



A student at the University of Havana (left); the maternity ward in a Havana hospital

# Cuba Puts Women Forward, But...

Even with government support for gender equality, there's still a cultural double standard

BY MARTHA BURK

**I** RECENTLY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to legally visit a not-so-distant country that's mostly off-limits to Americans. A place that sounds from afar like it might be a feminist paradise, because equal pay and maternity leave are guaranteed, health care is free and women are close to leadership parity in many institutions.

That land is Cuba—90 miles off the coast of Florida but light years away in terms of how women function in a society fundamentally different from our own. Since the communist revolution in 1959 led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Cuba has been isolated from the U.S. through a trade embargo and travel prohibitions. That means most of us have little knowledge of what life is like for the 11 million people who live on the Caribbean's largest island. With an invitation to visit as part of a women's rights, human-rights, racial-justice and social-welfare delegation, I had the opportunity to see firsthand whether the promise of gender equality matches the lived reality.

In Havana, we plunged into delegation meetings organized by the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration. The

women leaders of the Workers Central Union of Cuba, a government-sanctioned federation of trade unions in which women occupy 8 of the 17 seats on the national board, were typically enthusiastic about the Castro government (now led by Fidel's brother Raúl): "We can thank the revolution for how much women have achieved," one said. "A goal was to put women forward."

And the numbers seem to bear her out. Women are the clear majority of attorneys, general physicians, researchers and judges. They comprise more than 65 percent of university graduates, including 46 percent in technical and professional fields and 40 percent of scientific and technical students. Cuban women fill 43 percent of seats in the Cuban Parliament (compared to 17 percent in the U.S.) and are 28 percent of ministry heads (compared to 24 percent in the U.S. Cabinet)—but there is just one woman among seven vice presidents on the powerful Council of State.

While the communist government controls virtually every aspect of life in Cuba, it does provide benefits unheard of in the U.S., such as free education

through the university level.

Other benefits are a mixed bag, however. Housing is free but can be crowded, with up to three generations living in a household. Health care, including both maternity care and abortion, is also free—but medication, including birth control, can be scarce. Everyone has a food allowance, but food may be rationed. Women have the same job prospects as men and get paid the same, but the government assigns workers to different sectors rather than allowing a completely free choice.

The country is also, literally, crumbling. Thanks to the U.S. embargo and the collapse of the Soviet Union (which supported Cuba for years), once-magnificent buildings have gone for decades without repair, potholed streets are hazardous to navigate, and there are chronic shortages of everything from basic foodstuffs to soap. By U.S. standards almost everyone is poor—though equally so.

But the biggest complaint we heard from women there was that despite all the guarantees of equality and a government that apparently does its best to meet those guarantees,

LEFT: JENNY MATTHEWS/PANOS; RIGHT: ROBERT WALLIS/PANOS

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women are still second-class citizens in the eyes of their men. Even though Cuba's Family Code, adopted in 1975, states that women and men have equal rights and responsibilities regarding marriage, divorce, raising children, maintaining the home and pursuing a career, the "double shift" is not much different from that faced by their sisters in the U.S.

We heard it everywhere, from women leading labor unions to women's studies professors to those running local branches of the Federation of Cuban Women, the women's organization which boasts a membership of 80 percent of women in the country: Cuban men are unwilling to share equally in housework and child rearing. The words *machismo* and *macho* were used often.

"It is the power relationship in the home that contributes to inequality, including domestic violence," said one local woman organizer. To counteract that, said Margarita Alfonso Abraham, head of an agricultural co-op: "We try to encourage housewives to get a job, and teach women to achieve equality at home if they already have a job—forget about traditional role separation."

Organized child care is another area where revolutionary intent has fallen short. Universal day care has been the goal, but money has always been too scarce to make it a reality. The facilities that do exist give preference to the children of women doctors and teachers, which means that a great number of women still rely on "the grandmother system" or other patched-together arrangements so familiar in the U.S. Combined with a full burden of housework—washers and dryers are very scarce—the lack of child care limits women's ability to work in the first place or try for promotions if they do.

Listening to these daughters of the revolution changed my own thinking about the role the gender pay gap plays in shaping women's lives. I've

always subscribed to a strictly "rational economics" theory that goes something like this: Inequality in relationships and society is based on economic inequality, with the power in the family going to the party with the highest earnings.

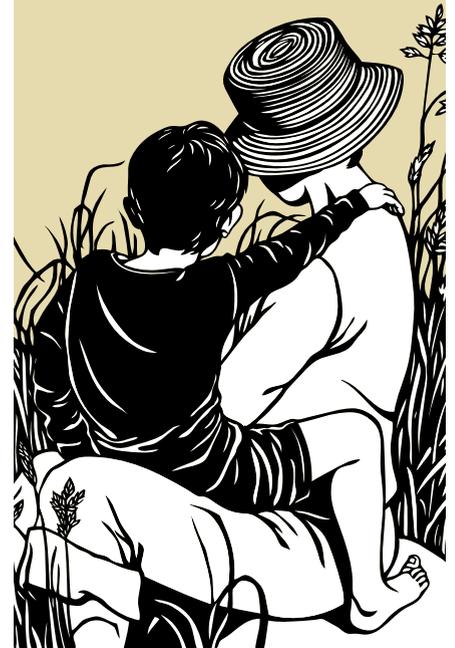
A prime example is the decision about who stays home to take care of kids when they're sick. To minimize loss of family income, it's usually the lowest earner, which in the U.S. is almost always the woman. So she stays home, garnering a reputation as a less serious worker, thus lowering her chances for raises or promotions, which further cements her place as secondary earner. But if we could only equalize pay, we'd automatically equalize power, right?

The Cuban experience has given the lie to my neat and sterile analysis. Even after 50 years of equal pay, equal power at home—and therefore in society—remains elusive. Biology may not be destiny, but without men taking true ownership of family responsibilities, it sure can feel like it.

Cuban women may be on the right track when it comes to changing this situation, however. They're incorporating gender education at the elementary school level, where boys are encouraged to be nurturing and school games are designed to break stereotypes. At its best, this will take another generation or two to pay dividends, and it's a real question as to whether games and role-playing at school can overcome the real-life examples kids see at home.

Back in the U.S., some laws to alleviate pay and employment discrimination are in place, but more are needed to achieve equity. As we continue to lobby for that, the Cuban example reminds us that true equality will mean more than just equal paychecks: We must bring about no less than a cultural revolution as well. ■

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