

Jenny Kassman

Cuba Solidarity Campaign—UK

September 2005

## **WOMEN IN CUBA**

One of the most significant changes brought about by the Cuban Revolution has been to the lives and status of women.

Before 1959 the role of most Cuban women resembled that of other women in the patriarchal societies of Latin America where there existed rigid stereotypes and a division of roles between the sexes in the home and in society. The undisputed role of a woman was that of wife and homemaker in a family headed by her husband or partner. Women enjoyed few rights and were expected to sacrifice not just their academic potential and broader interests, but also their health and happiness in order to ensure the stability and wellbeing of the family. In cases of maltreatment by men, despite the existence of laws forbidding such treatment, women were given minimal support by the police and the legal establishment.

However since the Revolution, which has put gender issues to the forefront of policy making, Cuban women have seen a fundamental transformation in almost every aspect of their lives with the result that today they are the envy of most other female populations in Latin America.

### **The Cuban Constitution**

The Constitution explicitly guarantees women economic, political, social, cultural and family rights and opportunities equal to those of men. These guarantees are found in :

Article 32, which states that women and men enjoy the same economic, political, cultural, social and family rights;

Article 41, which states that all citizens have equal rights and are subject to equal duties;

Article 42, which states that sex discrimination, among other forms of discrimination, is forbidden by law;

Article 43, which states that all citizens have equal access to all provisions made in Cuban society relating to education, work and career advancement, housing, transport and public areas.

Article 44, which stipulates women's right to equality in the home, work, health provision and in their entitlement to state benefits.

Parliamentary commissions have been formed to promote and ensure that the rights of women set out in the Constitution are complied with. One such commission is the Commission for Women,

Youth and Children, one of whose functions is to ensure that women have equal status and rights to men in government policies and programmes that are put into effect.

### **Women's Legal Rights in Cuba**

The rights of women in Cuba are guaranteed by law, equality for women being one of the fundamental measures taken to achieve social justice, the main objective of the Revolution.

- The Labour Code ensures equal rights and opportunities for women in all fields of work. They are assured an equal salary for equal work.
- All legal entitlements, such as those pertaining to health and safety in the workplace, holiday, pension and sickness entitlements apply equally to women and men. Social security benefits apply equally to women and men. Special provision is made for single mothers, widows and divorcees.
- All women in employment have the right to maternity leave before and after the birth of the child.
- Equality of access is ensured in both education and health provision.
- The Civil and Family Codes explicitly give women equal status within the home, family and marriage and with respect to their parental rights.
- Women have the right to family planning with recourse to abortion (legalised in 1965) if necessary.

In an international context, after the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Cuban government initiated a plan of action incorporating more than 90 recommended measures directed towards improving the status of Cuban women. In 1997 the National Plan of Action was drawn up and adopted by the Council of State. Since that year there have been three national seminars to follow up the implementation of the National Plan. In addition, each year all the ministries have to report on their progress with respect to this programme.

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In a similar way, Cuba was the first country to sign and the second to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, held in 1979. All of the recommendations of the Convention have been adopted by Cuba and the government has been presenting periodic reports to the CEDAW committee relating to measures put into effect.

### **The Federation of Cuban Women** (La Federación de la Mujer Cubana)

To a large extent, the success in implementing the legislation relating to the rights of women has been achieved thanks to the work of the Federation of Cuban Women. Eighty-five percent of Cuban women over the age of 14 (nearly four million people) are members of this NGO, which was founded in 1960 and one of whose functions is to serve as a consultative body. The Federation now has over 76,000 local branches throughout the country and forms part of the social infrastructure to secure the advancement of women. In its work to ensure equal rights and provision for women, The Federation's activities cover a wide number of areas:

- It works collaboratively with all the ministries, the trades unions, professional, scientific and peasant organisations, provincial and local bodies and the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television. In this way, women's rights are safeguarded and women are guaranteed the opportunity to integrate and contribute fully to the economic, political and social life of the country.
- At grass-roots level the FMC mounts campaigns relating to women's issues, such as community health and education programmes, civic rights campaigns and programmes promoting equality in different aspects of the lives of women. Since the early days in 1969, when the Federation organised literacy campaigns in the rural areas, it has played a major role in challenging the traditional roles assigned to women in the workplace, in education, in local and national politics, socially and in the family.

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- The Federation runs women's training centres as well as a publishing house in order to promote among women an awareness of their right to participate in all areas of the life of the country. It produces two publications: *Mujeres* and *Muchachas*.
- An important function of the FMC is to develop non-sexist attitudes among pupils in schools, all of which are mixed in Cuba, and to challenge the traditional stereotypes of women which still exist in Cuban society.
- Another aspect of the FMC's work is to carry out research into different aspects of women's lives in Cuba where problems are encountered with a view to finding solutions, such as the question of domestic violence. For this purpose the FMC has formed the Centre for Women's Studies.
- The FMC has established links with international women's organisations and commissions dealing with women's issues and plays an active part in their work.

## **Women in Power**

With just under 36% of female deputies in the National Assembly, Cuba ranks fifth in the world after the Scandinavian countries for the percentage of parliamentarians who are women. (The average for Latin America was 14.7% in 1999.)

In central government, 22% of ministers and 25.3% of deputy ministers are women. Just over 16% of the State Council are women.

In the provincial assemblies, 31% of delegates are women.

Women play an important rôle within the legal system: 71% of lawyers. 60.3% of judges and 47% of Supreme Court judges are women.

Since the attack on the Moncada Barracks on 26 June 1953, women have played an important part in the armed forces. A female guerrilla group was formed in 1958 which took part in the revolutionary war against Batista and today there are still some women's units – albeit a small number - in the regular army. However every woman in Cuba receives some form of military training in order to defend the country. About 20% of officers in the Cuban armed forces are women.

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## **Women in Employment**

Before the Revolution women made up less than 20% of the workforce (17% in 1956). Today they comprise 45.2% of the labour force.

### 1. Employment opportunities:

Although the 1940 Constitution declared sexual discrimination to be illegal and gave women the right to manage their own financial affairs, the law was not ratified until after 1959. Therefore before that date, the opportunities open to those women who did work were very limited. The lucky few who gained qualifications found work mainly as teachers, secretaries and nurses. However the majority of working women were unskilled and had to be content with being domestic servants and home workers, making clothing or cigars. Prostitution was widespread and the only means of survival for many women.

Since the Revolution the law has entitled women to apply for jobs on an equal footing with men in all areas of employment. While education and nursing continue to be popular careers among women, with 72% of teachers and educational workers being women and with 78,905 female nurses (compared with 2026 in 1959), today in Cuba statistics reveal the role played by women in a wide number of fields. Women comprise:

- 66.2% of all professionals and technicians;
- 51% of all doctors, making a total of 34,588, of whom 19,098 are

specialists (compared with 403 female doctors in the 1953 census);

- 44.6% of scientists;
- 51.6% of researchers
- 33.1% of managers;
- 70% of bank employees.
- Within the CTC (the Cuban equivalent of the TUC), 50% of professional posts are held by women.

The one area in which women have not yet achieved equality of opportunity is in the tourist industry and the Federation of Cuban Women is campaigning to ensure equal entitlement to enroll on courses which lead to work in this sector.

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## **2. Working conditions**

In Cuba women enjoy identical rights to men in terms of equal pay, working conditions, job security, holiday entitlement, pension rights and training. The position of women in Cuba in this regard is in complete contrast to that of women in other Latin American countries. According to a recent study by the World Food Programme, in Latin America women and girls make up seven out of ten of poor people whose jobs are characterised by insecure, poorly paid working conditions in which they have few, if any, employment rights.

This situation can be seen in the Central American Free Trade Agreement whose final version was signed in May 2004. The labour issues section of the agreement fails to include the right not to face gender discrimination and does not recognise women's specific rights in the workplace, which allows the widespread problems of discrimination against pregnant women and sexual harassment to continue. (Source: *Veronica Campanile, 'Gender Perspectives and Women's Action on the Central American Free Trade Agreement' published by the Central America Women's Network.*)

The position of women working in the agricultural sector in Cuba in particular compares favourably with that of women in the rural areas of other Latin American countries who work for very low pay (20-40% less than male rural workers) in informal, insecure jobs with no enforceable contracts, unions or security benefits. Their conditions of work often contravene health and safety regulations. In their report, published in the early nineties, on the legal status of rural women in 17 Latin American and Caribbean countries, the Food & Agriculture Organisation of the UN quoted Cuba as the only country where contracts are obligatory for temporary work and where there is effective

monitoring to ensure that rural workers – many of whom are women – receive the rights and benefits to which they are entitled.

The FAO report quoted above also refers to Cuba as the only country with legislation which protects working mothers, including those in informal employment, and with the legal mechanisms for making the laws effective.

In Cuba all working women are entitled to one year's maternity leave. During the first six months the mother receives 60% of her pay. She is entitled to

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take a further six months' unpaid leave, but with the guarantee of being able to return to her previous job at the end of that time. A recent addition to the law allows the mother, once she has finished breast feeding the baby, to share the remainder of her maternity leave between herself and the child's father. Here again we see a contrast with the experiences of many women in countries throughout Latin America who are often sacked from their jobs if they are found to be pregnant.

The state provides child care for working mothers at a very low cost for children from three months to school age. However the building of day nurseries was stopped during the economic adversities suffered during the Special Period of the 1990s because of a shortage of materials. As a result some women are obliged to seek alternative child care arrangements which are often more costly than the state provision.

In order to assist the more vulnerable groups of women, such as lone mothers and disabled women, to find work, each province and municipality has a Women's Labour Commission (Comisión de Empleo Femenino) . This body also helps women to find work outside the state sector, mainly in agriculture in co-operatives or smallholdings.

### **Women in Education**

Prior to 1959 education and career aspirations were a male preserve. Many families did not have the means to pay for their children's secondary and, particularly, university education and often priority for studying to a higher level was given to sons. The majority of women did not reach the sixth grade in schools and in the rural areas illiteracy rates were highest among women.

Since the Revolution education at all levels, including university level, has been provided free of charge to everyone. With the emphasis given to the creation of a society based on the principles of social justice, Cuba has seen a phenomenal change in the educational opportunities and the academic achievements gained by women.

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All schools in Cuba are co-educational and the equal status of women in society is reinforced in educational establishments by a number of means:

- by the promotion of an awareness in young people of the importance of equal opportunities;
- by the elimination of traditional stereotypes of women by using images of women which show their equality with men;
- by ensuring male and female pupils and students have equal chances of joining courses at all levels.

As a consequence women are achieving equally to men and even out-performing men in higher education, which can be seen from the figures below:

- 62% of all university students are women;
- 49.5% of graduates with higher degrees are women;
- Women represent 40% of all university students on scientific and technical degree courses;
- In 2000, in seven out of nine branches of the sciences, women represented over 50% of graduates;
- Women made up over 70% of students in the areas of Social Sciences, Humanities, Medical Sciences and Education;

To rectify male imbalances, there are special quotas for men on some degree courses, such as in Medicine.

At the other end of the scale, 63% of students who have enrolled on courses for underachieving or disaffected youngsters are female.

### **Women and Health**

Ever since the Revolution in 1959, all Cubans have been entitled to receive free of charge the full range of health provision, despite the US blockade imposed in 1962 and the critical years of the Special Period in the 1990s, when the blockade was intensified and Cuba experienced immense difficulties in obtaining certain types of medication and specialised equipment. These include services for sexual and reproductive health. Family planning is considered a fundamental right and 77% of Cuban women use some form of contraception compared with 65% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 76% in the US. (*Figures from the Pan American Health Organisation.*) Abortion is freely available, a situation not reflected elsewhere in South and Central America

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where abortion is only permitted (if at all) to save a woman's life and where 3,000,000 and 900,000 unsafe abortions respectively are carried out yearly, according to the World Health Organisation (1998). The WHO has estimated that 21% of maternal deaths in these regions are associated with unsafe abortions and that one unsafe abortion occurs for every three live births.

The universal availability of free health care in Cuba is reflected in the indices relating to women's life expectancy, infant mortality and maternal deaths which are the equivalent or better than those in the industrialised countries.

	<u>Cuba</u>	<u>Latin America &amp; Caribbean average</u>	<u>USA</u>
Female life expectancy:	79.8 years (2005)	75.4 years	80.3 years
Skilled attendance during childbirth:	99.9% (2004)	87.9%	99.0% (2001)
Infant mortality (per 100,000 live births):	5.8 (2004)	24.8	7.0 (2002)
Maternal deaths: (per 100,000 live births)	38.5 (2004)	94.7	8.9

*(Figures from Pan American Health Organisation's report 'Health Situation in the Americas – Basic Indicators')*

Cuba's figures for healthy life expectancy at 68.4 years (for males and females) are the highest in Latin America where the average for women is just 62.9 years. *(Figures from WHO: Global Programme on Evidence for Health Policy, 2000.)*

During pregnancy Cuban women are monitored closely with regular medical checks and scans (the average number of prenatal medical visits per woman is 12). Women with high risk or problematic pregnancies receive special care in one of the 266 maternity homes in the country. Over 99% of deliveries take place in hospital.

Sex education programmes for young people in the past decade have led to falling birthrates among 15-19 year olds.

Other services for women also resemble those provided in the developed world: women are screened for cervical and breast cancer as well as for venereal diseases. There are mental health programmes targeted at women in addition to special health programmes for older women and men.

## **Women and the Family**

In Latin America it is in the context of the family that traditionally women have found themselves subordinated to the privileged position enjoyed by males in relation to the rights and roles played by each partner in the home.

The Family Code, which became law in Cuba in 1975, applies the principle of equal rights in the home to the areas of marriage, divorce, adoption, maintenance and responsibility for their children. Men are expected to share all the duties and responsibilities relating to the running of the household and the care of the children. However traditional sexist behaviour patterns and gender stereotypes continue to exist (as is the case in most Western societies) and in the main it is the women who still bear the brunt of managing households, caring for the children and elderly relations in addition to fulfilling their obligations at their place of work. Their situation is exacerbated by the US-imposed blockade which causes a shortage of food supplies and household appliances and materials as well as affecting the state's ability to provide adequate child-care facilities and reliable transport to and from work.

Women tend to marry at a young age in Cuba and in recent years 60% of births have been to women under the age of 24. However divorce rates are high and second marriages are common. The birth rate among Cuban women in general has fallen to 1.6 children per woman (2001), a process that started during the hardships of the Special Period in the 1990s. This trend reflects that of the industrialised world where women also enjoy a broader range of rights opportunities compared with their sisters in the developing countries where birth rates are higher. As in western countries, Cuba is moving towards an aging population.

Physical domestic violence is not a prevalent characteristic of Cuban homes, unlike in most other countries in Latin America where, as Amnesty

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International commented in its report in 2004, inadequate legislation does not prevent violence against women and where gender based killings often go unpunished.

In Cuba in 1997 the FMC created the Grupo Nacional para la Prevención y Atención de la Violencia Familiar (a national organisation to study and co-ordinate measures to be taken to combat domestic violence and provide support to the victims of such violence). In addition to this organization, in communities around the country there are 175 centres which provide advice and guidance to women and their families. One area of their work relates to domestic violence: families receive counselling to prevent violence taking place or, in cases where such violence occurs, guidance and assistance is given to try to end it.

The courts respond vigorously in cases involving domestic violence and a violent act in a domestic context is considered an aggravated crime. Marital rape has been outlawed. One

explanation given for the lower rates of domestic violence is that Cuban women are less dependent on their partners on account of their economic independence and their higher levels of participation in the economic and social life of the country and their neighbourhoods. Their participation in activities outside the home engenders a less passive attitude and less tolerance of violent behaviour. However, in an article entitled '*La exterminación del patriarcado, Cuba y su escenario en la contemporaneidad*'

Luis A Rodríguez Ramírez and Belkis Rojas Hernández have pointed out that “invisible violence” – psychological violence in the form of verbal coercion and the undermining of partners on the part of men — is common place and has taken the place of physical violence.

In the FAO report referred to above under Working Conditions, Cuba is mentioned as one of the few countries in which common-law marriages are recognised by law. In Cuba a spouse, on the death of her husband automatically inherits his land and estate. In a common-law marriage a woman, on the death of her partner is entitled to inherit his land so long as she earns her livelihood from it. In other Latin American countries women are not always given equal access to their late husband's estate, sometimes on account of prevailing

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customs. In the case of common-law unions, the position of the woman is often much more precarious.

## **Conclusion**

By any standards, the position of women in Cuba ranks among the highest indices of equality of treatment and opportunities. However it is in the context of Latin America and the Caribbean that one becomes more aware of the remarkable achievements made in respect to women, achievements made despite over four and a half decades of the US economic blockade and that country's threats to Cuba's national security, both of which are ignored by the western media.

During her visit to the island in 1999, when the Special Period was still in force, the UN's Special Rapporteur wrote that “in terms of education, participation in the workforce and professional and technical training, women in Cuba are **well ahead** of women in most other countries.” Moreover it is clear that these advancements have had an impact on the status and roles played by women in many other spheres,

Women play a prominent part in politics (as we have seen) and the sciences. Scientists such as Concepción Campa, who headed the team that discovered the vaccine against Meningitis B, María Guzmán, head of the Virology Department at the Pedro Kouri Institute and director of the

PAHO/WHO Collaborating Centre for Viral Diseases, and Marlein Miranda Cona, one of fifteen UNESCO-L'Oréal Fellows in Life Sciences for 2005 (of whom just three were from Latin America and the Caribbean) for her research on the use of radio-pharmaceuticals to detect and treat malignant tumours, are a proud testimony to the advancement of women in Cuban society.

In the arts Alicia Alonso is director of the Cuban National Ballet, one of the most prestigious companies in the world, and there are numerous female artists, sculptors, photographers, musicians, journalists, writers and poets, such as Nancy Morejón and Georgina Saldana.

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In sport the Cuban women's volley ball team have been Olympic medallists on three consecutive occasions, winning a gold medal in 2000. The female judo team, with contestants such as Legna Verdecia and Sibelis Veranes, and the taekwondo and athletics teams are world class, winning for their country gold and silver medals in the 2004 Olympic Games, placing Cuba in 11<sup>th</sup> place, over the UK who came 12<sup>th</sup>, in the world ranking. The victory of the Cuban women's basketball team over the US in the Pan-American Games in 1994 showed the precedence of determination and resilience over power and wealth.

In Cuba it has long been recognised that, in order to achieve the equality of rights and opportunities for particular groups within the population, it has been necessary to develop a culture of equality together with the appropriate infrastructure. The culture of equality promoted by socialism and the infrastructure created during the decades following the Revolution have certainly brought fundamental changes and improvements to the lives of Cuban women.