirs and their children's health, while giving them a more equal role at home.¹⁰⁸

Health

“Life expectancy and infant and child mortality are summary indications of nutrition, income distribution and poverty and the quality of a nation's health care system.”

—Dr. Archibald R. M. Ritter¹⁰⁹

In many countries, birthing multiple children, finding them clean water, and nursing them in sickness dominate women's lives and act as a brake on advances toward greater equality. The health of female children affects their own life-chances in adulthood. The progress of gender equality is closely connected to a nation's investment in human health.

As with education, Cuba's health care commitment starts with a constitutional guarantee that provides each citizen the right to free healthcare. Cuba's national health care system provides universal health care coverage that has helped raise health care indicators for all citizens and especially women and children.

In *9 Ways for US to Talk to Cuba and for Cuba to Talk to US*, our report on engagement with Cuba, Dr. Peter Bourne described what the government did to deliver on the promise of health care:

“From his earliest public statements Fidel Castro promised the provision of health care as a central way in which his revolution would change the lives of the Cuban people. In power, a top priority was to bring equity to the healthcare system and in particular to provide services to those in rural areas. Dozens

of rural hospitals were built, and subsequently 450 community health centers, labeled 'Polyclinics' were established throughout the country. In the early eighties, 30,000 family doctors were assigned to work in conjunction with the 'Polyclinics' bringing primary health care within easy reach of virtually every citizen. The government moved, over time, to establish 21 medical schools as opposed to the one that existed previously."¹¹⁰

Backed now by a commitment equal to 10.6% of GDP, the system has given all Cubans greater health and longevity. It did so by building a comprehensive health system that offers primary care, hospital and clinical treatment, including pediatrics and gynecology, as well as top-notch research institutions credited with breakthroughs in Meningitis B, and lung and prostate cancer vaccines, among others.¹¹¹

Cuba has rid itself of most tropical diseases that afflict its nearest Caribbean neighbors; now, nine of ten Cuban deaths are from *non-communicable* diseases, the illnesses that most affect developed countries.¹¹² The complex of medical schools gives Cuba one of the world's highest doctor-patient ratios; today, over 78,000 physicians are available to treat 11 million of their fellow citizens, ten times the number that existed in 1960.¹¹³

These achievements benefit all Cubans. But many of the top programs of the National Health System are specifically directed at women. These include the Maternal-Infant Attention Program, the National Program for the Detection of Cervical-Uterine Cancer, the National Program of Reproductive Health, Family Planning, and the Program of Integral Attention to the Elderly. The National Program of Family Doctors and Nurses benefits women of all ages as well.¹¹⁴

This system—along with Cuba's other social policies—has produced great strides in maternal and child health. Approximately 99% of births take place in hospital.¹¹⁵ Working women who are pregnant are entitled to 18 weeks of paid maternity leave at 100% of their average weekly income. After that, either parent is eligible for up to nine months of parental leave at 60% pay.¹¹⁶ When they return to their legally protected jobs, women are allowed one hour a day to breastfeed. "It is illegal to employ women in positions that pose a threat to their reproductive health or to fire them as a result of pregnancy."¹¹⁷

The health care system lowered rates of infant mortality to 4.9 of every 1000 births, lower than Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.¹¹⁸

Although one indicator is alarming—in recent years, maternal death rates have risen (43.1 per 1000) since Cuba's economic crisis in the 1990s (29.3/1000)—there is nevertheless a *vast* improvement from 125/1000 in 1957. Cuba still ranks 4th lowest in the region.¹¹⁹

By driving down infant mortality and under-5 mortality rates dramatically, Cuba has fulfilled the Fourth Millennium Development Goal for reducing child mortality.¹²⁰ It is on track to meet the MDG targets for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; improving maternal health and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. It scores high, again, under the UNDP indicators for human development for expenditures as a percentage of GDP for public health, reduced child mortality, and increased life expectancy. Among less developed nations listed in the most recent Save the Children report, Cuba is ranked as the number one country in which to be a mother.¹²¹

Other health programs support women at every stage of their lives. Contraception is freely provided. Rare among nations in Latin America, abortion is legal, free, and accessible.¹²² These reproductive services have positive implications for women's health and increase their participation in work.¹²³ Cuba has made a significant commitment to childcare. An early childhood curriculum in the schools focuses on matters relating to health and human sexuality. CENESEX has been a leading advocate for effective and compassionate policies that helped give Cuba the lowest rate of HIV/AIDS in the Americas.¹²⁴

The FMC assists women with breast cancer and organizes self-help groups of women who have had mastectomies. “The political will of the government and the institutional response has greatly helped women in relation to uterine cancer,” says economist Teresa Lara Junco. Now, Cuba also records the fourth lowest death rate due to cervical cancer in Latin America.¹²⁵

All of this means that healthier Cubans are living longer. Cuba now expects 31% of its citizens will be over age 60 in 2030, the majority of whom will be women.¹²⁶ Outreach programs are being implemented for the aging, giving older Cubans a source of intellectual stimulation, motivation, and improved quality of life.¹²⁷



Antonia Díaz, 91, addresses a CDA delegation in June 2011.

“We are proud of being old women. There are things we can’t do, but we can do other things and we have achieved dignity. In this moment, we are strengthening the role and view of grandmothers. It doesn’t matter whether we have grandchildren, we are grandmothers because we are old and we have responsibility as educators for those behind us. We teach to learn and learn to teach.”

—*Antonia Díaz, age 91, University Programs for Older Adults (CUAM), University of Havana*¹²⁸

As everywhere, the life-chances of Cuba’s women and mothers, and the health of their children, are closely linked, and improvements in education and health give great support to the equality agenda. But now, as with education opportunities, the state is reorganizing the national health care system to find savings.

In October 2012, the Associated Press detailed the shuttering of medical care facilities, a cut of ten-thousand positions in the health system’s technical and support staff, and a broader reorganization of the country’s medical facilities. Although Cuba guarantees free access to medical care, the health care system is undergoing a process of “consolidation and regionalization,”

with an eye toward eliminating inefficiencies. The national budget for health care was cut 11% in 2010 and by another 7% in 2011.¹²⁹

Many polyclinics have been closed in recent years. One, in San José de las Lajas, with 75 professionals, a laboratory, ultrasound, electrocardiograph, urology, rheumatology, stomatology, rehabilitation, dermatology, emergency and two consultation rooms, was closed because it only attended to 15 patients per week.¹³⁰ Across Cuba, hospital beds have been moved to facilities with higher demands. Cubans complain that some facilities are run-down, that getting prompt treatment can mean offering under-the-table payments to jump the line for examinations, and patients frequently have to provide their own “sheets, pillows, towels, and even drinking water” during hospital stays.¹³¹

At the same time, Cuba's government has launched a public awareness campaign, “Your health care is free, but how much does it cost?” to remind the population of how much the state continues to spend in providing health care.¹³²

WOMEN GO TO WORK

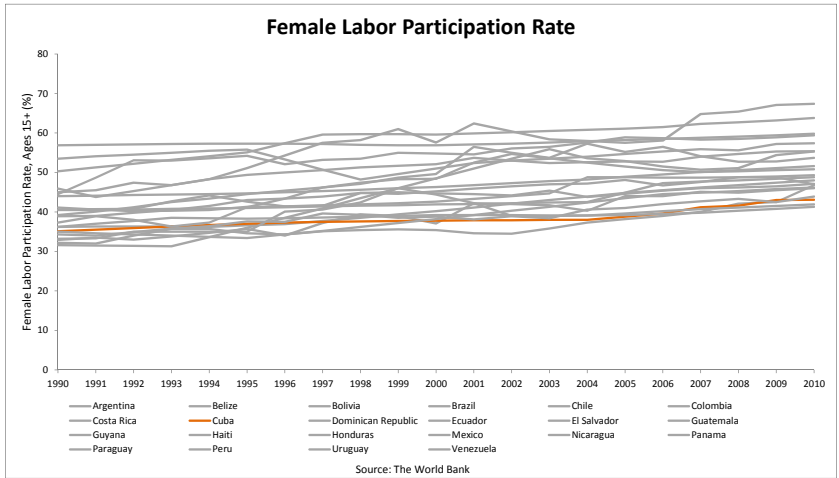
“Jobs are instrumental to achieving economic and social development.”

—*The World Development Report*¹³³

Women now constitute 38.1% of Cuba's workforce; an historic improvement, but a figure that lags behind most of Latin America.¹³⁴

Statutory guarantees to equality and the right to work, investments in health and education, nutrition and social services, legally protected maternity leave, day care, and return to their jobs following childbirth, all helped women to leave home and earn a salary in the formal economy. The investment in their skills mattered enormously.

Today, women hold 72% of the education and 70% of the health care jobs created by the state.¹³⁵ Likewise, they are in the majority in finance and the insurance sector.¹³⁶ In joint ventures operated by Cuba with foreign investors, Cuban women hold more than 40% of the jobs.¹³⁷ Although women make up 52.8% of the workforce with a graduate-level education, they hold only



34.4% of executive positions.¹³⁸ Women do not show strongly in the non-state sector either, accounting for only 17.2% of cooperative workers.¹³⁹ But, they do represent more than 24% of license holders in Cuba’s newly-expanded small business sector.¹⁴⁰

Roughly 200,000 women are engaged in agriculture activity across the country.¹⁴¹ The farm economy should be a *growing* source of gainful employment for women. However, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, “there is a low level of participation in the agricultural sector and cooperatives” by females engaged in agriculture, livestock, forestry and fishing across the island,¹⁴² and women constitute just ten percent of the leaseholders given parcels of state land.

Cuban agriculture expert, Dr. Armando Nova, described in spring 2012 what is holding them back. “*Hay mucho machismo, más en la agricultura* [there is a lot of *machismo*, more so in agriculture],” he said. In addition, the parcels of private land are often covered in *marabú*, a nearly useless shrub that is difficult to remove and covers 1.7 million hectares of Cuba’s productive land.¹⁴³ Farmers cannot grow crops without making greater investments, and contributing long months of very hard physical work. That said, Dr. Nova told us “there are women heading cooperatives, they tend to be more disciplined, more effective. *Más humanas*.”

Profile: Rural Women in the Provinces of Cienfuegos and Villa Clara



“For the first time I am economically independent. I deliver 100 eggs a week to the community store and they pay me as they sell the eggs. I’m happy because my salary is 400 pesos.”

—*Mabel González, coop worker in Santa Isabel de las Lajas, Cienfuegos province.*¹⁴⁴

Ninety-seven of the country’s 169 municipalities are rural, but Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, doesn’t come close to producing enough food to meet the population’s needs. The government spends \$2 billion annually importing food from abroad, which in turn limits what Cuba can invest to build a more productive economy. Agriculture was the earliest focus of President Raúl Castro’s economic reforms, distributing fallow state land to private farmers and cooperatives, along with a host of other changes designed to put more diverse and higher quality food on Cuban tables grown at home.

We met with women working at the CPA Jesús Menéndez de Caibarién Cooperative in Villa Clara Province. The CPA is an agricultural cooperative, uniting producers of milk, sugar cane, fruits, grains and vegetables. The small farmers who own land put their properties together to create the cooperative. All members of the cooperative work on that land. The revenues go to all; they are shared among all members.

We spoke to Rosario García, a mother and a grandmother:

“I get up at 5:30am and attend to my animals. At 6:00am, I arrive to my job at the cooperative. I live pretty close. I can walk to work. We can eat at the workers’ canteen. I complete my duties. From Mondays through Saturday noon, there is a first shift from 7am to 12pm. There is then a second shift from 1-4 pm. I go home at 4 pm. I take care of my 4 kids and grandchildren and the following day, I do the same. I can plough, do all tasks, I do a little of everything. I don’t have any impediments to work. Mostly, I really like the field and co-workers, both men and women. We are equal. We have the same rights and we fight and continue to fight for much more. So far, everything for us is perfect.”

Her colleague, Zenaida, added:

“I have two kids, one is 7 years old and one is 20 years old. I work here as a seller in the market but I’ve worked in agriculture, directly in the field, with the harvesting, in sugar cane, in everything. We have the same rights as everyone, the same for men and women. We can decide; we can have an opinion in any questions we are facing. We have the same rights.”

She’s been at the cooperative for twelve years. •

Getting more women to work on Cuban farms would help fulfill the goals of economic reform. “Indeed, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that giving male and female farmers equal access to time- and labor-saving tools could increase agriculture output in developing countries by as much as 2.5-4%.”¹⁴⁵ In addition to raising productivity, the Millennium Challenge Corporation says increasing the role of women in agriculture will improve the food security of their families and the nutrition status of their children.¹⁴⁶ On the farm, the economic interests of women who want to work and help their families converge with Cuba’s interest in importing less food from abroad and growing more at home.

Scholars argue whether Cuba was motivated by social justice or a desire to create a larger pool of labor when it encouraged women to go to work.¹⁴⁷ Motives aside, the results are not in dispute. In 1953, the number of Cuban

women age 14 and older who worked—with or without pay—was less than a quarter million, about 13 percent of the island's workforce.¹⁴⁸ Over the decades, that percentage has tripled.

Still, fewer than 40 percent of working age women are employed, and Cuban women earn on average less than half of what men make¹⁴⁹—not because there is pay discrimination, but rather that men have access to higher paying jobs. Women receive smaller salaries; as single parents, they are heads of household in one-third of Cuba's homes and, with low purchasing power, they have trouble making ends meet.¹⁵⁰ This is especially dispiriting to the highly-trained women who emerge year after year from Cuban colleges, yet remain unable to fully employ their talents. A bias in Cuban law provides a retirement age for men at age 65 but forces women out of the workforce five years earlier (reforms adopted in 2008 permit all retired people to work without losing their pensions).¹⁵¹

While Cuba is committed legally to assuring gender equality, attitudes, cultural norms, and values are still moving at a slower pace. Our delegations are often told that a “gender paradox” undermines their progress.

While Cuban law, for example, guarantees to men and women “equal rights and responsibilities in raising children, maintaining the home, and pursuing a career...women still bear the burden for performing the majority of household and caregiving responsibilities in addition to working outside the home.”¹⁵² Due to Cuba's chronic housing shortage, many women live in urban and rural households with three generations and have a “double-shift,” going to work while also attending children, grandchildren, and in-laws, at home and assuming overall administration of the household.¹⁵³ This weighs especially hard on households run by women of color. Afro-Cubans are less likely to have relatives living overseas sending them financial support. We were reminded by an Afro-Cuban professional in Havana, although “we have a law that prohibits racial discrimination. ...[that] does not mean that there is not any discrimination. Cuba's historical context cannot be erased in 50 years. There is something cultural. We need better education that another world is possible.”¹⁵⁴

As the population ages, Cuban women find their already disproportionate share of social labor will become heavier. If women continue to be the main

providers of eldercare, the competition between family responsibilities and career development will become more intense, forcing some women to sacrifice work for family, a back-to-the-future moment for gender equality.

POLICIES MATTER

“Facts are stubborn things.”

—*John Adams, December 1770*

Cuba's commitment to gender equity for women did not create an island haven for its female citizens. It did, however, make it national policy to dismantle obstacles Cuban women faced in their legal status, education, health and nutrition, parenting and employment.

Cuba was once ranked fifth in Latin America for adult literacy and combined primary and secondary school enrollments; now, it is ranked first.¹⁵⁵ UNESCO reports, “Cuban children's academic performance in primary school on language, mathematics, and natural science tests is significantly higher than that of their counterparts in the geographical region.”¹⁵⁶

Cuba has surpassed Brazil, Russia, India, and China, in the index for human development, because of its achievements in life expectancy at birth and years of schooling, even after adjusting for those countries' significantly larger economies.

Cuba has fulfilled the Millennium Development Goals for universal access to primary education, reducing infant mortality, and promoting gender equality and women's development. This goal, the MDG 3, is unique because gender equality is recognized as the means for achieving all the others.

Cuba has fundamentally increased women's life options and those to which their children could aspire. Simply put, policies matter.

“When our revolution is judged in future years, **one of the matters on which we will be judged is the manner in which our society and our homeland solved the problems of women.**”

—*President Fidel Castro, November 30, 1974, before the 2nd Congress of the Federation of Cuban Women*¹⁵⁷

The Risk of Falling Back

“The gigantic paternalistic state can no longer be, because there is no longer a way to maintain it.”¹⁵⁸

—*Marino Murillo, 2010, who now serves as Chairman of Cuba’s Economic Policy Commission*

In Cuba, economic upheaval has been accompanied by reversals in achievements and progress for women. This last major reversal occurred when support from the USSR disappeared, and “The overnight withdrawal of Soviet subsidies and trade links caused Cuba’s economy to collapse by 35% between 1989 and 1993.”¹⁵⁹

Those years, called “The Special Period” in Cuba, imposed immense hardships on Cubans. Less than one-third of public transportation functioned, industrial activity halved, daycare construction halted, and nutrition dropped as people consumed 30% fewer calories.¹⁶⁰ Real wages collapsed by close to 90%.¹⁶¹ The imprint of those times is painfully clear in lower growth rates, hunger, and impaired immunity among children raised in the scarcities of the time. Mesa-Lago and Vidal Alejandro describe how vanishing support from Russia, policy changes, and errors committed by Cuba’s government caused “a 78% decrease in real social expenditures per capita, an increase in unemployment to 8%, and a deterioration in social indicators.”¹⁶²

Although the female workforce actually increased, as male-dominated industries were the first to grind to a halt, the Special Period caused a setback for gender equality, because women also had to increase efforts at home to keep children fed and households organized. As a retired teacher said, “Who

do you want in your kitchen when there is not enough oil to last the week, and dish soap is hard to find? Who do you want to shop when pennies must be stretched to feed hungry mouths?”¹⁶³

Nothing of this magnitude is currently happening in Cuba. From the time he assumed office as acting president, however, Raúl Castro has publicly acknowledged his country's economic crisis:

“...Without an increase in efficiency and productivity, it is impossible to raise salaries, increase exports, substitute for imports, increase food production, and sustain definitively the enormous expenditures of our socialist system.”

—*President Raúl Castro*¹⁶⁴

To address the crisis, the nation's leadership is making changes in Cuba's economic model the scale of which have not been seen in more than fifty years. Cuba is shrinking the size of the state, ending a long list of social benefits, decentralizing authority to provincial and local governments, privatizing some government businesses, and creating more cooperatives. The government announced plans to lay off 500,000 state-employed workers, released some, but then slowed the process down. To absorb terminated workers, it is counting on the growth of the nascent non-state or private sector, by expanding areas of self-employment for so-called “*cuentapropistas*” and incentivizing the creation of jobs to do so.

All told, the labor performed by working women contributes to a hefty percentage of the nation's GDP. By 2007, this contribution was above the national average per worker¹⁶⁵ even though Cuban women have less access to higher paying jobs than men. To the extent that more women move into the workforce, they will exert more pressure on salaries to become equal.¹⁶⁶

But, state jobs are women's jobs. Cuban women do not want to shoulder a disproportionate share of the projected public layoffs. While the salaries of state employees do not stretch far, public employment offers a base-line security that entrepreneurial initiatives do not. Among women, there is insecurity about the layoffs and fears that in some cases women will lose their jobs due to discrimination. Now, the Federation of Cuban Women is

working to prevent discrimination in layoffs and to broaden opportunities in urban and rural small businesses and cooperatives.

Although women are joining the ranks of the self-employed, many of them expressed concern to us that approved private professions offer men more realistic chances of being hired or starting businesses.

Getting more women employed is an important goal. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has observed:

“Making the most of the talent pool ensures that men and women have an equal chance to contribute both at home and in the workplace, thereby enhancing the well-being of both men and women, and more generally to society.”¹⁶⁷

Profile: María Ileana Faguaga



María Ileana (Mimi) Faguaga Iglesias lives in Havana and is a historian and anthropologist. She was born in 1963 in the capital, but like more than half the city’s residents, Mimi has roots outside of Havana. Her father, born and raised in the eastern city of Santiago, was a guerilla in the July 26th movement, fought the final battles in the Sierra Maestra, and arrived in Havana with the victory of the Revolution. He married Mimi’s mother, a native “habanera,” and their family remained in the capital.

Mimi’s parents worked on opposite sides of the city. For them, managing her young life was a logistical struggle. They spent hours on public transportation taking Mimi back and forth from home to school, or to her grandmother’s house. Only eleven years old, she was sent at her own request to boarding school, to live and learn on the outskirts of

the city. After completing her studies at boarding school, Mimi moved back home to be with her parents.

University and the Job Market

Mimi attended college and studied history. Yet, the university offered few interesting classes that added credits to her major. She left her studies after her third year, but later returned to find more attractive classes being offered to fulfill her major, such as archiving and Caribbean history, that truly interested her. When she graduated, there were no jobs for historians. Instead, she worked in various jobs in the informal [non-state] sector without the security or benefits paid to employees of the state. Today, she is a freelance journalist and an adjunct professor at the University of Havana in the Contemporary History Department.

“So, I studied history at the University of Havana, against most peoples’ will.

“To discover after I graduated that in my major there was already a group of History graduates from four previous classes without employment - for me this was very frustrating, because the first question I asked myself was: Well, if they knew that, why did they open up the major? Why didn’t they tell me that I was going to study it at my own risk? [Or tell me] that they would not be able to guarantee me a job after graduation?

“I needed to work, I want to work, I like to work, and I really like journalism. But, I don’t think of myself as a journalist. This work has allowed me to earn my subsistence, and to feed my family.”

The Glass Ceiling

Mimi is a strong critic of a common narrative in Cuba that overstates women’s progress toward equality. Although there are women in positions of power, she says the real power of these women doesn’t compare to that of their male colleagues.

“We have to distinguish that access to university studies does not necessarily give us power. What’s more, to be in positions that are supposedly positions of power does not necessarily permit the exercise of power.

“I see this a lot with Cuban women. For example, when a woman is in the National Assembly, they incorporate themselves with a mental structure that does not necessarily correspond to empowerment. It corresponds to the norms of the existing powers, and the woman represents these norms instead of representing herself as a woman. So yes, I do believe that Cuban women have gained positions of power, but not with empowerment. I think that we have something which I classify as ‘revolutionary machismo,’ which is: ‘You’re here to the extent that you serve my interests, because the interests are defined by me, the man. From that point on, I consider you my equal, because you support me, because you help me, because you repeat my speeches. Because it’s I who says, as a man, that women are equal to me, and what’s more, I’m the one who is giving you this space. There is a group of self-determined Cuban feminists who recognize that in these 50 years, women have not won space; we have been granted spaces.

“What is happening to Cuban women now is not an issue of space. There are many spaces that are open for women. Women are in fields that were not historically open to them, for example, military and technical.

“This system that pushes us to get to the university, has not structurally created the guarantees that a woman can get to the university and study as part of a family, or as the head of a family.

“I’ve had the sad experience of a male boss telling me ‘Hey, don’t even think about having a baby, because you’re going to throw your career out the window. Don’t have a baby and don’t get married.’ The culture is still very *machista*. At the same time, choosing to have a family is not an option for women; it’s something you’re programmed for since childhood. That’s why it’s something that isn’t correlated with professional success”

Afro-Cuban Women in the Workforce and Access to Education

As an anthropologist, Mimi has focused on issues facing Afro-Cubans, and specifically Afro-Cuban women. She cites barriers that faced her generation and that continue to face school-age girls and their families today. These problems are only magnified by the impact of Cuba's changing economy and the heightened importance of private businesses.

“The Afro-Cuban and mulata women who joined the Federation of Cuban Women in '61 didn't need the organization to stimulate them to go out and work. Black women have always worked in Cuba. Usually domestic work, but also as small businesswomen, there's a tradition of black teachers, of black seamstresses, of midwives and nurses, and there is also a tradition of having more than one job at once. However, the ones who talk about that tradition are the black female scholars. It's something that the rest ignore, and I ask myself why.

“Once the legal opportunity for young black women was there, your 'opportunities' depended on your family. If they can maintain you for five years while you study, that's fine, but if you have three kids, you have to decide if they can continue to go to school after their obligatory education. When you're in school, even though the education is free, there are a lot of expenses that your family has to pay.

“Economic difficulties *obligate* professional women to have a second job in their free time—like an assistant in a *paladar*, where they pay you more than at your state job. But, you have no protections in private employment; you're like a slave. And [due to the added pressures] you are more likely to burn out or get sick. And then imagine—they fire you.”

Speaking of the impact of economic reforms, Mimi says so much dialogue about the reforms has caused them to inflate into something more than what is actually there: “There's an illusion, that is created

inside and outside of Cuba, and there's an idea that when those outside the country applaud us, that we have to applaud. Yes, there are lots of *cuentapropistas*. What we don't know yet is: how many of them can survive and save up a little bit to have a place to live?"

To Stay or to Go

Mimi understands the pressures pushing young Cubans to seek opportunities outside of the island. She sees some opportunity in emigration, but also notes the strains on families when someone leaves, and cautions against emigrants leaving Cuba with unrealistic expectations.

"I've thought a lot about the youth; what has caused the youth to be so escapist? We can't blame young people so much for wanting to escape, and likewise, we can't justify this by saying it's something that is happening in the whole world. We have to ask ourselves what has happened to the country's structure, and what's been done by my generation, mothers and fathers of these young people, that we've educated them and mis-educated them this way? And the truth is that they are the children of a generation that is very frustrated.

"Many of them want to leave the country; the majority of them to work, and some of them to study; all of them to learn and to experience an act of freedom."

People leave so that they can work and afford to support themselves and to send money back to their family. But it worries Mimi to think about the breaking up of so many families, and the difficulties of putting them back together.

"It's very worrying when people decide to break up a family, and even more worrying to break up a family with no plans of putting it back together. Hopefully, if they leave, they'll work. Hopefully, they won't get alienated. It's hard – there are people that leave Cuba thinking that they are going to find paradise on Earth and everywhere, life is struggle. There is no paradise." •

The Role of Women in Building Cuba's Future

“The challenge of delivering long-term strong and sustainable economic growth that benefits all can only be met if best use is made of all available resources. Leaving women behind means not only forsaking the important contributions women make to the economy but also wasting years of investment in education of girls and young women. Making the most of the talent pool ensures that men and women have an equal chance to contribute both at home and in the workplace, thereby enhancing the well-being of both men and women, and more generally to society.”

—*The Organization for Economic Cooperation
and Development*¹⁶⁸

Cuba faces major challenges. It must repay its international debts. It needs more of the foreign exchange now spent on food to import capital goods to become a manufacturer of products and producer of services the world wants to buy. It must end the problem of its two currencies—a national currency only valuable in Cuba, another internationally tradable—which distort the economy and cause disparities in the purchasing power of everyday Cubans. It must recover from yet another disastrous hurricane season.

To address these crises, the nation's leaders are making the most significant changes in Cuba's economic model in more than fifty years. In

its most dramatic action to date, Cuba is lifting most restrictions on the right of its citizens to exit and return to the country. Cubans can now travel abroad for two years at a time (and longer on request) upon presentation of a current passport and entry visa from the destination country.

These actions are economically important; they will provide Cubans with greater access to goods and services they want and need, enable Cubans who start businesses to feel a greater sense of ownership over their lives, and provide greater mobility and choices over where they live and how they earn. The travel reform also has potential as a source of more foreign exchange, and as a safety valve for the government, allowing the disgruntled or frustrated to go abroad.

Overall, Cuba's goal is to address the country's economic crisis without compromising its political system, sovereignty, or founding principles. This is a massive undertaking that will ask much from all of Cuba's people. But there are steps that could enable women to be fuller partners in Cuba's economic revival, which would, in turn, help preserve the gains and extend the cause of gender equality.

SUPPORT WOMEN AS ENTREPRENEURS AND AT WORK

“We are dignifying the work of the private sector so that when the state makes changes, the people will not feel the change so much.”

—*Female staffer at the Federation of Cuban Women, Santa Clara*¹⁶⁹

To cushion the impact of state layoffs, Cuba expanded areas where its workers can start their own small businesses, to 181 highly specific categories of trade, mostly in the services sector. It eliminated caps on salaries and promised incentive pay for productive workers. It freed Cubans to work at more than one job and allowed small business owners to hire other Cubans. It authorized bank credits to the private sector to boost self-employment, agricultural production and housing rehabilitation. In legalizing the sale



"Didn't you want me to open up a little business?"
Cartoon, Enrique Lacoste Prince, *Palante Magazine*

of cars and private homes by individual owners, it has increased private liquidity, mobility, and demand for services like home repair. Women now comprise approximately 24% of nearly 400,000 Cubans working in private enterprise.¹⁷⁰

This is positive. But, the small business sector is just getting off the ground in Cuba. Most government-authorized private occupations are in the service or retail sectors. Many new businesses are simply legalized versions of what Cubans as state employees had been doing on the side for years, without authorization, to get by. One recent study showed that only 17% of the new firms formed are run by former state employees or retired workers.¹⁷¹ For Cuba to realize its ambitious goals to reduce the state's payrolls, many more of these businesses will have to be created over the short- and longer-terms.

Profile: Barbara, an Entrepreneur



Barbara, age 26, was born and raised in Old Havana, where she continues to live with her husband and daughter. Operators of small businesses are called *cuentapropistas*, from the term *trabajo por cuenta propia* (literally “working for one’s own account”). She is among thousands of Cuban women working in the private sector, running her own storefront in a self-employment zone, where she sells shoes and clothing. The opening of the private sector in October 2010 has benefitted her economically, and she enjoys working side by side with her mother and sister, who operate retail spaces nearby. Barbara, like millions of other Cubans, has family on both sides of the Florida Straits. She occasionally speaks with her father, who left for the U.S. in 2001 and has not yet been able to return to Cuba. She has lived with her mother most of her life and helped raise her teenage sister.

Benefits of Running a Small Business

“My life has improved over the last several years with the possibility of working as a *cuentapropista*. I immediately solicited a license, along with my mother and sister, in November of 2010 when the private sector was once again opened up. The timing was perfect as my daughter was one-and-a-half years old at the time. The fact that I work with my mother and sister means that we can all work together to divide our schedule and take care of her, while my lovely husband also takes care of her 3 or 4 days a week when he is off from work.”

Prior to becoming a self-employed worker, Barbara was a housewife and hadn’t worked for an extended time in the formal economy. She said she seized the opportunity for several reasons.

“More than anything, the benefit of being a *cuentalpropista* is the ability to manage your own decisions. I can decide how to invest, what hours to work, whether I want to offer specials and other decisions regarding how to manage the business. In other words, I’m my own boss and I suffer the consequences, but also reap the benefits of my decisions. Moreover, economically, there are few, if any, jobs in the state sector that can compare with *cuentalpropismo* when it comes to salaries. I’ve been able to save a little money, invest in fixing up my house, buy my daughter what she needs and put food on the table. In the end, I’m a more independent woman. My husband and I help each other but we both contribute and I don’t have to rely on him.”

Entrepreneurs Face the Burdens of Everyday Life

Not all has been rosy with her new profession. Barbara is quick to point out the ongoing difficulties that she and her peers confront.

“Things have improved since the 1990s, but it remains an uphill battle for *cuentalpropistas*. We’re constantly dealing with inspectors. Some are honest and try to enforce the regulations, while many others are simply trying to ‘catch you’ or ‘confuse you’ to solicit a bribe. In my specific category of business, which is to sell articles of clothing, there is somewhat of a grey area about whether the clothes need to be produced locally and what exactly qualifies. This ambiguity leads to difficulties for us. Additionally, taxes continue to be high and we have a very difficult time acquiring our products.”

Barbara pays 42 Cuban pesos daily to rent her small retail space, located two blocks from the Capitol Building on Calle Monte in Old Havana, in one of the government’s newly constructed “self-employment zones.” She then pays 265 Cuban pesos for social security and 160 Cuban pesos for her *cuentalpropista* license, both on a monthly basis. She said that despite the inspectors, high taxes, and lack of a wholesale market, she will continue to “luchar” (struggle along) in the private sector.

“I don’t think I will ever work for the state. The salaries are low. There’s little efficiency. And most people rely on stealing. I’d rather work on my own and with my mom and sister making an honest living.”

Progress for Women and Economic Challenges for All

Barbara is grateful to the revolution for the gains enjoyed by women, but also feels economic disarray makes things difficult for most Cuban women.

“More than anything, the Cuban Revolution has provided good health and education for everyone, including women and other traditionally marginalized sectors of society. Health and education indicators prove this. At the same time, however, the reality of low salaries, the lack of affordable food, the deteriorating housing situation and other economic shortcomings make life for us women extremely difficult.

“If you’re a secretary, there is no computer; you have to write by hand. If you’re a stylist, there are no supplies and you have to go searching. The bus doesn’t show up and you need to walk miles or spend your lunch money on a taxi. After a long day at work you arrive home, and sometimes there’s no electricity or you have to climb up to the roof to fix the water tank to take a shower. Many times there’s not money for food, and you have to invent some crazy combination of food. Things are difficult. *Machismo* still exists and many women are expected to sacrifice at work and at home. Families are divided—my sister barely knows her father. It’s an uphill battle. The Cuban reality isn’t easy.” •

IDEAS FOR DOMESTIC POLICY

“There is no written book or training manual about how to do this.”

—*A government official, in an interview with CDA*

Self-employment is a risky plunge for Cubans to take. State jobs offer security. Small businesses typically do not. Cubans are generally unaccustomed to thinking about customers and marketing, supplies and profit margins. Some are spending down hard-won family savings or remittances without a safety net and no promise of success. These factors weigh especially hard on women. Their state jobs may be at risk, but many approved independent professions seem custom fit for men.

Women's participation in the labor force needs to be supported. In their 2012 study, *Recent Changes, Opportunities for Women?*, Dayma Echevarría León and Teresa Lara Junco recommend ensuring that women who leave state employment and join the non-state sector have the same kind of access to day care and other social benefits as they do in their government jobs.¹⁷² Cuban women also need vocational training, business management experience, and greater financial literacy. The government is not yet providing such seminars or workshops. Further, it is difficult to obtain start-up or investment capital, even on a small scale. Increasing access to capital, providing training, and offering new benefits to women entrepreneurs may seem like a tall order now, given the challenges already facing Cuba.

“The original capital is in CUCs or hard currency and comes from a variety of sources: Cuban international advisers, doctors, Cuban Americans, savings of Cuban workers, re-selling of packages received from family members abroad. It is possible to sell cheap goods at high prices.”

—*Dr. Marta Núñez Sarmiento*¹⁷³

In addition to informal sources, Cuba's government approved \$3.6 million in credits in January 2012, nearly all for home improvements.¹⁷⁴ Men are dominant in private sector businesses—such as carpentry and masonry—that are most likely to benefit from this provision. Cuba's Credit and Commerce Bank has extended loans to more than 13,000 farmers, where women's employment also lags behind men's.¹⁷⁵ Yet, providing women greater access to capital is essential for the country to increase economic growth.

Additional capital may come from more Cubans living and working abroad. In a recent survey, Dr. Norma Vasallo Barrueta, head of the Women's Studies Department at the University of Havana, conducted a survey and asked women what they expected from economic reform and what the most significant change would be. The most frequent answers related to immigration: women expected, and soon saw, changes in the immigration laws.

Her analysis: "[In the Cuban] collective imagination there exists the idea that travel is equal to earning money. I do not believe the interest is so much in travel, but rather to earn money and change the economic situation here."¹⁷⁶

Freedom to travel is not only a political right, but also an economic right. Constraints on the freedom of movement are brakes on the ability to work and earn.¹⁷⁷ Research has shown that the right to exit and return home boosts remittance flows, increases access to capital, and builds "human capital such as skills, networks and ideas that can be of use to their countries of origin."¹⁷⁸ As a consequence of the government's reform, many Cubans will be able to exit and return to their country, earn money abroad, remit savings home, and communicate with women they encounter outside Cuba about their experiences of immigration and the strategic uses of remittances for business formation.

As more women enter small business, they will pay taxes, reducing some of the pressure on the state's income. They will also pay employee salaries, pay for goods, invest in their firm's capacity to grow, and thus contribute to a virtuous economic circle.

FORMING OVERSEAS PARTNERSHIPS

"This year, the World Bank said, one-third of the economies of the 49 sub-Saharan African countries will grow at a clip of 6% or more; meanwhile, the number of people living in poverty has fallen roughly 10 percentage points over the past decade. It has as much, or more, to do with trade as aid. And it is compounding a surge of female entrepreneurs."¹⁷⁹

—The New York Times, *October 2012*

Given the existing competition for domestic resources, Cuba could form partnerships with governments and NGOs that are getting results bringing women into the private sector.

There are a number of positive examples of such partnerships in other areas of the world. In India, The Be! Fund invests in businesses designed and proposed by young people living in poverty. The would-be entrepreneurs are interviewed and, if they receive approval, are sent to the next stage which is to submit a business plan to an investment committee. If they succeed, they get not a grant but a loan. The business is then evaluated over time using criteria that include: profitability, job creation for others, and whether it has had a “positive impact on women and their lives.”

In Tunisia, the “Turn-Theses-into-Enterprises program” offers grants and business coaching to winners of a business thesis competition, and has captured the attention of young women, who account for two-thirds of participants.

The U.N. Women’s Fund for Gender Equality offers Women Economic Empowerment Grants, “to increase women’s access to and control over resources and assets—including land, water, technology, and viable employment—while also addressing the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women and girls.”¹⁸⁰

Cuba already has experience working and trading with foreign governments, market economies, and donor organizations that respect Cuba’s sovereignty. It has worked with Canada’s aid agency (CIDA) on training programs helping 14,000 workers in skilled trades.¹⁸¹ It has provided scholarships to Cuban students, 65% of whom are women, working with the Heinrich Boell Foundation. It partners with the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) on gender equality projects, strengthening inclusive participation, promoting South-South cooperation, and encouraging institutionalization of women’s equality.

There is a lot of innovation occurring in the developing world, and much to be gained from exchanges of information and best practices.

WHAT ABOUT THE U.S.?

“Restrictions on women’s economic participation are costing us massive amounts of economic growth and income in every region of the world.”

—Remarks of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton,
*Lima, Peru 2012*¹⁸²

All of Cuba’s success in improving women’s lives took place despite its own economic problems and the imposition of the U.S. embargo—sanctions imposing a comprehensive block on commerce of nearly every tradable item save food and some medicines, paired with restrictions on financial transactions among the most harsh our government levies against any nation.

For decades, Cuban officials used the U.S. embargo as a scapegoat for their nation’s economic problems, but that position has faded. President Raúl Castro has publicly identified “corruption” as “far more damaging” than interventions by the U.S. or other foreign powers.¹⁸³

Although the embargo has inflicted real hardships on Cuba’s people, and exposed the U.S. to intense global criticism, it has failed to accomplish its intended objective—upending the Cuban system. A 2012 study written at the U.S. Army War College concluded, “The cost-benefit analysis [of the embargo] to U.S. national foreign policy will remain exceedingly unfavorable, if not outright counter-productive.”

Yet, President Obama enforces its harshest aspects with surprising vigor.¹⁸⁴

In the last several years, the Obama administration has made public commitments to foster entrepreneurship by women globally through several initiatives and partnerships but has been conspicuously silent about Cuban women, even though strengthening the ability of female entrepreneurs is consistent with the oft-stated desire of the U.S. for greater economic independence for the Cuban people.

Women in the U.S. who are committed to the cause of gender equality need not wait for the U.S. government to change policy, begin direct engagement with Cuba, or take steps toward normalization. Actions can be taken now, consistent with current policy, to encourage women to engage with their Cuban counterparts.

CDA proposes the use of people-to-people exchanges to foster collaboration with women entrepreneurs in Cuba.¹⁸⁵ Cuba is already active in promoting international conferences on a wide range of topics each year. These encounters let professionals exchange expertise and skills as well as build networks.

CDA is currently planning a mapping project, in collaboration with a Cuban advisory committee, to identify organizations and individuals in Latin America with training and education programs for women, as well as innovative and successful approaches that might be useful to women entrepreneurs in the Cuban context.

If this leads to the development of collaborative projects, we will propose the convening of a South-South conference in Havana to foster exchange and technical assistance in areas such as business plans, budgeting, accounting, marketing, and sustainability.

This can be accomplished through policies adopted by President Obama in 2011 that opened up travel for people-to-people educational exchanges and academic travel.¹⁸⁶ Those reforms also provided a new opportunity, previously available only to Cuban American families, that enables any U.S. citizen to send remittances to an unlimited number of Cuban nationals, limited to \$500 per quarter, except to Cuban government and high party officials.

Dr. Manuel Orozco of the Inter-American Dialogue calculated that \$1.3 billion in remittances flowed to Cuba in 2011.¹⁸⁷ But the potential for increasing this amount through efforts by Americans of non-Cuban descent has yet to be realized. CDA plans to explore how to expand remittances from the U.S. to support women starting businesses, assuming a necessary context for this to work can be built in Cuba. This means working with the U.S. Treasury Department to define permissible activities to “bundle” economic support for Cuban women entrepreneurs.

Rather than providing financial support to recipients in Cuba our government deems to be dissidents, or democracy activists working outside the system, U.S. policy needs to mature. It needs to remove the ideological blinders and engage with women entrepreneurs in Cuba the same way it does with women throughout the hemisphere.

We recommend that the U.S. government do more to foster exchanges that involve Cuba. In his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2011, President Barack Obama made a commitment to breaking down the economic barriers that stand in the way of women and girls. One year later, Secretary Hillary Clinton launched “The Equal Futures Partnership” with 12 other founding nation/members. This partnership has already identified activities taking place in nations as diverse as Denmark and Indonesia to advance women entrepreneurship and equal economic opportunity. Secretary Clinton announced before leaving office that the group will reconvene at the World Bank spring meetings in April 2013 to share progress reports and welcome new member countries.

The Obama administration also started an initiative called Women’s Entrepreneurship in the Americas (WEAmericas). It aims to increase women’s economic participation in Latin America and the Caribbean “by reducing barriers women often confront in starting and growing SMEs: access to training and networks, access to markets, and access to finance.”¹⁸⁸

CDA believes that such initiatives reflect the shared interests of women and both countries, and the U.S. ought to make room for Cuba to sit at the table as they are implemented.

Conclusion

“In this regard, I think that the party leadership, at all levels, should be self-critical and adopt the necessary measures to prevent the reemergence of such tendencies. This is also applicable to the lack of systematic work and political will to secure the promotion of women, black people and people of mixed race, and youths to decision-making positions on the basis of their merits and personal qualifications.

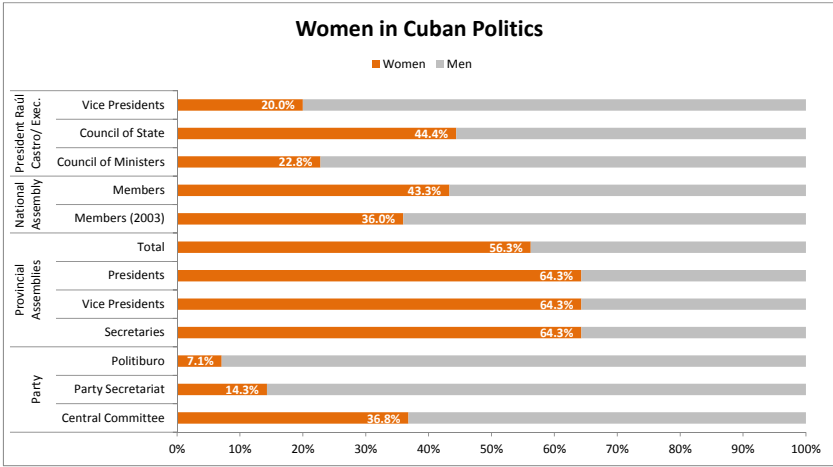
“It’s really embarrassing that we have not solved this problem in more than half a century.”

—*President Raúl Castro, April 16, 2011*¹⁸⁹

CDA has spent years listening to Cuban women talk about their country and their goals. We have tried to understand their diverse aspirations and, through this report, give them voice. In repeated trips to the island, what we have heard is a shared commitment to the realization of their equality.

Women would welcome more female leaders in the top ranks of the Cuban government and party. It is easy to understand why. The evidence suggests, as the World Bank said, “that governance is much better if women are engaged in decision making.”¹⁹⁰

But Cuban women might fairly wonder whether their voices are heard sufficiently in public decision-making or in holding Cuba accountable for falling short in these areas. Women comprise just 7% of the Cuban Communist Party’s Politburo, 14% of the Party Secretariat; 22% of the Council of Ministers,



and only one has been given the rank of Vice-President (there are five). As Cuba’s leadership makes decisions on state policy that will inevitably affect gender equality over the long term, who better to evaluate the consequences than those most familiar with the realities of the issue?

That having been said, what many Cuban women are striving for—a larger social transformation of public opinion, society and cultural norms around women, gender and race—may matter more.

As María del Carmen Varoso González, a member of the National Assembly of Cuba, states:

“It’s not an issue of rules, it’s not a problem of legislation—it’s a problem of changing people’s minds. The government and the revolution have given women every chance and opportunity and that’s the reality. Cuba has the highest percentage of women technicians and engineers. However, this is not reflected in higher positions. Why? Because we still believe that we have to look after everything at home. It will take years to change that, but I have faith in the new generations. It’s the only way.”¹⁹¹

As they are everywhere, leadership, an institutional framework, and cultural change, among other factors, are all needed for Cuban women

to fully realize gender equity. While the framework for progress remains in place, the question is whether it can be mobilized—quickly enough or broadly enough—to capture the ideals and interests of the next generation of Cuba’s people.

During a research visit to Cuba, we asked a young woman, “How would you like to see Cuba in 10 years?”

Her response: “I want to see women relaxing. Women are constantly working, and thinking about home and jobs. Women work twice. And, we have extended families, spaces and family groupings that women attend to. Women are peacemakers and mediators in households. They are always ‘on.’ Now it is possible to buy cars and houses. The change in our economy will oxygenate the life of women. We can think of having our own room, maybe even a house.”¹⁹²

The Center for Democracy in the Americas' Cuba Program

CDA advocates for the reform of U.S. policy toward Cuba. Our goal is to replace the existing policy of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation with a policy that will permit travel to Cuba for all Americans, promote diplomatic engagement, and ultimately normalize relations between the United States and Cuba.

We believe that changing U.S. policy would have a beneficial and lasting impact on both U.S. and Cuban citizens, and also send a powerful signal to Latin America that the United States is ready to write a new chapter in its relationship with the region.

CDA is unique among many Washington-based non-governmental organizations because it has a license from the U.S. Treasury Department enabling us to travel to Cuba. It permits us to conduct research in the embargoed country and host delegations of U.S. decision makers to the island for first-hand experience of Cuba and the impact of U.S. policy. Delegations hosted by The Center for Democracy in the Americas—and its forerunner, Freedom to Travel to Cuba program—have visited the island on nearly fifty occasions since 2001. We have taken more than 80 Members of the House and Senate and their professional staffs to Cuba on fact-finding missions.

Through these trips, CDA has also built productive relationships with Cuban officials, leaders of civil society, academics and artists, as well as everyday Cubans in Havana and across the island.

CDA disseminates information from our travel and research to policy makers, the press, and the public at-large. We publish trip reports, formulate strategies for reforming policy, hold colloquies, engage with the media, produce and disseminate video interviews with citizens from the region, and publish a weekly e-newsletter called Cuba Central, about Cuba and U.S. policy, read by senior administration officials, Members of Congress, respected journalists and numerous subscribers in the U.S. and abroad.

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First, this report, the third installment of our **21st Century Cuba** series, was made possible by the Ford Foundation and Mario Bronfman. We thank them for their financial support and encouragement of our work. We owe special thanks to The Christopher Reynolds Foundation and Andrea Panaritis, their executive director, for their contributions to this project and years of support for our Cuba work. CDA is lucky to have Susan Adelman in our corner; her financial and personal contributions sustain our research on women and assist CDA across the board.

Second, this subject is complex and has a long history, and we needed a lot of good guidance to get it right. A number of scholars—on both sides of the Florida Straits—gave us that and more.

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Fourth, a team of people inside and outside CDA rolled up their sleeves, did research and in-person interviews, took a staggering amount of information, and helped us write a report that we hope is our best research product to date.

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My last word is for the women of Cuba. Your story will resonate loud and clear with women living everywhere. We know they will understand your struggles and share your hopes for true equality. Even more, we want what you told us to be heard and understood by policy makers in the White House, State Department, and Congress who get to shape the future of U.S.-Cuba policy. Their judgments could only be improved by understanding what so many of them have been missing for all these years: your humanity.

—*Sarah Stephens*

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