

## **Viva Cuban Women!**

By June Terpstra, Ph.D.

NEIU Justice Studies

I met amazing and inspirational Cuban women during the March 2010 Research Program organized by Marazul Charters with the US Women and Cuba Collaboration. The aim of the program was to examine through a series of daily meetings over the course of 10 days the status of gender and race equity in light of fifty years of the Cuban Revolution while supporting the ending of the oppressive USA embargo against Cuba. Hence, our trip was structured in such a manner that we could meet with women leaders from community levels to national levels be they farmers, teachers, artists, cultural workers, trade unionists, students, politicians, administrators, or doctors in their work environments.

On 1 January 1959 the Cuban Revolution, which included brigades of women, overthrew the US backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista. At the time Cuba was an impoverished Third World US colony where the majority were illiterate, unemployed or underemployed and living in dire poverty, while a rich elite and their US cronies enjoyed the Mafia run brothels and casinos in Havana. Over the past 50 years Cuba has been transformed into one of the most literate countries in the world, where many of the most basic rights people in the USA cannot depend on - such as free and accessible health care, care of the elderly, education for all - have been made a reality despite the cruelties and hardships of economic sanctions. One of the rarely told stories in the USA are of the invincible women involved in the Cuban revolution such as Celia Sanchez and Vilma Espin, who are role models for many Cuban women today.

A primary emphasis of the revolution has been free education for all Cubans. Thus, the well educated and articulate Cuban women, whether farmer, trade unionist, teacher, student or artist with whom the delegation met, conveyed the importance of revolutionary socialist principles in every session. They articulated their belief that a country consistently under attack by the USA should be more concerned with production rather than consumerism. They emphasized the importance of establishing an anti-imperialist model for the world. They demonstrated in their professional work how mass political participation at all levels is more important than individualism. They modeled unity as women united with the men as necessary for the goals of social justice as described in their Constitution.

“...aware that all the regimes based on the exploitation of man by man cause the humiliation of the exploited and the degradation of the human nature of the exploiters; that only under socialism and communism, when man has been freed from all forms of exploitation-slavery, servitude and capitalism-can full dignity of the human being be attained...”

Cuban Constitution

It was our translator and guide, Tatiana, who modeled Cuban revolutionary praxis (theory transformed into action) as manifested in her daily life with the delegation. A hard working, well educated, dedicated anti-imperialist woman, Tatiana patiently educated the delegation members from the imperialist USA about all aspects of history, politics and culture in Cuban life. She was with us from early morning till late evenings with a two hour commute back to her home and

family after intense meetings where she translated, coordinated, and graciously facilitated all aspects of the delegation's journey through Cuba.

The revolution's solidarity ethic started at home for Tatiana whose mother taught in the literacy campaigns after the revolution. She explained how in the first constitution racism was officially combated and discrimination made illegal. Tatiana described the accomplishments of universal opportunities for education at all levels and socialized medicine. She detailed how illiteracy was eliminated with the participation of 100,000 young people in the National Literacy Campaigns and that free education extends all the way to post graduate studies with a university system that is currently extending to all of the country's 169 municipalities.

Tatiana described how despite the crushing economic crisis caused by the US/UN blockade, which prevents food, medicine, books and information from getting in or out of Cuba and despite appalling shortages of fuel, spare parts, paper and most other commodities, not one hospital, school or library in Cuba has been closed down, and no doctors, teachers or library workers have lost their jobs.

The women of Cuba and their families have suffered through blockades, embargoes and direct terrorist attacks, experiencing chronic "September 11" type traumas and their after-effects in addition to the cruelties of the embargo. The Cuban women, such as Tatiana, are not narcissistic "Sex in the City" capitalist women living off the backs of the global poor; paying \$400.00 for shoes and obsessing about the husband who does not take them out for dinner. These are brave, selfless women who bring vision and creativity to their communities while living with US imposed scarcity daily, working long hours, contributing to their culture, and raising their children.

Tatiana, as one of the most well-read women I have met in a long time, modeled the Cuban saying,

**"The revolution does not tell you to believe - the revolution tells you to read".**