

Cuban Women

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Cuban women are beginning to see solid results of the many years of struggle that they have been through. Before the revolution, there was little or no work for any women. The only way a single woman could get money for her children or herself was to beg or else sell herself. Most women were totally dependent upon their husbands or fathers. A divorced woman was considered to be nothing but a prostitute, because that was the only way she could support herself. Virginity became even more of a prize for a marriage dowry. Young women were “protected” to the point where they couldn’t leave the house without a chaperone.

Strong women have always been among those who struggled in the cities or in the mountains to overthrow the dictatorial regimes ruling Cuba until twelve years ago. After the revolution was won, many changes were made. Because of the great need for workers, women became involved in many aspects of building the revolution. There was still a lot of division of labor, with men taking the standard roles for the sake of efficiency unless there was a need for a lot of people (such as teaching, doctors, and technicians). To help women understand their responsibility in making the revolution succeed, the Federation de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC—federation of Cuban women) was created.

The FMC has done a lot to increase the awareness of the women. It publishes a magazine that talks about jobs that are open to women, medical information, educational information, family care, food, fashions, political activities in Cuba and the world, etc. There has been a tremendous struggle against the old attitudes of what a woman could do. The FMC has done a lot to reach out to women and involve them with other women and show them alternatives to being tied to the house. By September of 1970 over 51% of the women in Cuba had joined.

Now, almost any job is open to a woman. I went to Cuba on the 3rd Venceremos Brigade, the fall of 1970, with 400 other north Americans to work planting, fertilizing and picking citrus fruit. The camp we stayed at on the Isle of Youth is usually a tractor school that trains 400 women at a time in citrus work and provides a formal school education at the same time. There are also all-women work brigades that do agricultural work such as cane cutting and citrus tree fertilizing. In order to allow as many women as want to work the FMC runs *circulos infantiles* that will take care of their child from 45 days old (six days a week from 6 am to 6:30 pm or from Monday morning till Saturday afternoon). Birth control is available on request as are abortions. There is no push to use birth control instead of having an abortion: that decision is left up to the woman. (Abortions take about a week, a woman is under observation for a couple days and then also for a couple of days after the actual operation is kept in the hospital. That’s to make sure that the abortion was complete and that she is fine. This is all free.)

In the schools there is no tracking system forcing women into housewife or secretarial roles. Women are able to choose the courses they want to take. When we visited some schools, we asked some of the students there what they wanted to do—almost all of the women said they wanted to be doctors, teachers, or technicians. Education for technical and skilled jobs is free (including housing, food, clothing, and books). There are many technical schools that are for women only.

Because there are many women working in the agricultural brigades and leaving home to go to the universities, there is much less domination of her life by her father and family. This allows her much more control over her life.

Many women are deciding not to get married until they are ready to settle down. Many women who were married before the revolution have gotten divorced. One woman we worked with left her husband because he didn't want her to join a work brigade. Several women that we worked with had not been home in a long while because they were working with the 3 Venceremos Brigades.

But there is still a strong emphasis on male/female relationships in Cuba, continuing the competition and beauty standards that have existed for so long. And there is still a very oppressive attitude about homosexuality. Homosexuality is seen as a disease, rooted in the problems of Cuban society before the revolution. Homosexuals are not harassed if they work and support the struggle in Cuba, but they are not allowed in positions of influence, as teachers or members of the party.

Mercedez, a woman I was close to, goes with a man that she is probably going to marry, but not until she feels she is ready to arrange being together. She's going to teach (she graduated from Havana University while we were on the boat going down to Cuba) wherever the revolution needs her—NOT where her husband may be. Mercedez is like a lot of Cuban women. Even though she isn't looking around for a man, she still puts on her make-up before going out to the fields and on the weekends she goes to the beauty parlor to get ready for the Saturday night parties. Mercedez is a strong worker and knows what she is capable of doing and understands the necessity of her work as a woman: yet she still appreciates being helped down from a truck, having doors opened for her, things carried for her, etc. Cuban women are very sensitive to where their men are at—they've gone through an armed struggle together and the women feel that of course they'll build Cuba together, so they let the men continue to do these things.

On October 8th, the date Che Guevara died, we climbed up in the mountains to Che's command post during the revolution. I had a chance to talk with a Cuban woman who had studied in Russia for a year in coffee growing and cattle raising. She was a member of the Cuban Communist Party and a leader planning how to run the cattle raising and coffee growing on the farms and plantations in that area.

Today there are women in every phase of building the revolution, from the Central Committee of the party to tractor driving in the grape fields, to weeding sugar cane, to working in day care centers. Working against the strong attitudes that held them back so many years, Cuban women are still struggling to make their revolution within the revolution.

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