



Gender Equality and the Role of Women in Cuban Society

As part of the American Association of University Women's International Series on Culture and Gender Roles, a delegation of 48 AAUW members and staff traveled to Cuba in fall 2010 for six days of research, dialogue, cultural events, and educational experiences. From October 30 to November 4, the group visited sites around Havana and met with women leaders in education, the arts, politics, and law, including Mariela Castro Espin, the daughter of President Raul Castro.

The purpose of this unprecedented and historic trip was to examine gender equality in Cuba and to meet with Cuban citizens to gain a firsthand understanding of the roles of women in Cuban society. Research issues addressed on the trip included the following questions: What are the roles of women in Cuba? What is the relative status of women and men in Cuba? How has Cuban women's education affected their opportunities and lifestyles?

AAUW worked with Academic Travel Abroad, a 60-year-old organization licensed by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control to facilitate travel to Cuba by teams of professionals for the purpose of conducting research. All members of the AAUW delegation were carefully screened to ensure that they met specific requirements as professionals in gender equity-related fields.

This paper summarizes the findings of the delegation. Unless otherwise indicated, statistics and statements cited in this paper are based on delegation members' notes from the discussions and cannot be verified by public data.

I. The status of women in Cuba

During the trip, the AAUW delegates met with women leaders in a number of different fields, including

- Leaders and representatives from the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and the National Assembly (Parliament):
 - Elsa Rojas, president of the National Assembly's Commission on Children, Youth, and Women's Rights and Equality
 - Miriam Yanet Martin Gonzalez, vice president of the commission
 - Magalys Llort, mother of one of the five Cubans imprisoned in the United States
 - Mayda Alvarez, director of the FMC Women's Studies Center
 - Mayra Diaz, coordinator of the FMC National Committee on Violence and Domestic Violence
 - Yamila Gonzalez, president of the Cuban Family Law Association, secretary of the National Union of Cuban Jurists, and member of the FMC National Committee
 - Carolina Amador, FMC International Relations

- Teresa Hernandez, member of the FMC National Secretariat
- Magalys Arocha, member of the FMC National Secretariat
- Mariela Castro Espin, director of the National Center for Sex Education and Research (CENESEX)
 - Leaders at the University of Havana:
 - Cristina Lopez, vice rector
 - Milagros Martinez, Department of International Relations
 - Norma Vasallo, director of the Women’s Studies Department
 - Anicia Garcia, director of the Institute for the Study of the Cuban Economy
 - Reynaldo Jimenez, director of FLACSO (Latin American Social Sciences Department)
- Elected leaders and members of the National Association of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC):
 - Denia Alvarez, director of the Nicolas Guillen Foundation
 - Marilyn Bobes, internationally renowned poet
 - Mirta Yanez, internationally renowned author
- Specialists at the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the People (ICAP):
 - Esperanza Luzbert, director of the North America Division
 - Rita Olga Martinez, U.S. Department
- Leaders at the ISPEJV (Pedagogical Institute/University):
 - Olga Lidia Reyes Piña, director of the Foreign Affairs Department
 - Alicia Gonzalez Hernandez, director of the Department for Gender, Health, and Sex Education
 - Professor Luisa Campa, director of the Literacy Museum
 - Dr. Santiago Antonio Borges Rodriguez, from Latin American Reference Center for Special Education (CELAEE)
 - Dr. Carmen Lidia Cobas, CELAEE
 - Rosa María Masson, vice director of the Universidad Pedagógica de Postgrado (IPLAC)
- Josefina Vidal, director of the North America Department of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations (MINREX)

Women in Cuba have enjoyed equality—at least on paper—since the days of the Republic (1976). However, the women leaders who met with the AAUW delegates explained that, in reality, Cuban women and girls have a long way to go before they achieve full equity. This was specifically confirmed by one speaker who observed that, “We have made progress, but we have more to achieve in the area of justice for women and children.”

For example, several of the leaders described the challenges of achieving gender equity in day-to-day Cuban life, particularly in the home. Cuban law grants women and men equal rights and responsibilities in raising children, maintaining the home, and pursuing a career.¹ The leaders noted, however, that traditional sexist behavior and gender stereotypes persist, and laws requiring the equal division of household chores are not enforced. Consequently, women still

bear the burden for performing the majority of household and caregiving responsibilities in addition to working outside the home.²

Working women who met with the AAUW delegation repeatedly mentioned their “double day.” At the University of Havana, some speakers admitted that they turned down opportunities to take leadership positions at the university because they do not have a wife at home to make dinner and take care of the house. Additional comments, such as “Women work, but men have not learned to wash and cook” and “Men still don’t understand what equity means,” are further evidence of men’s and women’s unequal status in Cuban homes.

The delegates found that these women know they must work to break through this lingering machismo to attain true equity. As one speaker noted, “We do nothing in changing women if we do not also change men.”

The struggle to balance work and home life is not unlike that faced by many women in the United States. In contrast to U.S. women, however, Cuban women lack access to basic, everyday items. Delegates found that Cuban supermarkets are rarely stocked with household essentials or convenience items such as frozen meals. Most families do not have access to modern conveniences, such as washing machines, dryers, microwaves, and dishwashers. Transportation can be challenging, as few women have their own cars. Summing up the situation, several women from the FMC said that it was difficult even to discuss gender equity when Cuban women face so many basic problems at home.

II. Employment

The AAUW delegates learned that Cuban women benefit from universal access to work in all fields and that laws requiring equal pay for equal work have long been codified.³ Despite the law and significant progress in some professions, women in Cuba still face formidable obstacles to achieving equality in employment.

Women remain the minority in traditionally male fields, although progress is being made.

Today, Cuban women figure prominently in the ranks of professional and skilled workers. Women make up 66 percent of the labor force in Cuba, and more than 70 percent of professionals in the country are women. Despite these impressive numbers, delegates repeatedly heard that Cuban women lead in the “helping” and teaching professions, while men dominate the “hard” sciences, information technology, and mathematical fields.

Speakers elaborated that while men continue to dominate the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, medicine is considered to be more of a helping profession in Cuba, and women are well represented in this field. In 2009, 69 percent of health care workers, including doctors, were women. Women also make up 80 percent of the education workforce, and two-thirds of the lawyers and judges in Cuba are women. The legal profession,

however, does not enjoy nearly the same status or require the same educational prerequisites as in the United States.

Nevertheless, the delegates also heard promising accounts of Cuban women breaking through barriers and entering traditionally male fields. For example, 30 years ago only 5 percent of engineers in Cuba were women; today that number is 24 percent. In contrast, only about 11 percent of engineers in the United States are women.⁴

Although women enjoy equal access to work, a glass ceiling exists.

Cuban law grants women equal access to public leadership positions but, as delegates learned, women are underrepresented in the highest ranks of government and education.

Thus, although Cuba ranks higher than the United States in the proportion of women in the national legislature,⁵ Cuban women still remain a minority in the country's National Assembly, making up 43.6 percent of the 614 member unicameral legislature. Nevertheless, this is substantially greater than women's representation in the U.S. Congress, where women make up about 17 percent of members in the House and Senate.

Women are well represented in education, too, but the number of women educators decreases as rank increases. Delegates learned that in Cuba, as in the United States, teaching is not seen as a high-status profession, particularly at the elementary school level. Consequently, there are more female than male teachers at the primary level, but there are more male than female teachers at the pre-university level.

Women are well represented among professors at the university level. Although women at the University of Havana were unfamiliar with the phrase "glass ceiling," they were well aware that women faculty members have not advanced to top university ranks at the same rate as men. They noted that even though women hold a number of senior university positions, deans have historically been men. Some notable exceptions at their university include the deans of the physics and biology departments and the outgoing dean of the chemistry department. Speakers also told delegates that the university has four women vice rectors or vice presidents. Again, delegates observed the similarity with traditional patterns in U.S. higher education.

Still, there has been progress in the area. For example, at the Center for Pedagogical Science, four out of five vice presidents and the center's deans are women.

III. Education

During their visits to the University of Havana and the Enrique José Varona Higher Pedagogical Institute, AAUW delegates learned that women in Cuba enjoy the same access to education as men and play a prominent role in the education field. Women can go as far as they wish educationally, limited only by their performance on tests. In fact, women make up more than 80 percent of all university students and nearly 68 percent of university graduates. In the

United States, 57 percent of undergraduates at four-year institutions are women, and women earned 57 percent of bachelor's degrees in 2008.⁶

Women in Cuba remain underrepresented in traditionally male fields of study.

Despite these promising numbers, the delegates found the situation in Cuba to be similar to that in many countries around the globe—women make up the majority of students in social studies, medicine, and pedagogy but are a minority in the natural sciences, math, and technical studies. In Cuba, women make up 81 percent of medical students (women's grades in medical school are typically higher than men's), 72 percent of social studies students, and 70 percent of education students. By contrast, women make up only 46 percent of students studying the natural sciences and math, 37 percent of students in the technical sciences, and 30–40 percent of the engineering students.

Women were instrumental in Cuba's 1961 campaign to eradicate illiteracy.

Today, Cuba boasts a literacy rate (defined as those ages 15 and over who can read and write) of more than 99 percent, which is similar to the rate in the United States.⁷ The delegates learned, though, that this was not always the case. In January 1961, 20.6 percent of Cubans could not read or write. To eradicate illiteracy, Fidel Castro launched a yearlong literacy campaign in which women played a critical role.

As part of the campaign, Castro dispatched 100,000 *brigadistas* to the countryside and later to the urban areas. More than half of the *brigadistas* (52 percent) were women. Three women, literacy pedagogy strategists, created the readers and training manuals used in the campaign, and the director of the literacy campaign was a woman. By the end of the year, the percentage of illiterate Cubans had decreased to approximately 3.1 percent, and all pupils were reading at at least a third-grade level. UNESCO was invited to observe the literacy campaign, and many countries have since modeled their own literacy campaigns on that of Cuba.

Several delegates asked speakers how Cuba ascertained "literacy" but found that the answers did not necessarily translate into what is considered established literacy. As a result, it may be somewhat difficult to make comparisons with U.S. literacy rates.

IV. Violence against women

Cuba does not have a separate law addressing domestic violence, and it remains a pressing social issue.

Currently, Cuban law does not recognize domestic violence as a distinct category of violence, but it does prohibit threats and inflicting injuries, including those associated with domestic violence. Penalties for domestic violence are covered by the laws against assault and range

from fines to prison sentences of varying lengths, depending on the severity of the offense.⁸ The FMC told the AAUW delegates that it plans to submit draft legislation on family violence.

According to the U.S. Department of State, human rights advocates report that violence against women is a problem in Cuba, and police often do not act on cases of domestic violence. The press rarely reports on violent crime, and the government has not released data on the extent of domestic violence. Nevertheless, the Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional (CCDHRN) and the Cuban Chapter of the Latin American Federation of Rural Women report that domestic violence remains a serious problem.⁹

In 1997, the FMC created the Grupo Nacional para la Prevención y Atención de la Violencia Familiar, a national organization to study and coordinate measures to combat domestic violence and provide support to victims.¹⁰ In addition, delegates learned that professional outreach and counseling currently span all municipalities in Cuba. Victims can file claims against abusers at the Office of Victim Rights and can denounce their abusers to the police. Victims also have access to state-provided mental health and sexual abuse therapies.

Speakers from the FMC explained how the Cuban Center for Forensic Medicine, the University of Havana, the media, and the police are working to raise awareness of the full spectrum of family violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, and verbal abuse. Women are also being trained to identify abuse such as marital rape, which was once seen as a husband's natural right but is now deemed an act of violence by law. Speakers added that there is a great need to train judges, prosecutors, and other specialists abroad so that they can return with models for reform.

Although prohibited by law, sexual harassment continues to be a problem in the workplace.

Speakers from the FMC explained to delegates how the organization worked to modify the "public scandal" clause in the Cuban Criminal Code to include all sexual harassment. Cuban law currently provides penalties for sexual harassment, with potential sentences ranging from three months to five years of imprisonment.¹¹

In 2008, the law was applied most frequently to male supervisors abusing their power over female subordinates, according to the CCDHRN. The Cuban government did not release any statistics during the year on arrests, prosecutions, or convictions for sexual harassment offenses. Groups citing anecdotal evidence, however, claim that sexual harassment is widespread.¹²

The FMC is working to prevent prostitution.

Prostitution is legal for people over the age of 16, but pandering and economic activities facilitating prostitution, including room rentals, are illegal.¹³

Representatives from the FMC discussed the group's prostitution prevention work. Through grassroots efforts, the FMC seeks out women with training and a passion for health brigade or social work to provide anti-prostitution education and outreach. In 1997, the FMC also worked to reintroduce the ban on pimping and introduced a human trafficking ban.

V. Sexuality and reproductive rights

Delegates learned that Cuban law currently contains many women-beneficial policies and that women are active in forging new policies. For example, reproductive choice is nested within the penal code, and all reproductive/sexual rights are geared toward ensuring the legal autonomy of women. For example, contraception and abortion have been provided to Cubans under the free national health care system since 1965.

Cuba also has a very generous maternity and parental leave policy that has developed over time as a result of the work of women's organizations. In 2003, an FMC-proposed law revised the maternal leave law to allow both fathers and mothers the opportunity to take leave from work. Women are entitled to maternity leave with full pay beginning six weeks before the birth of a child and 12 weeks after giving birth. After that, either the mother or father is eligible for 40 weeks of parental leave at 60 percent pay.¹⁴ However, few fathers take advantage of this benefit.

Abortions performed outside the national health care system are illegal.

According to Mariela Castro Espin, the director of CENESEX, abortion was legal in Cuba before the revolution; however, it was extremely expensive. Many women sought illegal abortions at a cheaper cost, and botched abortions were a leading cause of mortality for Cuban women. In 1958, illegal abortion was the number one cause of death for women in Cuba.

After the revolution, the Cuban government put abortion under the Ministry of Public Health and criminalized all abortions performed outside the public health system to prevent deaths from postsurgical infection and malpractice. Abortion in Cuba is illegal if it is (1) done against a woman's will, (2) performed for a fee, (3) done by untrained personnel, or (4) performed outside the Cuban public health system. With this reform in place, the Cuban mortality rate from abortion complications has dropped significantly.

Access, however, appears to be an issue, and delegates reported that when they questioned one session speaker further about abortion in Cuba, she replied, "It is legal but expensive."

Sex education is taught in all Cuban schools.

Cuba first began teaching sex education in schools in the 1990s. Today, sex education content has been mainstreamed into all levels of Cuban education, from pre-K to the doctoral level. For example, condom use is discussed in primary school onward. Educators teach the concept that

“no means no” and that one must say no to any nonconsensual sexual experience. The curriculum also teaches contraception versus abortion as the first line of pregnancy prevention. Educational outreach has been credited with helping to lower the country’s teen pregnancy rate. CENESEX creates the sex education curriculum promulgated throughout all levels of the Cuban education system.

Delegates learned, however, that the system has its weaknesses. As a result of varying pedagogical levels among teachers, personal prejudices against homosexuality (see the section below), for instance, can transmit to students as state-mandated sex education.

Groups are working to overcome homophobia in Cuban society.

During their meeting with Castro Espin delegates also learned that, despite some progress, significant work remains to be done in overcoming lingering machismo and homophobia in Cuban society. State agencies, including CENESEX, are performing scientific research on the roots of Cuban homophobia to see what messages will most successfully undercut discrimination and promote sexual diversity in Cuban society.

For example, to break through lingering machismo and redefine Cuban masculinity, CENESEX is producing cartoons for adolescents to help them deal constructively with new courtship norms (that is, that males should try to court—not conquer—girls). CENESEX also shows films to generate public debate on changing gender roles and sexual diversity.

A commemoration of International Day Against Homophobia continues to be held annually in Cuba. In addition, proposed changes to the 1975 Family Code seek to protect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender family members and grant the right of same-sex unions.

VI. Conclusion

This paper summarizes the major findings from the AAUW delegation’s six days in Cuba. A key finding from this historic trip is that despite differences in backgrounds, politics, governments, and access to services, women in Cuba are dealing with many of the same issues as women in the United States—including work-life balance, gender stereotypes in employment and education, domestic violence, and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Additionally, as in the United States, women in Cuba have made significant progress over time but barriers remain.

In Cuba, despite laws to support gender equality in education and the workplace, women are underrepresented among the highest ranks of the government and educational leadership. Laws to promote gender equality in the home have also been ineffective in overcoming gender stereotypes and lingering machismo. Like AAUW in the United States, groups in Cuba are working passionately to break through remaining barriers so that all women and girls have a fair chance. This discussion does not end with the delegates’ return to the United States.

A main goal of the delegation was to bring these research findings home to help seed further dialogue about the barriers facing women and girls in Cuba. The trip reinforced the importance of personal communication, as written policies do not always correspond with practices on the ground. Meeting with women Cuban leaders gave our delegates a better understanding of the issues facing Cuban women today. AAUW looks forward to continued dialogue with women leaders in Cuba and worldwide as we seek ways to promote gender equity across the globe.

¹ U.S. Department of State (February 2009). *2008 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/wha/119155.htm.

² Cuba Solidarity Campaign (n.d.). *Women in Cuba Report*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk/resources/WomenInCubareport.pdf.

³ Cuba Solidarity Campaign (n.d.). *Women in Cuba Report*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk/resources/WomenInCubareport.pdf; U.S. Department of State (February 2009). *2008 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/wha/119155.htm.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau (2000). *Census of the Population*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁵ The White House Project (2009). *The White House Project Report: Benchmarking Women's Leadership*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.thewhitehouseproject.org/documents/Report.pdf.

⁶ Snyder, T. D., and Dillow, S. A. (2010). Digest of Education Statistics 2009 (NCES 2010-013). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

⁷ U.S. Government. Central Intelligence Agency (December 2010). World Factbook. Retrieved January 7, 2011 from www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html.

⁸ U.S. Department of State (March 2010). *2009 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136108.htm.

⁹ U.S. Department of State (March 2010). *2009 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136108.htm.

¹⁰ Cuba Solidarity Campaign (n.d.). *Women in Cuba Report*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.cuba-solidarity.org.uk/resources/WomenInCubareport.pdf.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State (March 2010). *2009 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136108.htm.

¹² U.S. Department of State (February 2009). *2008 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/wha/119155.htm.

¹³ U.S. Department of State (March 2010). *2009 Human Rights Report: Cuba*. Retrieved December 15, 2010, from www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136108.htm; notes provided by Cuba delegate Susan Sarfati.

¹⁴ Evenson, D. (2005). "Cuba's Maternity Leave Extended to Fathers, but Few Dads Take It," *MEDICC Review* 7(6). Retrieved December 16, 2010, from www.medicc.org/publications/medicc_review/0605/mr-features.html.