50 YEARS LATER:
WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CUBA

Oxfam
During its 15-year presence in Cuba, a fundamental axis of Oxfam work has been to contribute humbly to the effort to document and disseminate information on aspects of Cuban reality that may be useful for stakeholders, social organizations, and decision-makers in countries of the region and the South as a whole. With this perspective, we have presented publications on Cuban social policy in times of crisis, the agricultural situation, the impact of various projects and programs, the experience of the farmer-to-farmer agro-ecology movement, the life stories of 50 rural leaders across the country, and the Cuban system of dealing with HIV/AIDS. Additionally, we have contributed to systematic documentation of the Cuban system for risk reduction, adaptation models and mitigation of climate change.

With the publication of this document, *50 Years Later: Women and Social Change in Cuba* – created by an inter-disciplinary team of Cuban researchers with support from a Brazilian colleague – we hope to show another facet of the rich Cuban experience. We believe this facet is extraordinarily important, given Oxfam’s conviction that “without gender justice there can be no justice.” This document reflects the important and substantial progress that has been made in gender equity, as well as the challenges that lay ahead.

We thank the authors, and the women who gave their time for the interviews and contributed valuable information and critiques in the validation focus group as well as in readings of early drafts of this document, which one of the women even called an “information mine.”

We hope that this book may be useful for Cubans in their daily struggle for a country with growing gender equity. We also hope that readers from other countries may see this as an opportunity to broaden their knowledge of the reality for women in Cuba, and that each may find ideas and proposals to feed work for gender equity in their own context.

*Beat Schmid,*  
*Oxfam Program Coordinator in Cuba*
The young woman who, in the Cuba of the Third Millennium, dreams of being a computer scientist as she leads her student collective and shows off her first love, may not be aware that just 50 years ago in this same country, women made up only 13 per cent of the workforce. This young woman was born with the rights that her grandmothers won, making the results of a five-decade struggle against a five-century old patriarchy seem “natural.”

However, although the process of women’s empowerment in Cuba is one of the great achievements of the Revolution of January 1959, it has not been discussed in its full dimensions in writings about the progress made in Cuban society. Much more emphasis is often placed on advances made in healthcare, education, and sports.

Perhaps one reason is that this movement, cataloged as a revolution within the Revolution, has not been sufficiently documented so as to classify its achievements, errors, and challenges. This lack of documentation makes it difficult to comprehend just how much has been achieved. Much of the information remains dispersed in unpublished speeches, documents, and studies. The pressure of constant work has taken precedence over making time to reflect and view the road traveled and the path that lies ahead. However, as Jesús Martín Barbero points out, “the left must not, despite the imperatives of daily work, stop generating theory, because theory is also a space of dependency.”

What has been called “a struggle for women’s equality” has been one of the unique aspects of building the Cuban social system. Unlike the architects of other systems for the construction of socialism, who viewed the elimination of discrimination against women as something that would come automatically with the suppression of exploitation in general, the leadership of the Cuban Revolution recognized from the very beginning that the forms of oppression to which women were subjected required specific and targeted actions. To carry out these actions, a grassroots organization called the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC by its Spanish acronym) was created.

It is only in recent years that results of studies performed in Cuba, by Cuban researchers, have begun to be published. This book is a contribution to this growing bibliography; it does not examine only one aspect of the issue, rather it seeks to offer a more complete vision based on linking viewpoints across several disciplines.

The authors themselves point out the reason for this multi-viewpoint approach, saying that “the analysis of gender relations in the political sphere, economic sphere, and in the context of education, health, and families, led us to select several scenarios and individual or collective experiences of Cuban women to explain the current social situation.”

It is also necessary to highlight that this book’s approach to women’s empowerment goes beyond the narrow definition of reaching determined quotas or positions in political power, and includes a broader perspective of expanding opportunities to reach full participation under equal conditions.

This perspective explains why this book begins with an analysis of social policy as a key element for gender equality, establishing a synergy between the humanistic concepts of the Cuban Revolution, the process of change in production and power relations, and women’s empowerment. The book avoids the epistemic essentialism of viewing discrimination against women as isolated from its socio-economic and class-based context. Multiple forms of oppression are dialectically related to gender discrimination and the history of the country.

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Additionally, significant space is dedicated to the issue of women’s participation in decision-making, perhaps one of the most crucial challenges today. President Raul Castro made reference to the issue in one of his interventions in Parliament: “I personally believe that the lack of progress made on this issue in the 50 years since the revolution is shameful, even though women account for 65 percent of the technical workforce and the citizenry forms a beautiful racial rainbow without any formal privileges…”

In this interweaving of factors and social actors, specialists view the FMC as a mechanism for the promotion of women’s participation. The FMC also acts as a critical player in designing policies for the advancement of women and the creation of a culture of equality. This role goes beyond simply drafting and promoting laws, which is indispensable but insufficient when it comes to subverting judgments and prejudices in the collective mindset.

Progress in the education indicators reached by Cuban women demonstrates what has been achieved so far. The researchers note these achievements in a longitudinal study that is linked to other prevalent realities, but do so without any smugness, pointing out the spaces in which androcentric thought still seeks to reproduce itself.

This type of attitude is another aspect that makes these essays so valuable; the researchers are not seduced by the numbers alone. On the contrary, they weave together the quantitative and qualitative elements, making comparisons to Cuba’s past as well as to the situation in other countries. The researchers explore the complexity of the issues from several vantage points.

The section on women’s economic empowerment shows this same spirit. In addition to information on women’s participation in the workplace, the section presents the tension between family and work life, and the wage gaps that stem from the different roles that are assigned and assumed from the traditional concepts of what is masculine and feminine.

The essay on health reveals the progress that has been made and discusses, from a critical perspective, the cultural aspects that enable gender inequalities to persist in the system.

Of course, a discussion on the diversity of families in Cuba – the way in which they are structured and the extent to which they express or limit women’s empowerment – could not be left out of this study. The “double shift” for women is one of the patriarchal burdens that still weigh upon families and household dynamics.

Issues of gender-based violence surface as well in this examination of the current social situation for Cuban women. This book presents a revealing analysis of an issue which is often scantily approached and partially studied. Here its complexities are discussed, and the machismo that still persists is identified.

The authors, well-known researchers and teachers, are some of the pioneers of gender studies in Cuba. They come from different places, but have coincided in efforts that, especially since the 1980s, have promoted research on women and gender in academia and other fields.

Here we have a book that draws from diverse sources and bibliographic studies, interviews, field research, and discussion groups as its methodological compass. The work also establishes links between dissimilar aspects in Cuban reality in order to examine the process of women’s empowerment over the course of the socialist Revolution, neither apologetically nor over-critically.

As it reflects upon the results achieved, reveals what has yet to be done, and establishes the contradictions that such deep changes may generate, this volume is indispensable to understand today’s Cubans, examine the past, and discern the future.

Isabel Moya

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The task of setting out a general panorama of the situation for women in Cuba, pointing out the role of the State as a fundamental actor in guaranteeing change, is a very delicate and evocative proposal. This is due to the fact that, in the last three decades, the Latin American and Caribbean women’s movement has dedicated a large part of its efforts to designing public policies to combat gender inequality. The analysis here offers input and elements to analyze the role of the State in the transformations that Cuban women have experienced, as well as the challenges that have arisen along the way.

One of the perspectives included in the text evaluates the situation from the standpoint of compliance with the Millennium Objectives and the proposals of the Committee for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In this sense, this book offers confirmation of what many of us already knew. A process such as the one occurring in Cuba goes well beyond the legal and political instruments of the United Nations, which provide only generic orientation and don’t, in and of themselves, call for deep structural changes. It is very positive for Cuba to adopt these instruments as a reference, as this allows their limits to be clearly discerned. At the same time, three decades before the Fourth Conference on Women was held, Cuban policies were already using the instruments and proposals that would later be defined as cross-cutting elements.

This book effectively examines and reviews what the process of women building a collective force and voice represented, and how diverse sectors were able to come together. The reflection on the role of the FMC in the construction of cross-cutting policy elements and the inter-relationship between diverse actors in the Revolution is also important. Another element to highlight is the importance that was initially assigned to women’s economic autonomy and to structural changes in women’s lives. In the area of social inclusion, the studies in the book demonstrate how a combination of policies were established to target the most vulnerable sectors, for example, actions related to incorporating sex workers into society through their reintegration into the formal workforce.

The book includes an analysis of the way in which the FMC organized its work, and on the series of interfaces it built. Its actions were taken on a broad scale, and were centered on what were considered to be fundamental aspects: training, research, and orientation. In this way
the FMC reached out to different levels and sectors so that the policies built could reach all women. In other countries there was much debate as to whether the FMC was a feminist organization or not. The analysis included here shows how the organization itself has viewed its relationship to feminism: it has always struggled against discrimination.

In addition to presenting the changes that have taken place, this book deals with the challenges Cuban women continue to encounter every day. This analysis reflects upon the significance of the principal strategy of the Cuban Revolution, which is also present in a broad sector of feminism: to support actions that take women out of the confines of the home and enable their full incorporation into social life. This reflection also demonstrates the fragile nature of full incorporation in the context of complex family relations and the demands of household work and care for family members. This dynamic is evident not only in Cuba, but in many other countries as well, and it reveals both the extent to which women take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to them, as well as how difficult it is to change gender and family relations. The “role overload” women bear comes to light, as well as the tension between public and private spaces and the consequences of this stress upon women’s health.

This analysis demonstrates that there is a great difference between Cuba and other countries in terms of the intensity of inequality, but not in terms of its presence. The book warns that the socialization patterns for men and women continue to follow traditional models, and women are still forced to reconcile their presence in public spaces with their family lives.

In the same way, the patriarchal models of property and control that make violence a part of the daily lives of women still exist, and traditional representations of what is male and what is female still prevail, making their mark on sexuality and education. Men remain better positioned in the workplace, and they carry out less household labour. In other words, the sexual division of labour persists, because even while some of its expressions have been altered, its principles remain present: the separation of men’s and women’s work, and a hierarchy in which men have access to work of greater value and do not effectively take responsibility for household work or care for family members. In practice, women continue to be in charge of the everyday care of adult men. These trends illustrate power imbalances, both in families and in society.

What’s most important is that the debate presented in this book is part of a series of initiatives that show the vitality of the Cuban process and the courage to examine existing limits in order to overcome them. The capacity of Cuban movements and organizations to participate in global struggles, as well as their everyday actions of solidarity with other peoples, must not be overlooked. Part of this process has included the willingness of Cuban women to participate in international spaces for coordination such as the World March of Women, where they contribute their experience, commitment, and spirit of rebellion.

The lives of Cuban women represent an important reference point for the global movement. This book offers an excellent opportunity to delve further into these women’s reality, and will doubtlessly generate learning which will enrich the discussion on how to overcome our challenges in the struggle to win equality.

Nalu Faria
The development strategy in Cuba since 1959 has incorporated the idea that developing the skills and capacities of human beings, the true protagonists of progress, should be at the center of economic development.

The Cuban development model, created out of structural transformations in the second half of the 20th century, has centered on valuing the State’s role in the market and in designing policies that seek social equity and promote universality of opportunities. The Cuban approach implies that the process of economic development must overcome all of the cultural barriers that limit social integration for traditionally marginalized groups. Surmounting these obstacles is a precondition for sustainable human development. The struggles against discrimination in employment and in favor of equal access to education and health services have become high-priority initiatives -- constants which must be preserved even in the flux of international crisis, the fall of the market and socialist system, the intensification of the blockade, and the new economic scenario defined in the 1990s to deal with these realities.

The priority placed on these policies explains why, even in the worst of circumstances over the last 50 years, social expenditures continued to represent a high percentage of the Gross Domestic Product. This high level of social investment is especially apparent when it is compared to the investments made in more developed economies, which were not facing the realities of an economic blockade. The responsibility for financing social development rests upon the government.

During these years, one of the barriers to development that had to be overcome was the subordination of women in a patriarchal culture. What today translates to Millennium Goal Three, the promotion of gender equality, has been a long struggle for women’s equality and emancipation for common Cubans. This struggle is an integral part of the Cuban development project, and it has remained constant over the tough test of time and the difficulties of the Special Period. *

Viewing this policy from an historical perspective, it is clear that a foundation is in place to continue these social policies. There are also ruptures and contradictions, which highlight the need to adapt strategies to fit the new historic realities that have come about over the past 50 years.

In the first decade after the triumph of the Revolution, beginning in 1959**, a new mentality emerged in the formulation and implementation of social policies. The new approach was inspired by the goal of true equality. The early period after the revolution saw the launch of intense grass-roots mobilization efforts, enthusiastic popular participation in neighbourhood or sector-based organizations, and strong commitments to defend and support revolutionary measures.

The existing state apparatus became a guarantor of rights and a social provider. For this to happen, the property system changed and wealth was redistributed within a very short time frame. During this time period, the revolutionary government implemented a series of plans that sought to eradicate poverty, unsanitary conditions, and vulnerability. The government also promoted experimentation, stimulated broad-scale people’s participation, and reorganized social services on a national level in order to provide access to the entire population.

The impact of these widely-implemented social policies was immediate and radical. The policies were oriented toward the population in general, with a special focus on the poor, and they reached the specific groups of women and children.

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* The Special Period is referred to in Cuba as the extended period of economic crisis that started in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

** While this book sets out time periods for didactic reasons, readers should consider that events are not strictly limited within the established time frames. (For details on these time frames, see Cesar 2005.)
During the 1970s an institutionalization process took place. The goal of promoting equality continued to dominate social policy, with a particular emphasis on improving living conditions of the population through an egalitarian distribution of resources and macro-level programs such as the construction of businesses, highways, and schools. This was an era of strengthening and consolidating social policies.

State centralization increased during this period, reaffirming the role of the State as a guarantor. People’s consultations continued to be one of the main channels for the participation of the Cuban people in the overarching processes of the Revolution.

This stage was characterized by changes to national legislation that reinforced the tangible results already achieved in Cuban society. Different laws were drafted, including the Maternity Law section of the Labour Code, Family Law, and the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba. These laws sought to incorporate the new changes occurring in male-female relationships into law, reinforcing women’s rights to political, social, cultural, and economic equality.

Social policies for equality grew stronger in the 1980s. These policies stressed improvements in the living conditions of the population. Contradictorily, the development model that produced this relative bonanza began to show its first signs of wear. The established model began to burn out toward the end of the 1980s, as economic results could no longer cover social expenditures. The process of “rectification of errors and negative tendencies” began in an attempt to correct the country’s course. The image of the State as a guarantor began to dissolve, and although the State continued to play a role in social provision, it now did so in a manner consistent with the lesser resources at its disposal.

In the 1990s, with the crisis brought about by the fall of the socialist camp, important measures were implemented in Cuba. This decade gave rise to an economic policy that responded to new historical contexts, but which also allowed social inequality to appear. In the economic system created by the new property regime, which recognized private and mixed-ownership properties, a new population-at-risk* appeared. Nonetheless, the search for equality continued. This equality was to be based on the principles of universalism, attending to human needs, and public, free-of-charge social benefits. Measures promoting equality were carried out in accordance with policy formulation and implementation mechanisms that responded to the needs and interests of the people. Despite the tensions between social expenditure and economic results which arose during this crisis period, the proportion of the Gross Domestic Product assigned to social programs increased by 34 per cent (M. Uriarte 2008).

In the first years of this century, the recovery of the Cuban economy allowed for investment to be prioritized in social programs, in contrast with other countries that cut expenses in times of crisis. This reaffirms that Cuban policies for social welfare continue to be guided by the principle of responding to human needs and seeking equity, including gender equity. Any analysis of progress made toward equality between Cuban men and women must be considered in the general context of the Cuban struggle against all kinds of cultural discrimination as a necessary condition for development. This struggle is derived from a particular approach to social and economic policy, one based on universalism.

The implementation of universalism in policy has allowed Cuba to achieve health, education, and employment rankings comparable to countries with high human development levels, as well as important results in the promotion of gender equality. The report on fulfillment of the Millenium Development Goals confirms these results.

* This is a concept that replaces poverty in the Cuban context. According to the Institute of Economic Investigation, (INIE by its Spanish acronym) “…poverty refers to an inhuman condition which is difficult to measure. […] generally because the concept of income assumes that access to basic needs functions primarily through market relationships” (Ferriol et al 1998). There is ongoing debate between Cuban academics and politicians as to whether this group should be designated with the term “poverty with protection,” or “at-risk group.” Regardless of the most appropriate term, it is important to clarify that these individuals and families are not unprotected in the same way as those in other regions of Latin America and the world who experience poverty, as Cubans have access to free healthcare and education, and access to other basic products.
During recent years, Cuba has shown significant progress in its Human Development Index (HDI), moving from a mid-range ranking to its current rank with high development countries. The HDI score ranks Cuba in position 51. The consistent application of the principle of universalism to improve opportunities for women has raised Cuba’s position on the Gender Development Index (position 49) above its relative position on the HDI (UNDP 2007).

In Cuban foreign policy, construction of international commitments in favour of the advancement of women stems from this same development approach. Signing and applying the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), established an important political benchmark in the country. These steps helped to demonstrate the advancement of women in Cuba compared to other countries, and to create a National Platform to provide follow-up to the gender equity projects. Additionally, the endorsement and ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provided an important legal instrument in the struggle against discrimination in the lives of Cuban women.

### Table 1. State of Fulfillment of Millennium Development Goals, Cuba Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal #</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Level of Fulfillment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>End poverty and hunger</td>
<td>Probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Achieve universal primary education</td>
<td>Fulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Promote gender equality and empower women</td>
<td>Fulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reduce child mortality</td>
<td>Fulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Improve maternal health</td>
<td>Probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases</td>
<td>Probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ensure environmental sustainability</td>
<td>Potentially probable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Develop a global partnership for development</td>
<td>Potentially probable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: INIE, 2005*
Women’s empowerment, expressed in the growing roles of women as protagonists in the political, economic, and social lives of their countries, is a characteristic of the world today. Although these roles and actions are different in each nation, women are increasingly recognized as social subjects, owners of their own rights, and agents of change who are committed to development under conditions of gender equity.

Women’s empowerment is a gradual and complex process of fundamental changes in women's human condition, rooted in improving quality of life and social welfare. This process has been pushed forward by feminist thought and political practice that took root and grew. The experience that women have gained as collective and organic actors, and the urgency of their struggle for gender equity, have been decisive factors in the creation of an international legal framework that supports women’s rights. It is in part thanks to this framework that women have reached greater levels of influence and participation in the institutional sphere. Nevertheless, it must also be mentioned that women face multiple social realities: the levels of women’s empowerment and the speed with which processes of change are taking place are different in each society.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba is a leader in progress and victories for women. Over the last 50 years Cuba has been an important stage for increased women’s participation, not only in terms of economic activity, but also with respect to social and political action. This increased participation includes the incorporation of the women’s sector, already widely integrated in economic organizations and community action structures, into spaces of power within the government and the State.

The level of social integration of female Cuban workers is high and has been sustained over time. Integration includes all arenas of public and private life: the workplace, the community, politics, and the home. Even when work life ends, community, political and domestic life almost always continues, and high levels of social integration are maintained.

The fact that more women are taking on protagonist roles is, without a doubt, a result of a political project whose fundamental objective has been to achieve justice and social equality. Nonetheless, women have not yet reached equal participation in circles of power. They are less present in leadership positions, especially the positions at the highest levels of decision-making, which means that the decisions of the State, Party, government, or public companies continue to be made by the men leading these national institutions.

The Cuban government has prioritized fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals, promoting the presence of women in leadership roles in order to guarantee and promote women’s rights, power, and political participation. A key result of this effort is that women now account for 43.16 per cent of Cuba’s parliament, one of the highest percentages in the world, going well beyond the goal of 30 per cent established by the United Nations in 1995. Since the year 2002, affirmative action models have been applied through a joint agreement with the Organizations of State Central Administration (OACE by its Spanish acronym) to build a candidate database including equal numbers of men and women. Starting in 2003, final selection and approval processes for leadership positions were required to include a man and a woman under equal conditions, so that decisions could be made upon equal requirements.

After Cuba’s participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations in 1995 in Beijing, a working platform was created. One of the leaders of the Federation of Cuban Women referred to the platform in an interview:
The platform is there to sum up the views and political will of the State of the Republic of Cuba, serve as the cornerstone for the construction of policy on women, and provide continuity for the advancement and development of gender equality in our country. The platform contains strategic objectives and actions to be carried out, linking governmental and non-governmental efforts with the highest-level decisions, as our system of government allows many actors from across the country to come together to guarantee that the goals are fulfilled. The implementation of the goals is the responsibility of the Cuban State, with participation and contributions from the FMC as a national mechanism for the advancement of women. The Cuban State has given the FMC the authority to assume a role almost on-par with a public ministry. Monitoring compliance with the CEDAW objectives has become a powerful tool for the FMC to advance the struggle to end discrimination against women in Cuba. The government has given the FMC the social responsibility of overseeing compliance with the objectives of promoting women’s participation in political and social decision-making processes (M. Casas 2008).

In the last two decades, the number of women who have gained access to leadership or management positions has increased slightly. Even though the shift in statistical representation reflects only the quantitative advances made, this is the starting point to achieve greater female responsibilities in the exercise of political and social power. Equity cannot be reached if women do not share equal leadership rights and responsibilities as men, including the distribution of power, income, work, and time.

Table 2 specifies the number of women in workplace leadership positions in the country from 1995 to 2006. This indicator does not provide separate data regarding the institutions that are led by women or the levels of leadership that they exercise. An increase can be observed, but access to these spaces still remains lower for women than for men.

Achieving greater representation of women in leadership spaces is a key strategy for women’s empowerment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Both Sexes Total of workers in leadership positions</th>
<th>Women Total women workers % of total workers</th>
<th>Total leadership positions % of total leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>4174.9 321.5</td>
<td>1481.4 35.48%</td>
<td>87.4 27.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4379.3 346</td>
<td>1559.5 35.31%</td>
<td>102.9 29.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4754.6 366.2</td>
<td>1768.8 37.20%</td>
<td>108.0 29.49%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: (ONE 2007 c)
As the chart shows, although women now participate in leadership structures in the workplace, the number of men in management and leadership positions is triple the number of women in such positions. In 1995, 27.18 per cent of the workplace leaders in the country were women. That number was 29.73 per cent in 2000 and 29.49 per cent in 2006.

Comparing the balance between men and women in workplace leadership positions over a period of just over 20 years reveals that in the year 1980, of every 100 working men, 10.7 were leaders or managers; only 5.4 out of every 100 women held such a position at that time. This gap diminished only slightly by 2002, when 12 of every 100 working men exercised leadership roles, and 6.7 of every 100 women held those positions. After 20 years of applying policies to promote women’s access to management and leadership positions, the percentage of men holding these positions continues to nearly double the percentage of women in such leadership spaces (D. Echevarría 2008).

The dimensions and significance of the rights and victories enjoyed by Cuban women today can lead to new widespread efforts and greater expectations for the female population. A young female professional expressed these feelings:

These changes have had a positive influence on my life; I have been able to live, just like the rest of the young women of my generation, in a context that is more favourable for me to develop my life projects. I’ve graduated with a degree in Psychology, I’ve been a university professor and a leader of the Youth Communist Union (UJC in its Spanish acronym), as well as a member of the Federation of University Students (FEU in its Spanish acronym). I’m finishing a master’s degree. If we look at the past, we see that women were totally subordinated and dependent, and were at a disadvantage with respect to men. There were high levels of illiteracy among women, as well as poor health conditions, unemployment, and little legislative protection (this still exists in some senses). It’s clear that the implementation of social policies has brought some important benefits (V. Muñoz 2008).

Without a doubt, the educational, technical and professional competencies of Cuban women represent important human capital and valuable potential for socio-economic and cultural development. Nonetheless, this knowledge and skill base must be allowed to shine in decision-making spaces in politics and government.

The female presence in Cuban Parliament grew after the elections of 2008; women now occupy 260 of the 614 seats, or 42.34 per cent of the National Assembly of People’s Power. The rate of growth has been constant, though it is still proportionally small compared to the great number of women with the necessary skills and requirements to participate in this governing body.

Table 3 displays the rate of women’s involvement in the Cuban Parliament.

**Table 3: Women in Cuban Parliament**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% of women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>42.34</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Source: FMC 2008*

Comparing these numbers to the levels of participation of women in parliaments in other countries throughout Central America, there is little doubt that Cuba holds a prominent position in the region. Cuba now ranks third in the world for this indicator, the estimated average female representation in world parliaments being 17 per cent (M. Álvarez 2008).

In the elections of 2003, Cuba was already a world leader in terms of the number of women in parliament, behind Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway.

It is important to emphasize that female representation is greater at the highest levels of the national and legislative power than it is in provincial and municipal governments and at the grassroots levels (People’s Councils and Districts).
While the percentages of women’s participation in provincial governments have risen since 1976, the gains have been discreet, from 17.2 per cent in 1976 down to 16.8 per cent in 1981, and finally up to 30.8 per cent in 1986. From that date the percentage came down slightly, settling at 28.6 per cent in the year 2000 (M. Álvarez, et al. 2000).

Since then, according to Mayda Álvarez, a member of the Candidacy Commission for the 2008 elections, the proportion of women in elected positions in the provincial governments has risen. Álvarez reports that women represent 40.8 per cent of the total number of elected officials on a provincial level, out of a total of 1,201 candidates (M. Álvarez 2008).

The FMC analyzed this trend – which differs from trends observed in other administrative, political, and grassroots institutions – in its Sixth Congress. The objective causes identified included an excessive workload resulting from the multiple roles women were asked to play, and limitations in material resources and support services for households. The subjective causes may be related to prejudices, sexist stereotypes, self-limitation among women, and the adoption of life projects that do not include hopes for promotion (FMC 1995). One of the women interviewed shared that:

> If it seems difficult for a woman worker to organize her time and efforts to do everything she needs to, I can only imagine how difficult it must be for a woman leader. This, I think, is the main problem. While there are still prejudices and mindsets that say women aren’t efficient or don’t have the right skills, I think that at the root of it, the conditions don’t exist to allow many women to accept promotions into management and leadership positions” (C. Suárez 2008).

Table 4 shows data for female political representation in the parliaments of different countries. The information in this table, when compared to the data on Cuba in Table 3, shows that the participation of Cuban women in their parliament is nearly triple the participation of Central American women representatives in their respective national legislatures.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Election Year</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Total Women</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>93</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>128</td>
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<td>9.4</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (UNDP 2006)

The Inter-Parliamentary Union presented a ranking in April 2000 that placed Cuba among the 19 nations who had more than 25 per cent representation of women in their national legislative institutions that year. The Scandinavian countries are at the head of the list with the greatest number of women parliamentarians. In the Americas, only Cuba and Venezuela appear on the list. Cuba reported 27.6 per cent women representatives, while Venezuela reported 28.6 per cent, landing in 12th position on the list.

Recent data demonstrate a more favourable situation for female participation in parliamentary leadership. Cuba, with its 219 women in parliament, representing 36 per cent of the legislators, ranks seventh in the world. Costa Rica and Argentina occupy positions nine and 12, respectively. Despite this progress, however, the numbers are far from showing an equitable relationship between men and women in government, and further still from expressing a situation that favours women in leadership positions. There are 19 countries in the region in which women hold less than 20 per cent of the seats in their parliaments and in three of these countries female participation is classified as “very limited”: Honduras, Haiti, and Belize. These three countries are each ranked – lower than 100th place in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005).

Despite a growing representation of women in the Cuban Parliament, women participate in the Council of State to a lesser extent. In 1998 the Council of State, elected by the parliamentary representatives, was made up of 16.1 per cent
women. This includes an increase of nearly three percentage points from 1993 levels, but the number is still very low when one takes into account that the number of women legislators in the parliament rose by more than 50 from one legislative session to the next (M. Álvarez, et al. 2000). Likewise, six women have served in the Council of Ministers from 2004 to 2008, and 33 have held responsibilities in the Vice-Ministries.

Progress has been made in the distribution of management positions between men and women. In the year 2007, women made up 54.5 per cent of management personnel in the medical field; among stomatologists the number rises to 65.3 per cent. Despite these encouraging figures, this field follows the same pattern as other institutions: the pyramid narrows as it gets higher. Even though some women have been vice-ministers of health, none has occupied the central position of the Ministry. All this takes place in a healthcare system in which women constitute 70 per cent of the workforce (MINSAP 2007).

The participation of Cuban women in the different levels of leadership of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC by its Spanish acronym), and in grassroots and labour organizations, has been important to the process of women’s empowerment.

In the year 2000, 30.1 per cent of the active members of the PCC were women. Nonetheless, women held only 22 per cent of the leadership roles in the Municipal Committees, and 23 per cent in the Provincial Committees. For that same year, women made up 13.3 per cent of the Central Committee, and eight per cent of the members of the Political Bureau, the highest level of power in the Party. The numbers for Provincial and Municipal Party Heads are also low, showing that only two women are First Secretaries in Provincial Boards – 14 per cent of the total - and 10 women hold these roles in municipal party structures – six per cent of the total (M. Álvarez, et al. 2000).

The statistics show that in the PCC women account for only one-third of the active membership throughout the country. The Fourth FMC Congress suggested that this may be because access to these political spaces is based on a scale of personal merits and socio-political experience that favours men, or because women limit their own participation in the political activities of the organization.

The Workers’ Central Union of Cuba (CTC by its Spanish acronym), which represents the men and women employed in state economic activities, demonstrates a similar trend. Women accounted for more than half of the grassroots leaders in the union sections, bureaus, and municipal directorates (51.9%, 55.6%, and 62.1% of the members of those structures, respectively) in the year 2000. These percentages differed from the composition of the National Council and Secretariat (the highest levels of leadership), in which only 35.4 per cent and 24.6 per cent of the leaders were women, respectively (M. Álvarez, et al. 2000).

In the organization of the CDRs*, which include almost all of the Cuban population over 14 years of age, these same trends exist, though they are not as pronounced. The rates of women’s participation in the grassroots base of this organization, neighbourhood committees, and municipal boards are 44.2 per cent, 40 per cent, and 40.6 per cent, respectively. Women account for 35 per cent of the National Coordinating body for the CDRs.

It is important to emphasize that women, and especially unpaid household workers, play a crucial and active role in developing and implementing projects in the CDRs. These organizations are also spaces which promote training for women to join in the work and leadership of different institutions. One of the women interviewed for this book made reference to these training processes, saying: “Those of us who were leading the block kept records of who was working and who was studying. Most of them are; now seven teachers joined to teach classes, even though they were retired. We all took part, along with two men who participated as well” (B. Torres 2008).

In the National Association of Small Farmers, (ANAP by its Spanish acronym), women were barely represented in the leadership in the year 2000. Women held the presidency of 1.8

* Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, a social organization whose grassroots structure is based on the place of residence of its members.
per cent of the Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPAs) and Credit and Service Cooperatives (CCSs) (M. Álvarez, et al. 2000). However, by 2008, there were 61 women leading CPAs and 94 women presidents of the CCSs. Women now account for 23 per cent of the members of the municipal committees of the ANAP, and 24 per cent of the members of the association’s provincial committees. Women represent 32 per cent of the total membership of the ANAP. While these data show an increase in female participation in agricultural production organizations, rural life and production still maintain a traditionalist division of labour that reproduces asymmetries in gender relations and hampers the assimilation of cultural changes.

Limitations on women breaking into intermediate and upper hierarchies are accompanied by “images and perceptions present on the demand side about the characteristics required for leadership positions. While they claim to be neutral in terms of gender, there is a particular association between the attributes valued for management positions and stereotypes linked to men” (M. Novick, S. Rojo, and V. Castillo 2008).

The participation of women in institutionalized politics is essential, not only because it is a sign of the equitable distribution of power, but also because it can represent a guarantee that a gender-based approach will be used to generate social policies at different levels and for different institutions. The statistic representation of women in leadership positions is only a tool for analysis; to understand the true contributions of women in power and of the application of a gender-based approach in politics, it is important to include a qualitative dimension of analysis through a group of indicators that demonstrates how this power is exercised, and under what conditions.

An assessment of women’s participation in leadership should not only analyze an increased presence of women in management positions; it should also examine what kinds of responsibilities are being taken on, and how much control women have in the context of the power that they exercise. This includes an appraisal of the decision-making process and access to resources. Are gender-based policies being implemented through these leadership spaces? Do they include the specific interests of women in long-term projections?

According to Echevarría, leadership structures in labour, political, and administrative institutions continue to assign to women the typically female roles from the family and household context, which favours a continued decision-making dichotomy between men and women (D. Echevarría 2008).

Various studies found that women participate more in decision-making in secondary and intermediate structures. This often leads women to play auxiliary roles, especially in economic, administrative, and organizational functions, as well as in human resources. These studies also established that access to resources is not equal between men and women leaders; this may stem from the scant representation of women in high-ranking positions with more complex responsibilities and more power. However, positions held by women imply more effort and stress due to the additional responsibilities that women have within and outside of their homes (M. Álvarez 2000; T. Caram 2000; D. Echevarría 2008).

Similar points of view are found in the interviews carried out for this book:

The way that having power in the workplace is designed, it prohibits responsible participation in the family. Often times participating fully in hard work until seven or eight o’clock is the indicator of whether or not I am a good worker, and this of course has its effect on women. On the one hand, they may have a family to take care of, and on the other hand they have to deal with double and triple shifts at work. There’s a lot that has to be done to fix this. (I. Moya 2008)

A socio-cultural change that includes equal division of daily responsibilities of family life is very necessary. This means not only creating the general conditions in society that facilitate this goal, but also working in educational and cultural

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* See horizontal-vertical segregation
** Sexual division of labour and corresponding stereotypes
spheres to teach both men and women about the true principles of equality in the family context.

Although a legal and political platform to promote equity is necessary, it alone is not enough to guarantee equity between men and women. Promoting women is a complex task. As management or leadership positions are assigned greater responsibility, they are associated with the characteristics of the male leader/executive. Requiring these characteristics – including excessive rationality and authority, and the ability to commit 100 per cent of one’s time – does not favour the selection of women for higher-ranking positions.

The responsibility assigned to leadership and management positions, and the characteristics of the workforce they supervise, vary based on the qualifications and academic level of the manager. When women are not selected for higher positions despite the unique capacities they have accumulated, they may feel undervalued or they may be underutilized in the institutions where they work.

One of the leaders interviewed shared her view:

The great challenge is to build new forms of leadership, in which family life does not have to be the opposite of workplace success. Raising the workforce is also very important - that is, for the human species to continue we need not only to reproduce ourselves biologically, but also to cultivate values in our people, to cultivate sensitivity. This takes time and dedication as well (I. Moya 2008).

Studies consulted (M. Álvarez, 2000; T. Caram 2000; D. Echevarría 2008) emphasize that:

• Inequalities are observed in access to professional advancement and performance training, an important resource for increasing the number of women in management. The central role that women continue to play in domestic and family activities limits their participation in these educational and training opportunities.

• Even while some women have established strategies to decentralize tasks within their households, tension still exists between public and home life due to the “role overload” that they experience.

• Differences are observed in the leadership levels that women are able to access: women managers tend to be “second-in-command” (sub-directors, vice-presidents) or at the head of secondary structures. Only a limited number of women reach the highest positions of power, because these traditionally male-dominated positions contribute to the persistence of the traditional sexual division of labour and sexist stereotypes.

The leaps made in women’s empowerment are part of an ongoing process in Cuban society; achieving authentic equity in female participation in leadership circles is a challenge that remains in the country.

Female Empowerment and Women’s Organizing

The FMC, founded on August 23, 1960, has been an important instrument for women’s empowerment in Cuba. It integrated all of the women’s sectors, promoting the ongoing work of diverse actors to guarantee unity in women’s interests, even across different economic and social conditions. The fundamental objective of the FMC was to promote a series of strategies and actions to change the social situation for women in the context of the new political scenario following the triumph of the 1959 Revolution.

This organization has always incorporated an analysis of Cuban women’s reality into its proposals, and has sought to create a collective women’s identity and consciousness along with demands for equity in gender relations.
The FMC has become a leader on issues concerning women in Cuban power structures, which has allowed the organization to help design policies directly related to the achievement of equal rights for women. Developing cooperative relationships with different institutions has allowed the FMC to intervene in a wide variety of political processes in order to improve the scenario for women’s political participation. This was the case, for example, in the construction of a legal framework for more equitable and organic women’s participation in all areas of society, in order to guarantee specific actions and channel initiatives and demands within the broader context of equality and social integration that began in Cuba in the 1960s.

The FMC maintains relationships and seeks to carry out actions with educational, healthcare, administrative, family, and local institutions; the political will of the Cuban State can be measured in terms of the policies, programs, and initiatives that the State carries out together with women’s organizations.

The FMC promotes the incorporation of women into public spaces by promoting their selection for jobs created by the economic and social development plans that the country implements.

The FMC has collaborated many times with the Department of Labour and organizations that create jobs throughout the country, responding to women’s need for employment. Work has been done to encourage administrative organizations to offer non-traditional employment for women, and greater vocational orientation to incorporate young women into Polytechnic Institutes.

The leadership of the FMC has been present in activities related to employment, education, healthcare, and others topics. During these 50 years, the FMC has defined the content of social and economic policies for the promotion of equality between the sexes, using its role as a mediator with the State to advance proposals that guarantee the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights through social programs and policies.

The work of the FMC has been strengthened and diversified through the creation of three basic institutions. One, the Centre for Women’s Training (CECAM by its Spanish acronym), works in the formation and training of the organization’s leaders. The second, the Centre for Women’s Studies, has a more academic and research-based mandate. Lastly, Guidance Centres for Women and Families were created in the municipalities. Guidance Centers run community education programs for women and families to promote healthy lifestyles and preventative healthcare, and to provide free legal and psychological guidance. The struggle for equal rights and opportunities for men and women has become stronger through the Centers’ work of education and training in the communities.

The FMC is recognized for its role in the complex battle against gender discrimination. The structure of the Federation means that its actions reach more than 90 per cent of the women of the country, and enables it to propose legislative initiatives and to participate in analyzing and debating legislation, social policies, and other women’s issues. While not all of its structures function with the desired quality, the FMC is able to exert educational and political influence through the close collaboration it maintains with State institutions, grassroots organizations, and the Party. Finally, due to the social and political recognition it has garnered from the results of its work, the FMC is able to generate analysis and propose solutions for the problems that affect women (M. Casas 2008).
To reinforce and expand the significant gains made for women in the public and private spheres, the FMC is carrying out a number of initiatives. One of the more complex actions that the FMC is carrying out is to encourage political, social, and economic institutions to include a gender-based perspective in their work platforms to serve as a cross-cutting approach for analysis and practice. The clearest example of this is the National Action Plan from Beijing, and the activities to follow up to and fulfill the goals set out in this platform.

The Cuban context is a fertile stage for the application of measures that contribute to greater women’s empowerment and the FMC is one of the greatest strengths Cuban women and the Cuban State have in the effort to make the political project of gender equity a reality.

Gathering of women members of the National Association of Small Farmers, an organization that is working together with the FMC to increase women’s leadership.

There has been great debate in certain social sectors, both within and outside Cuba, over the non-identification of Cuban women’s organizations with the basic principles of feminism, and a certain distancing of these organizations from feminist practice. Even though the Federation was not originally proposed as a feminist project, in essence its positions, actions, and objectives have made it one. While feminism cannot be identified as a monolithic theory or movement, at its root it is a commitment to struggle against gender discrimination and to change the situation of women’s subordination in society. It is true that until 1974 the central concept of the FMC was not equality, rather the full incorporation of women into social life, but the work of the Federation has generally been in line with the principles of those who struggle for women’s rightful place in society.

Since beginning as a new organization in Cuba in the revolutionary period, the FMC has gradually been aligning its objectives and action strategies to respond to the changing historic moments and needs of the Cuban women.

The FMC was the first non-governmental organization created after the triumph of the Revolution, even before the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs in its acronym in Spanish) and other organizations that populate the socio-political landscape in Cuba. At the time the FMC was created, there was some disorganization in the Cuban feminist movement, and serious differences existed between women’s organizations. The Federation was able to integrate all of these women into a unified project. At the time of its founding, women from all the existing organizations in the country joined the FMC, including recognized leaders from paradigmatic feminist groups of the time. These included Vicentina Antuña and Mirta Aguirre, who were part of the newly created National Direction of the FMC, and Vilma Espín, who led the Federation until her death. Vilma dedicated her life and work to the revolutionary struggle and to fighting for women’s full equality in Cuban society.

Analyzing the early period reveals certain divergences between the FMC and the predominant feminist movement of the 1960s. The proposals and objectives of this movement were different from those of the incipient and growing Cuban women’s organizations. Isabel Moya goes into further depth in her article titled Alas Desatadas [Unbound Wings]:

The president of the Federation of Cuban Women, Vilma Espín herself, and other founders of the FMC have explained the context in which these divergences came about. Women in Cuba were throwing their lot in with the profound societal changes being forged, there were the-
ses and resolutions on women’s equality being debated and passed in the Party Congress and Federation, and the laws being passed demonstrated a political willingness to confront sexual discrimination…. We considered that kind of feminism to be something unique to capitalism, something not entirely in tune with our reality. (I. Moya 2009)

The FMC crystallizes the political will of the revolutionary State, and Fidel Castro, its highest leader, to reach the women’s movement’s objective of equality and eliminate all forms of social discrimination, including discrimination against women. This translates into positive actions contained in social policies and national programs to benefit women. This is a movement that organizes women to work for social transformations, banishing all forms of subordination and sexism. Beyond the existence of stereotypes and prejudice against feminism in the social mindset, there is no doubt that the FMC has played a transcendental role in Cuba, nor is there any doubt about the feminist essence of the federation. “I truly think it’s an Olive Green Feminism, because it has its own characteristics. That doesn’t mean that it has reached all its victories in the same way” (Interview with I. Moya 2008).
3. Changes in Education for Cuban Women

Marginalization in education and social exclusion go hand-in-hand in women’s experience throughout history – this is no coincidence. Education helps people to become social actors capable of analyzing the world, criticizing its faults and inequalities, and, most importantly, using their knowledge as a tool to transform their circumstances and reality. Through the ages, education has been an instrument that carries great power. This is the reason that, throughout history and across societies, women have been excluded from access to institutionalized learning. Additionally, their contributions have been hidden or ignored in the universal concert of our transition from barbarism to civilization. Apparently women do not fulfill the same requirements that allow men to be protagonists both in the social sphere and in the production, transmission, and acquisition of knowledge.

Naturally, Cuba has not escaped the worldwide reality of the “female fate” in education. Understanding the most important aspects of the Cuban context in the years leading up to the revolution will allow us to understand the changes that have occurred for Cuban women in the educational sphere. This sector has undergone some of the largest and most significant changes, which have transformed the women of this country into an undeniable force for social influence.

Cuban women have struggled for access to education in order to emerge from a state of alienation and to bridge the gap created by a lack of knowledge. In the 19th century, the first public spaces in which Cuban women won access were related to access to education:

“The inclusion of the first women in primary schools, and later in universities, was achieved through a difficult battle that the most forward-thinking women of the time had to fight in the arenas of ideas and action. At the end of the 19th century the emergence of these feminist discourses, timid by today’s standards, and the first appearance of women in the educational sphere as students, opened a breach in the patriarchal culture of Cuban society. This space has widened with the passage of time, a result of women proposing higher and more ambitious objectives in this area” (R. Fleitas, et al. 2005).

The initial efforts described above came together with the development of the feminist movement in Cuba in the beginning of the 20th century. Today’s Cuban women owe many of the important accomplishments they have made to this early movement, which was one of the premier feminist movements on the continent.

The triumph of the 1959 Revolution introduced unprecedented changes in the educational sphere. Education policy became a determining factor in overall social policy and an overall strategy for development. It is impossible to understand education policy by looking only at the general education and higher education systems; other programs have also been important, including technical capacity building in companies that generate economic development, health education in the general population, and sexual education in families. Education involves various institutions, and although government policy is directed essentially towards public institutions, it is also closely linked to the family unit.

Cuban education policy is based on the principles of co-education and universality – a humanist principle which provides coherence to the entire system – and as a result, the education policy has encouraged greater gender equality. At the same time, co-education is only one of the pillars of a system that recognizes the right to education for all people, regardless of race, class, sexual preference, or other social construct. Other pillars of the education policy are its public nature, its coherently planned structure, and its sustainability.
Universality as a policy focus is complemented by a principle of preferential treatment for socially vulnerable groups, such as the disabled or those with other special needs. Since the first years of the Revolution, special plans for education and capacity-building have been designed for female sex workers. Young women from rural farming communities are part of the “Ana Betancourt” program. This program’s specific goal is to improve access to education for women who are at the greatest social disadvantage. The creation of programs directed at specific social sectors, taking into consideration their unique situations, has slowly become common practice over the years. The education reform set in motion by the new government in the 1960s is organized across three large campaigns, which expressed three fundamental objectives to raise the education level of all people, and women in particular. The first is the Literacy Campaign, in which women were both beneficiaries and protagonists; the second is the Campaign for Sixth Grade and the third is the Campaign for Ninth Grade. These campaigns have been maintained, and new options have also been added for continued study in vocational programs, skilled labour training programs, and university.

The 1960s brought about substantial changes in the participation of women in education. The ongoing socialist project included social policies meant to transform the situation of historically marginalized social groups, especially women. It sparked the conversion of Cuban women into agents of change by not only making mass access to free education possible, but also by relying on women as protagonists in the most important educational effort of the time period: the Literacy Campaign. Women played in a double role in this campaign, as both learners (49.7% of participants) and teachers (59.5%).

Before the first large-scale educational actions were carried out by the Revolution in 1961, the state of women’s education was marked by the 56 per cent illiteracy rate among women (R. Pavón 1977) and the low level of women’s participation in higher education, which was less than one per cent (Census 1953), and which was concentrated in the areas of teaching, pharmacy, and the humanities. In 1953, of a total of 2,132,000 women older than 10 years, 23 per cent were illiterate, 71 per cent under-educated, and only two per cent had completed high school (R. Pavón 1977). This trend was particularly apparent among poor, black, and mixed-race women. The Literacy Campaign reduced the illiteracy rate in the general population from 23.1 per cent to 3.9 per cent in one year. 700,000 people learned to read, 55 per cent of which were women, the majority from rural areas (CIEM 2000).

The Literacy Campaign promoted the ongoing education of all its beneficiaries and promoters, in such a way that women were able to participate en masse in educational efforts. Since then, these efforts have been carried out without interruption and have doubtlessly favoured women. The following facts show the improvement in the educational status of Cuban women:

In 1970, after only one decade of revolutionary changes, women who had completed primary education to a 4th to 6th grade level made up the bulk of the female population, 43.7 per cent. This put them under very similar conditions compared to men, who showed a rate of 46.7 per cent. In 1979, the overall illiteracy rate was 3.9 per cent: 3.7 per cent among men and 4.2 per cent among women (ONE 1979). However, in 2005 (according to the Women’s Fund at the United Nations and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean -ECLAC, 2007), the illiteracy rate of women and men 15 years and older in Cuba was 2.8 per cent and 2.6 per cent, respectively; for those between 15 and 24 years of age, the rate at the same date was only 0.2 per cent for both sexes. These statistics demonstrate the significant reduction of illiteracy in Cuba, and represent abundant proof of the gains made in gender equality for education access in the country.

If we compare the situation in Cuba to the rest of the continent, the statistics listed above demonstrate that Cuba holds a privileged place in the education stratification of the region.
In 1995, the comparative section of the study “Latin American Women in Statistics,” which groups the countries of the region according to educational achievement, offered the following continental picture.

A first group of countries includes those where completion rates for basic education are high, close to or higher than 90 per cent, and where rates for secondary education are close to or higher than 50 per cent, for every age group. This group of countries includes Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Panama, and Uruguay, followed by Costa Rica and Peru with rather lower percentages. In these countries, illiteracy rates and the number of people without any schooling are less than 10 per cent among the total population (T. Valdés and E. Gomáriz 1995).

Education access statistics from across the region show the education gap in various countries. As stated in the UNESCO Regional and Country Reports on Education in Latin America and the Caribbean:

Currently Latin American youth spend less than nine years on average in the school system, barely a year and a half more than twenty years ago. This average spans large inequalities that result from parents’ income levels and rural versus urban living situations, and it remains far below the 12 years that are, by the ECLAC’s judgment, the minimum number of years of education necessary, along with other socio-political factors, to earn a salary sufficient to allow an individual to free themselves from poverty in their lifetime. Since, based on the United Nations Development Program’s indicator of poverty (Human Poverty Index), which measures fundamental dimensions of human development, poverty affects more than five per cent of the population in every country in the region except Argentina, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, and Uruguay, and more than 20 per cent in Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, a similar lack of progress in the number of years spent in school is worrisome (UNESCO 2001).

The same report shows the current levels of primary schooling by sex in a group of countries in the region:

**Net primary schooling rate by sex, 1998**

These statistics demonstrate the Cuban state’s fulfillment of two of the most important Millennium Development Goals, specifically Target Three of Goal Two regarding the achievement of universal primary education by 2015, and Target Four of Goal Three regarding the elimination of gender inequality in secondary and higher education by 2005.

The Cuban government has announced that it has completed Millennium Development Goal Two, universal primary education, and is now prioritizing a more ambitious goal of 100% retention rates in secondary education. Equity across regions and gender equality in these indicators were crucial factors in fulfilling this goal (INIE 2005).

Recent documents from the UN indicate very few changes in this area after more than a decade, and show a very unequal picture of Latin America characterized by large education gaps. This makes the short-term fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals in Latin America very difficult.
The 2003 United Nations Human Development Report, dedicated to the Millennium Development Goals, compares the education status of girls and young women in Cuba to that of boys and young men in Cuba in 2000-2001 and 1990-1991. The findings are as follows:

### Table 5: Education Status of Girls and Young Women vs. Boys and Young Men in Cuba; Female Rates.

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<td>Cuba</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>97</td>
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Source: (PNUD, 2003)

Cuba’s second report on fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals confirms that universal primary education is a reality in Cuba. Since the 1990s, enrollment in primary education represents approximately 100 per cent of the population of the corresponding age range. According to statistics for the 2004-2005 school year, 99.4 per cent of the population in the age range set for primary education (6 to 11 years old) is enrolled in primary schools and special schools – 99.8 per cent of boys and 98.8 per cent of girls. This high net rate of schooling was achieved thanks to student retention rates of nearly 100 per cent and a steadily decreasing repetition rate (only 0.5 per cent in 2004) (INIE 2005).

The same report explains that the results in universal primary education and basic secondary education create a very high rate of literacy for people between 15 and 24 years of age. According to figures published by the National Statistics Office in 2002, the youth literacy rate was 99.96 per cent: 99.96 per cent among men and 99.95 per cent among women (INIE 2005).

Accomplishments in education equity are seen not only in access to and participation in primary and secondary education, but also in women’s access to and success in higher education. Changes in enrollment and graduation rates in higher education show the progress made by women in Cuba, despite economic crisis conditions in the country since the 1990s. One of the women interviewed confirmed:

Despite economic problems, the blockade, etc., having well-organized and free education and healthcare systems undeniably puts us, as contemporary Cuban women, in a much more advantageous position. We serve as role models for many women in the region and have had enormous success compared to women – professional or not – from neighboring countries, and many from Africa and Asia... International agreements with socialist countries for pre- and post-graduate studies have allowed me to carry out my doctoral studies in the ex-Soviet Union, and afterwards, bi-lateral agreements with other countries allowed me to attend important scientific events in my field and compare and improve my scientific results at the international level (Interview with L. Álvarez 2008).

Cuba’s report on the Millennium Development Goals summarizes how these goals are being fulfilled, specifically referring to the achieve-
To be more humanistic, our culture around sexuality must be based in gender equality.

CENESEX’s work is the result of cooperation between diverse sectors, including healthcare, education, and women’s organizing. One of the objectives has been to establish educational intervention programs meant to eradicate sexist education in children, youth, and adults.
In the decade that followed, and under the influence of the so-called Battle of Ideas*, educational programs were established to educate new professors, train art teachers, and make higher education universal. This last program included the creation of university branches in local municipalities, with the goal of increasing access to higher education. It provided access to education for youth, mainly young men, who for different reasons could not enter into higher education through traditional pathways.

Enrollment and graduation rates have grown steadily in all levels of schooling, both in traditionally feminine educational areas as well as those considered stereotypically masculine. These statistics indicate progress, but inequalities that show the weight of patriarchal tradition in students' choice of studies still persist. Women's enrollment in university classrooms in Cuba has been higher than men's since the 1980s. However, when enrollment is analyzed by specialization, differences between the sexes remain in some disciplines.

Despite co-educational efforts in Cuba, one of the clearest examples of sexism in the education system, as is also the case in other countries, is related to the participation rates of girls and boys in different subjects and their subsequent choice of studies, correlated with the typical gender assignment toward particular professions. Enrollment in math and technical studies is mostly male, while the majority of students in the arts, languages, humanities, and certain professional studies (those that are an extension of the private sphere or home-life) are female.

Other studies reveal the same pattern in technical sciences, specifically engineering, a sector where the absence of women is very telling. This pattern exists even in Cuba, where undeniable gains have been made in traditionally male sectors. Technical sciences -- both pure sciences and engineering -- continue to be a sector dominated by men; in those specialties with small graduating classes, such as Mining Engineering, women's presence is practically zero. Many sexist aspects remain in these areas (Y. Hernández 2008).

Nonetheless, comparisons to data from the beginning of the 2000s show steady progress. In the last five years, women have made up the majority of the population with technical training in the country, representing more than 60 per cent of higher education graduates each year. It is expected that this trend will continue in the coming years, since the rates of new female enrollments and women in the total student body are in the same range. The disciplines with the highest female enrollment are humanities, natural sciences, and educational sciences. In medical sciences, for several decades, more than 70 per cent of enrolled students and graduates have been women (FMC, 2004).

The fifth and sixth reports submitted by Cuba regarding the fulfillment of the CEDAW convention affirmed that 24 per cent of graduates in technical sciences were women in 2001-2002. The number of women who graduate from universities has grown to reach 65 per cent of all current university graduates (FMC 2008).

There is a notable presence of women in computer science, with an enrollment rate of 45.9 per cent in 2002-2003, 51.6 per cent of whom were newly enrolled students (FMC 2004).

It should be recognized that women's access to higher education in Cuba does not mirror the education gender gaps found in lower levels of schooling. As found in an analysis by D. Alméras:

* The expression “Battle of Ideas” is based on the pre-eminence of ideas over physical force. As Fidel Castro said in an interview with Ignacio Ramonet, “Ideas illuminate the world... ideas can bring peace to the world and resolve the great dangers of war and violence.” The Battle of Ideas refers to education in a holistic sense, an increase in the general level of understanding, education, and culture of all citizens. Or, according to Ramonet, “a socialization of knowledge, treating knowledge as a common good” (2006).
“Some Latin American countries exhibit a rather different pattern: they show significant growth in women’s access to university education, while maintaining a distinct deficit in primary education. For example, according to information from the comparative section of the study ‘Mujeres Latinoamericanas en Cifras’ [Latin American Women in Statistics] Colombia reached 51 per cent female university enrollment in 1990, while 14.1 per cent of the female population is illiterate. This shows, in part, the speed with which education rates have grown in recent years; in effect, the largest differences are seen between generations. In another example, illiteracy statistics in Bolivia in 1988 were 3.5 per cent for women from 15 to 19 years of age, and 66.8 per cent for those 50 years and older” (1994).

Clearly, the successes exhibited by the Cuban education system in maintaining nearly uniform levels of schooling for boys, girls, adolescents, and youth in the different levels of schooling result from the design and application of Cuban education policy, which is directed towards fully educating all of the country’s citizens.

The women interviewed while writing this book confirmed these statements and described what they have done to change stigmas:

Really, in my passage through the education system I have not had a ‘glass ceiling,’ and always, in one way or another, opportunities have opened for my development and personal advancement. The main obstacles had to do with my major. The Physics Department at the University of Havana has always been elitist and male-dominated, where near-geniuses sometimes under-value a ‘farm girl from Holguin’ who showed up, a good student, to compete with them for grades and prestige. Nor was it easy in mathematics, and later on as a team leader I had to hear opinions like ‘she can’t take on higher responsibilities because she’s too sweet,’ as if I had to adopt a tough, masculine style to lead well at other levels (Interview with L. Álvarez 2008).

One area where sexism persists is in a “hidden curriculum” upheld by the cultural transmission of gender stereotypes, a consequence of the persistently male-centered character of academic knowledge. However, since Cuban pedagogy is orchestrated through broad programs developed to achieve gender equality in education, there is no proof that the Cuban education context contains these same characteristics.

The ways in which patriarchal thought is reproduced are many and varied; it transforms itself and refuses to disappear, anchored as it is in our traditions and culture. It reveals itself in a hidden curriculum, in the lyrics of a trendy song, in the value judgments of a manager who should promote a female worker, in debates over a proposal to modify the Family Code. But it is a logical process that needs to be addressed in all its complexity. Fifty years of Revolution is barely a moment in time if we compare it with 500 years of Western Judeo-Christian culture that formed the Cuban nation (Interview with I. Moya 2008).

When evaluating sexism in the education system, it is important to keep in mind some basic indicators to understand the situation for women vis-à-vis education, and to compare, as much as possible, the transformations that have occurred in Cuba with other Latin American countries. For example, the appearance of women in school texts allows us to know how much of a change is being generated, not only in women’s access to education, but also in cultural tendencies toward equal consideration of characteristics of both genders as basic elements of culture. This indicator shows significant differences between the countries in the region for which information is available. For example, while in Chile in 1990 the rate of women featured in assigned readings ranged from 24.5 per cent and 36.4 per cent, in Peru in 1986 only 8.5 per cent of images in textbooks mentioned women and 7.8 per cent of texts mentioned women. In Uruguay in 1991, only 16 per cent of the people featured in assigned readings were
women (Valdés and Gomáriz 1995)*. Additionally, assigned readings frequently depict women in the home; these texts continue to present a traditional and stereotyped image of gender roles.

Diverse studies (Y. Bombino 2005; M. Romero 2008) on the presence of sexism in Cuban schools reveal that:

1. Across all areas analyzed, sexism is manifested in schools in the conduct, language, and attitudes of teachers and students. The most chronic manifestations of sexism are reflected in the value judgments with which roles are assumed and distributed: passive roles for girls, active roles for boys.

2. Language reinforces male prominence by taking the masculine form by default. This is observed in study guides, murals, posters, etc., while roles traditionally considered feminine are designated as such – for example, teaching and domestic work (the roles of caretaker, protector).

3. Various authors and policy and education scholars find that boys and girls arrive to preschool with a distinct sexist influence received in the home, where the child begins to normalize inequalities and form the perception that inequality is inevitable because one is a member of one sex or the other. These inequalities, initially perceived and learned in the home environment, are reinforced in school curricula, both explicit and hidden. The paradigm of bravery, energy, and courage is fostered in the masculine figure when the images of heroes are male and in references to dates or historical events that only tell the stories of men. In contrast, when images are sought to represent beauty, tenderness, and weakness, the feminine image appears again and again, sexualized, a beautiful woman, sexy, and almost always white. There is an obvious repetition of the common stereotype of strong men and weak women, made even clearer by an analysis of instances of violence in the classroom.

4. Assigned texts perpetuate representations of gender inequality. Based on the characters they feature, these readings depict a society dominated by male adults. Protagonist roles central to the work are primarily filled by masculine figures, which perpetuate the values of the public, social space in which they act as positive and universal.

In general, texts, hidden curricula, and – in more than a few places – explicit curricula all express the values that patriarchal cultures hold as valid, legitimizing, stereotypical models of femininity and masculinity that contribute to the perpetuation of female subordination and male power on a societal scale. All this works against co-education, and therefore against gender equality in education and society in general, considering the important role that schools play in socializing youth.

Eliminating sexism turns out to be crucial to changing the unequal relations between genders that make up the underpinnings of violence and other damaging burdens placed upon women. One of the women interviewed commented on this, saying, “An effort may have good intentions, but here I would like to say that the road of sexism is paved with good intentions, because an effort that had very good intentions ended with what? Attributing the cause of gender-based violence to alcohol, and therefore hiding its real causes: inequality and hierarchical power relations” (Interview with I. Moya 2008).

A new direction in women’s leadership and prominence is the step taken by numerous academic departments to promote research about women in private and public life: working towards institutionalizing Gender Studies in academic circles. These departments were founded with the support of the FMC and they bring together women researchers and teachings from diverse professions, mainly Social Sciences, to organize scientific work to promote an understanding of the social situation women face. These spaces do not exclude male participation, but they are mostly made up of women.

The efforts of these academic departments have already begun to bear fruit, as academic discourse begins to recognize how sexist general

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* In the last two cases, the statistics refer to primary education texts. In theory, this would tend to inflate the data, as in general the presence of women is greater in readings for primary school than in readings for secondary and higher education.
and professional schooling in Cuba still remains, and as educational actions are planned to change the patriarchal ideology of professors and students. Studies on gender allow for a deeper analysis of inequality and its subtle manifestations as a cultural element – not only a political, legal, and economic one. This refers to culture understood not only as an expression of spirituality or a product of subjective analysis, rather also as practice.

The emergent culture is successfully widening interactive spaces for women, granting greater social recognition to women’s work and gender, and leading to higher self-esteem and more dignified treatment. With the new culture, women have achieved a more elevated social position and have acquired better education and economic independence, eroding the concept of an identity based entirely on motherhood and reproduction. Education today is seen as an important victory for women, not only, and not even principally, in order to be better prepared to educate their children, but rather as an inalienable right to achieve better living conditions. Along with observing higher levels of education in women than in men, this is the greatest benefit derived from the processes of educational changes in women’s identity.

However, cultural change has occurred unevenly, both in the sense that it has not reached all women equally, and also in the sense that situations of subordination still exist, coexisting with the victories that open new favourable spaces for women. We will call these hybrid cultural situations (R. Fleitas, et al. 2005).
To begin the process of women’s economic empowerment we must consider the economic contribution of every form of work, both paid and unpaid. Looking at work in a holistic way, and understanding the different kinds of work to be equal to one another, are essential preconditions for gender equality.

Article 11 of the CEDAW established women’s right to access the same employment opportunities as men. For most women, however, the prospect of employment outside of the home and the work of raising a family are intimately linked. The work of raising a family can impact the amount of time available for women to look for work outside the home, affect patterns of women’s involvement in the labour force, and create a work overload (when time spent working outside the home and raising a family is considered cumulatively)*. Article Five of the Convention establishes that State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women (D. Zapata 2007).

The following indicators are used to measure the fulfillment of this right: (1) which measures the State implements not only to ensure that women may participate in employment outside of the home under equal conditions, but also to guarantee that the work of raising a family is recognized, valued, and protected; (2) whether women have the same opportunities as men when working outside of the home; and (3) whether men and women participate equally in the work of raising a family (D. Zapata 2007). Labour market conditions for women are analyzed using a series of indicators, including the unemployment rate, the gender-based salary gap, and the rate of gender segregation between occupations.

Whether these rights are fulfilled, however, depends on the way states lead and manage society. “Governments can facilitate conditions to increase employment, but without committing to improve its quality; they can enact laws that guarantee equal pay but not enforce them; they can make it possible for women to participate in writing economic policy, but not guarantee a policy change that brings about a transformation in economic and gender relations” (L. Frade 2001).

For decades, neoliberal structural adjustment programs in the region have impoverished broad sectors of the population; governments have been unable to stop this trend. The effects of these programs upon women are more pronounced than in the population as a whole.

Although these programs have produced a rapid increase in female participation in the workforce, due principally to growth in the service sector and the production-for-export sector (overwhelmingly in textile factories), they have produced mixed results in terms of overall employment, quality of employment, income, and autonomy.

Sources for the ECLAC (2008) found gender inequality in the region expressed in the following ways:

• Despite of the growing number of women joining the labour market, their participation rate (58%) remains significantly lower than men’s (83%).
• Rates of unemployment for women (12%) are consistently higher than those for men (8%).
• In urban areas, the amount of income earned by women is only 65 per cent the income earned by men.
• Women are over-represented in low-productivity sectors of the economy, where they earn low salaries and profits, and under-represented in medium- and high-productivity sectors of the economy. Furthermore, these higher sectors include income gaps between salaries and business profits for men and women. This means less job security and more unstable income levels for women.

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* For example, Milosavljevic and Tacla (2007) found that if the time that women work outside of the home is added to their time spent raising a family, the total workloads of women are greater than those of men for every country in the region for which data is available.
• Women interrupt their employment history more often than men in order to fulfill family obligations, such as raising children and caring for elderly relatives.
• The greater difficulty that women face in joining the labour force and their disadvantaged involvement means that a smaller proportion of women (19%), compared to men (32%), contributes to the social security system and accesses retirement pensions. Furthermore, women’s pensions are smaller than men’s. In the population 65 years old and over, women’s pensions are 77 per cent of men’s.

In many countries in the region, significant percentages of women work without receiving any pay. There are some 85 million women in Latin America who do not have their own source of income. According to the ECLAC, the majority of the migrants and poor in Latin America are also women. The situation is particularly serious in Chile, Mexico, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Colombia, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Bolivia, where at least four of every 10 women more than 15 years of age do not have the capacity to cover daily expenses (2008).

In total, some 60 million Latin American women do not have a job aside from working within the home, meaning that they have no health insurance or emergency savings to rely on (ECLAC 2008).

The current economic crisis is expected to most severely affect jobs with the highest ratios of female employees, such as sales, financial services, manufacturing (especially textile manufacturing and textile factories), tourism, and domestic work. A decline in available financial resources in the economy may affect the cost of living, generating additional pressure on women trying to manage a household.

Women’s Participation in the Labour Force in Cuba

The revolutionary process, including the programs and measures that have characterized it since it began, has helped to create greater economic independence for women, primarily by providing access to paid work. Social policies in the labour sector are based on non-discrimination in employment and salaries, equal opportunities for men and women, universality, job security, and social security. The programs developed by the Cuban state to incorporate women in the labour force strove for equality between women and men in access to work and in pay, so as to not limit women to traditionally ‘female’ jobs, rather to achieve diversity. The programs sought to avoid relegating women to the private sphere exclusively, even in periods of crisis. In 1953, the number of women over age 14 who worked – with or without pay – was 247,674, which represented only 12 per cent of the total labour force. In 1990, this number reached more than 1.5 million, six times more, which demonstrates growing and active participation of women in the labour force, allowing them greater economic independence and professional achievement.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a series of activities were developed to incorporate Cuban women into the formal labour force, primarily for those women with the lowest incomes: prostitutes, domestic workers, and the rural poor. In the case of the rural poor, the objective was to make their work visible and respect their right as workers to receive pay.

In the 1970s, a variety of new laws were written, including a Maternity Law within the Labour Code, the Family Code, and the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba. These laws systematically documented the changes that were already becoming a reality in the context of gender relations, and as such, endorsed women’s rights to political, social, cultural, and economic equality.

The program of “rectification of errors and negative trends,” undertaken in the 1980s, established a series of programs to support women through child care initiatives so they could be more fully involved in the public sphere, and in particular the labour force. Government incentives supported the construction of Children’s Circles, school, worker, and neighbourhood cafeterias, and other projects. During this time the Women’s Labour Front of the Cuban Worker’s Union (CTC by its Spanish acronym) played an important role in running food programs and creating employment opportunities for women.
Cuban society as a whole guarantees and protects the right to work of its citizens, particularly women. The Coordinating Commissions for Women’s Employment, made up of representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the CTC, and the FMC, whose purpose is to guarantee and protect the prioritization of women’s employment, have played a key role in this effort since their creation.

At the close of 2007, 40.04 per cent of all employed workers in the economy were women. In the public sector, which accounts for the majority of jobs, the number increased to 46.23 per cent of workers. In fact, more than half of all women of working age were employed, enjoying full rights to employment and social security.

Progress has been made not only in terms of the number of jobs, but also in terms of their quality. Statistics indicate that female employment has moved away from jobs with lower qualifications, recognition, and pay; data reflect greater female participation in the country’s vocational and professional workforce (65.6% in 2007).

Evidence of this increase in quality is the fact that today women make up 51.6 per cent of researchers and 48.9 per cent of employees in scientific and technical units, which demonstrates the fact that women have become formative actors in science, economics, and society in general.

Certain key sectors in the country, such as education and healthcare, have seen a growing rate of female employment: 72 per cent of employees in education and almost 70 per cent of employees in the healthcare sector are women. This situation is very different from the pre-revolutionary period, when only 6.5 per cent of doctors were women (FMC; ONE date unavailable).

Despite the magnitude of the economic crisis that the country faced in the 1990s, a comparison between the economic policies implemented in Cuba and the structural adjustment programs that other Latin American countries experienced under the “Washington Consensus” reveals important differences. A joint study on the social impact of the economic reform program, carried out by the ECLAC, INIE, and the UNDP, concluded: “The Cuban case’s contributions are very useful for the international community to reflect upon possibilities for productive development with gender equity.” Although “the balance between social and economic goals has not always achieved equilibrium,” there has been “a great capacity to adapt policies and minimize adverse effects.” This allows us to assert that the basis of the Cuban strategy “has been constant evaluation to achieve simultaneous results in equity, development, and well-being.”

The circumstances of the 1990s forced the government to alter some of the foci of their economic policy, employment among them. Even in this new context, however, policy efforts were directed toward preserving progress in women’s employment, with special attention put toward re-locating women working in the sectors that were most seriously affected by the economic crisis. The Commission for Women’s Employment was created with this goal, made up of the Women’s Labour Front, the FMC, and the Ministry of Labour, among other institutions. The political willingness to continue employment equity efforts was maintained.

Alongside changes that the reforms proposed for the regimen of economic incentives, additional changes occurred in the country’s labour market, including:

a. Changes in the job structure of the formal sector of the economy (defined as employment in the state economy and the emergent sector) through business re-organizations. These changes created more diversity in the production structure, with notable differences between groups of workers under different working conditions, labour productivity rates*, and pay systems.

b. Underemployment stemming from the country’s attempt to not significantly alter employment levels and workers’ salaries. In recent years, rates of underemployment have declined as a result of renewed economic growth in the country.

* Labour productivity rates have no relationship to differences in the degree of effort that different workers put into a job, rather with differences in working conditions. In an underdeveloped economy, a worker may work very hard and in extremely long shifts under improper physical conditions without an increase in their labour productivity rate and, therefore, will receive a low income simply because they have not had access to technology, education, or other factors that increase the productivity rate. This demonstrates the importance of increasing investment in human and physical capital.
c. Growth of the informal sector\(^*\) of the economy, where a significant number of women work. Growth in the informal economy refers to own-account workers as well as their network of employees and assistants.

d. Growth in the number of cooperatives and other forms of land ownership in the countryside. This growth is linked to agricultural production, with the creation of the Basic Units of Agricultural Production (UBPC’s by their Spanish acronym), which rely on women’s labour for agricultural jobs far more than in previous periods.

e. Growth of unemployment. A lack of satisfaction with the limited existing employment options means that a considerable number of people are unemployed. Above all, there are a significant number of youth who neither work nor study.

The context of women’s employment differs from men’s in the following areas:

- Differences in the Economically Active Population (EAP) and the Not Economically Active Population (NEAP) among women and among men
- Labour patterns (entry into, continuity within, and exit from the workforce), which tend to be more discontinuous among women than among men.
- Horizontal and vertical segregation
- Income differentials
- The specificity of informal female work.

### Characteristics of the EAP and NEAP in Cuba: Linkages and Tendencies

Differences between men and women in their levels of participation in the Economically Active Population, which measures levels of participation in paid employment, reveal the unequal access to the labour market. The trend in the EAP indicates what possibilities exist for the intensive and extensive use of human resources.

The participation rate by sex, according to data from the National Statistics Office (ONE in its Spanish acronym) from 2007, reveals that:

- The EAP is predominantly made up of men. The rate of economic activity for men (86.7%) is markedly higher than the rate for women (59.3%).
- The NEAP is predominantly made up of women. In 2007, women made up 40.6 per cent of the not economically active population, while men made up only 13.2 per cent. This indicates a high degree of underutilization of the female population.

An important study that clarified the situation of the economically active and not economically active populations of the country was carried out by the CEDEM, entitled “Characteristics of the EAP and NEAP in Cuba: Linkages and Tendencies” [“Caracterización de la PEA y la PNEA en Cuba y provincias, sus vínculos y tendencias”].

This report found that the NEAP includes more women than men. Additionally, the age distribution of the NEAP reveals that it includes mainly people of working age, both men and women, in all geographic regions.

The distribution of the NEAP by category (see Table 4.1) reveals important differences between men and women.

### Table 4.1 Distribution of NEAP by category, both sexes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Both Sexes</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Economically Active Population</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired or Pensioned</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receives external economic support</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeeping</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled/Unable to work</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No activity</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitalized</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other situation</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The International Labour Organization defines the informal sector as the total number of non-professional own-account workers, home workers and paid domestic workers, unpaid family workers, and workers in companies with less than five employees (ILO 2006).*

Source: (ONE 2002)
Looking at each of these categories by sex, we see that the “Housekeeping” category is almost entirely made up of women; the “Retired or Pensioned” category is made up of 3.3 per cent more men than women (in absolute figures this represents 145,954 retired or pensioned persons); the “Students” category contains slightly more women than men (0.5%, equivalent to 22,195 people) (CEDEM 2008).

Regardless of their size relative to the overall figure, special attention must be paid to the “No Activity” and “Other Situation” categories, to better socially integrate these people and to consider their contribution to the possible growth of the EAP (CEDEM 2008).

Results of this study showing that the NEAP is composed in its majority of women underscore the great potential of women of working age as a reserve for the EAP.

The results by territory reveal the potential to increase the EAP in all provinces (due to reserves in the NEAP); the study also highlights that this possibility is highest in the Eastern provinces (CEDEM 2008).

The results of this study allow us to observe gender differences in employment. When NEAP is looked at by region, territory, and sex, despite the ongoing predominance of women throughout, the proportion of women in the NEAP is highest in rural areas. This further indicates the need for economic and social policies that facilitate greater participation of women in the EAP.

**Tension between Family and Work in the Employment Histories of Women**

Women, unlike men, are situated in the labour market not as individual subjects, but as collective social subjects with responsibilities and obligations that limit their availability and time.

An old popular saying says that “women need to work twice as hard to be valued half as much.” The 1995 UNDP Human Development Report, which analyzed the situation of women at the global scale, asserted that women and men spend approximately half their total work hours on unpaid activities in the home and community.

If we take the value of the unpaid hours worked by women and men, added to the amount by which women are underpaid in the labour market, and measure it in terms of current salaries, the value is estimated at some 16 trillion USD, or in other words, more than 70 per cent of the officially estimated world product. Of these 16 trillion USD, 11 trillion represent the unpaid and invisible contribution of women to the world economy, equal to 50 per cent of the world product that year (UNDP 1995).

A survey on time usage carried out in Cuba in 2002* by the National Statistics Office found the same results. This study concludes: “If we could place a value on the unpaid household work of women, assuming that they were paid [hourly] at a rate equal to at least the average monthly salary in the country, the total amount would end up higher than the average monthly salary. The average cost of an hour of work multiplied by the number of hours worked per day would reach a monthly amount of 428 pesos” (ONE 2002).

For example, the study found that women in Old Havana dedicated an average of 3.55 hours per day to unpaid household work, while men dedicated 1.17 hours. In the urban part of Bayamo, women dedicated 4.39 hours, while men dedicated 1.28 hours. In rural areas, both sexes dedicated more time to these tasks, but women’s labour remains disproportionate. In Granma, for example, women dedicated 5.59 hours to domestic work and men 2.25 hours, on average (ONE 2002).

Finally, when we look at the total number of hours worked by women and men in the municipalities surveyed (including rural and urban areas), in paid or unpaid work (in or outside the home), women contributed 29 per cent of the total to the former and 71 per cent to the latter, while men contributed 67 per cent and 33 per cent respectively. In urban areas, unpaid work occupied 69 per cent of the total hours worked by women and 28 per cent of the total worked by men, while in rural areas this percentage was 80 per cent for women and 40 per cent for men (ONE 2002).

* The survey spanned the urban and rural sections of Pinar del Rio, San Juan y Martinez, Guisa, and Bayamo, as well as the Old Havana, an entirely urban municipality (ONE 2002).
Studies of this sort show how the burden of unpaid work falls primarily on women, in both urban and rural areas, creating deep tensions and a “poverty of time” in women’s lives.

The responsibilities of family life disrupt the professional careers of women in very different ways than for men. One aspect of career changes exclusive to women is to leave their job after having children. Social representations of what it means to be “a good mother” weigh on this decision, seeming to exclude the possibility of reconciling employment and family responsibilities. While both spheres may be perceived as spaces of pleasure and personal fulfillment, some women find them to be “opposites.”

Women are primary caretakers of children, particularly during their early years. As such, the need to combine family and employment responsibilities applies more to women than it does to men.

The majority of interviews carried out for this book illustrate that motherhood, as well as other family issues such as separations or divorces, have a large impact on the employment histories of women – at times changing them significantly. In men, the same events do not have the same impact on their respective employment histories.

Women develop their own strategies to move from the public to the private sphere. Many women decrease their workload after becoming mothers – they go back to work with a reduced schedule, extend their maternity leave, or abandon their job altogether. These ways of accommodating their roles as mothers and workers, within the bounds of available possibilities, are presented as “choices.” However, the context in which these options exist is one marked by deep tensions stemming from gender mandates and scarce alternatives offered by public services.

For men, their time is more flexible, although they have many things to do. You ask them and they’ll tell you that they have nothing to do (Interview with A. Aranda 2008).

Horizontal Segregation

Horizontal segregation in the labour structure presents itself in terms of the existence of “men’s spaces” and “women’s spaces” which are characterized by different conditions for workers of different sexes - in salaries, access to training, and career advancement possibilities.

Many studies find that a “key moment” in labour segregation is the moment of hiring personnel. To a large extent, the search for a candidate to fill the job predetermines gender segregation in employment. For many jobs, the employer does not search for the best possible person to carry out the work, but rather for a man or woman with certain characteristics (M. Novick, S. Rojo, and V. Castillo 2008).

Roles for women are defined based on certain attributes that are frequently considered feminine, among them neatness, patience, perseverance, attention to detail, acute vision, and an attitude of service. Women are secretaries, administrators, servants, and machine operators in jobs that require fine motor skills. These jobs are intended exclusively for women, and gender is a limiting criterion in the search for and selection of personnel (M. Novick, et al. 2008).

In Cuba, the Ministry of Labour not only abolished all restrictive measures that kept women from accessing traditionally exclusively male jobs, but also took further measures that increased women’s opportunities to join the workforce, protect their rights, and guarantee equality in opportunities and pay. Laws affording special protection to women include Law 13/76 for Workplace Health and Safety and Law 49/89 of the Labour Code. The latter contains a chapter dedicated to “Women’s Labour,” which says: “Administrations must create and maintain appropriate work conditions and the necessary infrastructure to make possible women’s participation in the labour process.”

The following ratios describe the employment of Cuban women by occupation:
• 46% of workers in the public sector and 65.6% of professionals and technicians are women.
• 72% of workers in the education sector are women.
• 70% of workers in the health sector are women.
• 51.6% of researchers and 48.9% of workers in science and technical units are women.
• 17.22% of workers in the cooperative sector are women.
• 25.4% of own-account workers are women.
• Women’s presence is smaller in other branches of economic activity, including agriculture (17.4%), construction (15.7%), and mining (19.1%).
• Women have a larger presence (41.5%) in service jobs, such as businesses, restaurants, and hotels. In financial services, banking, and real estate they represent 52.4 per cent of workers, and 51.3 per cent in community, social, and personal services.

In 2007, the percentage of women active in different ownership structures of the economy increased with respect to the previous year; by the end of 2007, women occupied 40.04 per cent of all jobs. In the public sector the figure was 46 per cent, representing 1,554,698 women employed and an increase of 72,397 female workers in state institutions.

These results show that while the overall women’s employment rate is stable, it allows for a segregated labour structure in which women represent 70 per cent of the workers in teaching, social services, and health services. These sectors represent an extension of the domestic space and of the reproductive and care-giving roles that are traditionally assigned to women.

Women’s employment in the education sector is much higher than in other sectors. In 1993, 68.7 per cent of the workforce in this sector was women (P. Popowski 1995). In the 1995-1996 school year, 62 per cent of all teachers working in a classroom were women (P. Popowski 1996). There are many female teachers in Social Sciences and few in ‘pure’ Sciences (Physics). In Natural Sciences the statistics are not homogeneous. However, a qualitative leap forward is seen across the board; women make up 51.6 per cent of researchers and 60.4 per cent of the scientific reserve of the country. Of 199 Scientific Research Centers, 48 (24%) are managed by women. In 1999, women made up 64.6 per cent of the technical and professional workforce; in 2003, they made up 66.4 per cent, and one in every four researchers was a woman with a doctorate in Sciences (FMC 2003). The number of women earning scientific degrees denotes, on one hand, a massive influx of women to the scientific field in Cuba in the revolutionary period, compared to the one per cent rate of female university students in Science programs in 1959. On the other hand, there is still a significant gap between the rate of female participation in scientific activity in the country and the rate of women obtaining the highest academic degree in this area.

More recent statistics show that in higher education in Cuba, the percentage of female professors on faculty in the 2002-2003 school year was about 50%, with a still higher rate in many universities. Since that year, the number of higher education professors has doubled, with universities employing nearly 6,000 more female teachers. This increase is primarily due to the universalization of University Education, which
increased enrollment and created more than 160 municipal university centres (FMC 2004). Currently, the teaching faculty in higher education is made up of 53.4% women (FMC 2008).

The healthcare sector is another area of the workforce with a high rate of female employment. In 2006, Cuban women made up 69.4 per cent of the workers in the healthcare sector. During each decade of the Revolution this number has increased, along with growing equality in the distribution of doctor’s positions between men and women; 56.2 per cent of doctors in Cuba are women (MINSAP 2007). Differences still exist between specialties, however. More women work in clinical roles and more men in surgery. Pediatrics is a clear illustration of this dichotomy of roles, because in this specialty women are the majority, the reasons for which have been linked to their historic role as a care-taker of children. Statistics from the 2008 annual report on health reveal that women make up 65.3 per cent of pediatricians and only 30 per cent of pediatric surgeons (MINSAP 2007).

Women represent almost 70% of employees in the health sector

Differences also exist in other specialties. Women are the majority in the branches of nutrition (71.4%), ophthalmology (73%), and general family medicine (64.5%). General family medicine plays an important role in community and preventative medicine, where health programs rely on collaboration between sectors. Women are less represented in specialties that focus on higher-level public health issues and cutting-edge research, including oncology (36%), neurosurgery (16.5%), and cardiovascular surgery (7%).

Further analysis of women’s employment reveals that female employment is much lower in the non-state sector, where women represent only 15.8 per cent of employees. Additionally, women’s participation has remained particularly low (17.22%) in the cooperative sector.

Although women have some control over productive resources in this sector, it is only at a participatory level or in intermediate leadership positions; land and capital continue to be, in their majority, controlled by men. The country is currently carrying out a land transfer program to use idle lands for food production, which will allow greater access to land for women.

Lastly, female employment increased in all provinces in 2007. The greatest improvements over 2006 appeared in Guantánamo, Santiago de Cuba, the city of Havana, the province of Havana, and Pinar del Río. The lowest rates appeared in Holguín, Matanzas, Las Tunas, and Granma.

Sources from the National Statistics Office also show a declining unemployment rate in the country throughout the year, finally reaching 1.8 per cent for general unemployment and 1.9 per cent for female unemployment.

Vertical Segregation

Women in the labour market have limited access to management positions, a phenomenon referred to as “vertical segmentation” or “glass ceilings,” in an allusion to invisible boundaries that make career development more difficult for women. The so-called glass ceiling represents indirect discrimination, one that is not written into the law, but that is observed in differenti-
ated results between men and women. This acts together with other factors to limit the quality of employment to which women gain access (M. Novick, et al. 2008).

A portion of the people interviewed for this book considered “the flexibility to work long or unforeseen workdays and availability to travel” to be among the factors that create significant obstacles for women who aspire to management positions.

The perception held by human resource departments of the “greater indirect costs of female employment,” primarily in relation to maternity leave, is concerning. Difficulties in accessing child care, given the insufficient availability of child care for younger-than-school-age children, makes women’s participation in the labour market more difficult.

A notable paradox is that women may be excluded from night-shift jobs, justified by a need for “protection,” while the risk run by women who begin work at very early hours and leave from the house before dawn is not perceived in the same way.

According to the ONE, the composition of the female workforce by occupational category in 2007 was similar to the previous year. There was growth in the management sector, and the rate in the technician category remained high, as we see in Table 4.2:

### Table 4.2 Behaviour of Occupational Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban workers</td>
<td>1105520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical workers</td>
<td>1174596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative workers</td>
<td>89083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>715175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>278238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (ONE 2008)

In organizations, women tend to generate their own promotions by constantly proving themselves or by making their positions indispensable. Their upward mobility is more segmented into phases than that of men; they work their way upwards within the company.

In order to become head of the pizzeria I first began working as a kitchen helper, then in food preparation. I worked five years there, until they opened the assistant position. My boss got mad when I took it, but later he understood, and finally they made me head of the pizzar (Interview with M. Silva 2008).

The growth of particular sectors, such as the Institute of Civil Aeronautics (IACC by its Spanish acronym) and other business groups formed in the 1990s also created significant employment opportunities for women working in these sectors.

“The formation of the Business Group in 1994 set the stage to include more women in different specialties and managerial positions” (Interview with V. Griffith 2008).

### Income Gaps

Gender discrimination is prohibited in the daily practice of the labour relations system and by Cuban law. The Cuban Labour Code includes and protects the principle of “equal pay, regardless of gender, for work of equal value,” rooted in equality in education levels, training, and job-search preparation, as established in the Constitution of the International Labour Organization.

There are few studies that have been carried out in the country on income gaps between men and women. One of the existing studies was done by the Institute for Labour Research (IEIT by its Spanish acronym), on “female presence in the work force, according to different categories of employment and sectors of the economy, horizontal and vertical segregation, salaries and overall income.”

One part of this study analyzed the salary levels of men and women working in the same positions. It looked at responsibilities with the same
level of complexity, in the same employment category and same income bracket, from January to December 2006 in 10 organizations.

The study found that women received two percent lower salaries than men, with the exception of those workers in the Ministry of Education.

Salary losses due to absence from work were caused by illness (60%), child care and care of other family members (22%), and maternity leave (18%). Of the total absences recorded by gender, 77 per cent were registered by female employees. This confirms that men rarely miss work for any reason other than illness.

The study demonstrates that the disproportionately large amount of responsibility that women take on compared to men in raising a family translates into fewer days worked on average each month and, as a result, lower incomes for women. This means that, although salary discrimination does not exist, there is still a salary gap between men and women. This affects women’s contributions to social security, meaning that women’s pensions are smaller than men’s, reflecting women’s greater difficulty in accessing retirement benefits to sustain them in their old age.

The Specificity of Informal Female Work

Something that may be specific to the Cuban case is the increasing number of women participating in the informal sector. In Cuba, unlike other Latin American countries, self-employment and work in the informal sector is more lucrative than a job in the formal sector of the economy. However, a smaller proportion of women work in this sector, widening the income gap between men and women. Of a total of 138,999 self-employed workers, only 25.4 per cent are women.

Employment segregation appears in the informal sector just as it does in the formal sector. Certain jobs are considered traditionally feminine or traditionally masculine.

Female workers in the informal sector are concentrated in a small number of occupations that require very little investment of capital. These activities are generally extrapolated from their socially assigned roles, such as needlework (knitting/crochet), sewing, food preparation, etc. There is a much broader spectrum of informal sector jobs available for men, including small manufacturing businesses, repair shops, construction work as skilled labourers, sales, etc.

The Cuban labour scene continues to be affected by a lack of motivation to work. This phenomenon is affecting youth participation in the workforce.

Low youth participation in the labour force has three main aspects: (1) very unstable participation, often linked to school drop-out levels and low job retention rates; (2) late participation, after long periods of inactivity; and (3) participation in more informal and less productive sectors of the economy.

Low youth participation in the formal-sector labour force is compounded by significant growth of the informal sector and underemployment in family and private businesses, which most of the time generate higher incomes than employment options with the state.

One of the greatest challenges facing the country with regard to employment is to generate programs for youth who neither work nor study. Every survey on the subject has found in all parts of the country high rates of young women who not study or work. Surveys count 23,529 women in this category, or 46 per cent of the total category (FMC 2007).

The FMC has taken responsibility to set out proposals to orient youth and incorporate many of them into training programs run by the Guidance Centres for Women. In some provinces, further research into the causes of non-participation in work or school has found that scholarship programs generate little interest in studying and that youth receive insufficient positive influence from family members. Cases were also found of youth who abandoned a course of study or a job that they had previously taken on (FMC 2007).

* This situation is described in detail in a series of studies published by the Cuban Center for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS by its Spanish acronym), published under the name “Social Integration of Youth since the 1990s” [“La integración social de la juventud a partir de los años 90s”]. For more information, see also “Youth Employment in Cuba: A never-ending story?” [“Empleo juvenil en Cuba ¿El cuento de nunca acabar?”] in the online daily Juventud Rebelde, November 25, 2007.
Various employment options are offered to these youth by FMC programs with the Cuban Association of Animal Production (ACPA by its Spanish acronym), the Cuban Association of Agricultural and Forestry Technicians (ACTAF by its Spanish acronym), and the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP). The FMC also responded to the Education department’s request to train Informal Track Volunteer Promoters as Educators in Children’s Circles.

Although faster progress could be made, new forms of stimulation that correspond to the quantity, quality, and social contribution of the work are allowing the country to make important steps toward reducing social inequality. The new forms of stimulation are sparking workforce growth and participation of both men and women.

A series of measures to be implemented in the country, including the possibility of holding more than one job and the distribution of land usage rights, will expand opportunities for new employment by creating new forms of property ownership.

However, it is not enough to have a higher employment rate and a growing number of jobs for women. These work opportunities must translate into high-quality jobs in a growing number of sectors and occupations and must contribute to establishing more equitable gender relations in raising a family and in employment outside of the home.

**Employment in the agricultural sector has been an important source of jobs for rural women and has helped make visible the value that women in this sector contribute to the economy.**

### Fulfillment of Millennium Development Goal One in Cuba

The first and most emblematic of the Millennium Development Goals is the reduction of poverty. According to the narrow definition of the World Bank, poverty is defined as living on less than one dollar of income a day, which defines poverty as merely a lack of cash income.

Beyond these criticisms of this choice of measurement, the World Bank definition of poverty also does not address the issue from a gender-based perspective. Addressing poverty from a gender-based perspective can explain day-to-day dynamics inside the home, including how income is distributed and the unequal distribution of responsibilities and stress.

Experts warn that analyzing poverty by traditional means (measuring income and unsatisfied basic needs) is difficult in the Cuban case, because of the influence of social spending in the basic sectors of education, health, security, and social assistance. Rationed distribution of food and other goods and subsidized prices must be taken into account as well. Studies by the National Institute for Economic Research (INIE in its Spanish acronym) assert that poverty is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon in Cuba, with characteristics unique to Cuban society. To live in poverty in Cuba is to still have a safety net in the most vital areas, such as preventative and curative healthcare, basic food provisions, continuing general and specialized education, employment opportunities, and housing (A. Ferriol 2004).

Women, and in particular women from at-risk homes, can count on a universal and holistic social safety net that ensures their opportunities and capacities are not reduced by limited access to economic resources.

Women are also guaranteed access to a highly institutionalized network of free social services, ensuring that their family’s difficult economic situation will not prevent their household from accessing expensive and technologically complex medical and educational services, or opportunities for child care. Women also can be sure that the children of these families will not be excluded from opportunities in the future because of their present economic difficulties (A. Ferriol 2004).
5. WOMEN’S HEALTH IN CUBA: EQUITY AND INEQUITY

The Healthcare System and Access by Gender

Women’s health is a key aspect of the Millennium Development Goals and in human development in general. It is especially important because of the role that women play in caring for the health of their children and entire families. A UNICEF report from 2006 states: “women’s equality is a key factor for child survival and development.”

The fact that women play the role of healthcare provider means that family health is dependent on the cues and culture that women are capable of generating. Women greatly influence the family’s dietary strategies and hygiene habits as well as the general well-being of its members. Women’s circumstances, social situations, and opportunities to develop their capacities are determining factors for how they carry out this role and, therefore, for their own health and that of their families.

Women’s health is also valuable for the country’s development because women represent almost 50 per cent of the Cuban population, and their roles in economic production and science have become more and more important and valuable (ONE 2007a). This is based in the humanist conception of health as a right for all men and women.

Cuban society has been moving towards equal access to opportunity, including access to healthcare, for 50 years. In the 1960s, the Cuban government introduced substantial policy changes that spoke to a new focus on development, with health as a key aspect.

Despite the difficult conditions experienced during the crisis of the 1990s, progress has been made toward gender equality in healthcare in Cuba. This progress is due to a healthcare system based on the following principles: (1) healthcare is a universal right; (2) all services are free; (3) provision of care is organized by territory; (4) community and preventative health is emphasized; (5) tasks are divided into programs and monitored with quality indicators; and (6) the system is public.

Over the years, these principles have strengthened the healthcare system and guaranteed its capacity to adapt to difficult circumstances. The principal challenge has been to develop the system and maintain these principles despite a permanent state of resource shortage caused by the 50-year economic blockade and the high demand for medical technology in order to maintain improvements made in health indicators for the population. The tropical climate, which facilitates the spread of communicable diseases, and Cuba’s location in a region prone to natural disasters such as hurricanes, create further challenges for the Cuban healthcare system.

Providing healthcare for Cuban women is an objective of all of the country’s healthcare programs. Women play a dual role in this process, both as recipients and promoters of health services. Women have played an important role since the beginning of the Revolution, when they volunteered for mass vaccination campaigns, took first aid courses as part of their military training, and worked as health brigade members, nurses, social workers, and professionals. Public Health Ministry (MINSAP by its Spanish acronym) policy institutionalizes priority care for women and children. This is formalized in the central focus of Ministry actions, including programs for reproductive health, uterine, cervical, and breast cancer prevention, breastfeeding, responsible motherhood and fatherhood, mother-infant care, mass vaccination, and more.

* The Constitution and various national laws affirm that health is a universal right and, in particular, emphasize protection for pregnant women.
Healthcare provision is also organized using a multi-sector approach. Different organizations, including the FMC in all provinces, the Workers’ Central Union of Cuba (CTC), the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), and state institutions such as the Ministries of Education, People’s Power, and the Labour, all help develop healthcare provision strategies.

Years ago, MINSAP began to use a gender-based approach that, while still far from fully implemented, has already generated results. One of these results is disaggregation by sex of the national statistics system. A gender-based approach to women’s health takes into account other conditions such as age and geographic region.

Institutional innovation has been an important characteristic of health policy. An institutional initiative worth mentioning in the Mother-Infant Care Program (PAMI by its Spanish acronym) is the creation of Maternity Homes*, which were developed with the objective of reducing maternal mortality rates and providing maternity care to women who live far from hospitals, in particular in mountainous areas. Today, Maternity Homes are located throughout the country and have helped overcome the food insecurity experienced by pregnant women, principally in the eastern part of the country. A Maternity Home has similar functions to a hospital, but in a home-like environment.

Finally, healthcare policy in Cuba has worked steadily toward perfecting holistic, preventative, and community-based medical practice that makes the right to healthcare a reality for all. Family doctors are a pillar of community healthcare provision, and they contribute to women’s well-being by providing medical care to women and their families, as well as employment and professional affirmation.

Gender equity in healthcare depends on equal access to opportunities, which can also be understood as a fair or equal distribution of power between genders: a context where all men and women enjoy the same quality of life and where there is a balance of men’s and women’s roles in different spaces, spheres (raising a family vs. working outside the home), and sectors. Equity also means equal access to all resources - not just health services, but also food, housing, potable water, income, quality employment, education, and a culture of healthcare free of sexism and based on cooperation between sectors. It involves not only overcoming all the barriers that make women more vulnerable as they struggle for an optimal quality of life, but also addressing the higher mortality rate facing men and lengthening their life expectancy.

Free healthcare and programs that emphasize women’s health have been keys to achieving Cuban women’s long life expectancy have meant that Cuban women enjoy better results in many health indicators than women in other parts of the world. Improving access to services was another important aspect of perfecting the primary healthcare system in Cuba. Decentralizing services from hospitals to a network of community providers made healthcare more available and accessible.

* The first Maternity Home in post-revolution Cuba was founded in 1962, according to Dr. Francisco Rojas Ochoa, at that time the healthcare system director for the province of Camaguey.
These three factors alone are not enough to affirm that Cuba has reached optimal equality of opportunities. Access to and quality of healthcare services also have to do with the distances traveled to reach healthcare institutions, the way healthcare is organized geographically, and the more-or-less rational decisions that healthcare system users make within this context. This last factor depends, in the end, on the personal or collective culture of the healthcare system users.

The “health culture” of the patient differs from that of the doctor because of the socializing influences they receive from different healthcare models, one of which is the medical model. The “health culture” of the patient is a result of a long process of socialization in the art of treating and caring for sick family members; these acquired traditions often influence the choices one makes about the best way to treat their own or their relative’s illness, and whether or not to go to a formal health service. Studies have shown that the individual’s choice does not depend only on if they are able to pay for a service or not, but rather on a variety of motives that include cultural upbringing with regard to health and constructed social relations, which could include gender relations (M. Broffman 2003).

The practice of falling back on treatment through medicinal herbs is traditional among families and is generally inherited by both men and women, although it is more frequent among women. In their role as caretakers for the sick, women will often turn to home remedies to cure more benign and frequent illnesses for children and adults (fever, colds, diarrhea, etc). This practice was always very common among Cuban women, especially to confront common health problems such as respiratory illness. It became even more widespread during the 1990s due to the scarcity of medicine in Cuban pharmacies and related problems in the quality of healthcare provision.

Although Cuban women’s progress in education has better prepared them to take on health responsibilities for both themselves and their families, it has not been enough to uproot the practice and stereotype that the woman is the caretaker of the Cuban family, a fact that affects women in diverse ways.

Taking into account the relationships between use of health services, distribution of time, and execution of daily responsibilities, it is clear that Cuban women are still at a disadvantage with respect to men. Cuban women make greater use of health services not only because they get sick more often due to their gender role*, nor because they live longer, but because they do more for their family’s health and take responsibility for follow-up treatment for the rest of their family, at times to the point of forsaking care for their own health. This leads to, as has been affirmed before, a greater decline in their income at the end of each working month, which means more stress due to scarce resources and low quality of health services, as well as an ongoing tension over time distribution between the double roles women fulfill.

The interviews done for this book reveal how Cuban women must overcome everyday difficulties to access health services. Delays getting to hospitals, trips on foot because of transportation problems, time spent waiting for consultations and other challenges, are all understood to be situations that provoke stress and impact women’s health.

This worsens the situation of women’s health, with women’s “role overload” causing a higher morbidity rate, which in turn makes it more difficult for women to adequately care for their own health. Improved access to health services, in order to be more effective, must coincide with a more equitable division of roles between men and women.

On the other hand, machista stereotypes and the demands the provider role places on Cuban men puts them at a disadvantage as well, as they hide or minimize the importance of their health problems, and do not go to medical consultations with the frequency required to diagnose an illness promptly (Interview with F. Rojas 2008).

Cuban women’s decision-making process about the health services they choose is not significantly influenced by geographic concerns.

* This does not refer only to higher morbidity in reproductive and sexual health, but rather also to higher morbidity in other types of illness and health problems.
Those who live under and use the Cuban healthcare system know that geographic divisions are constantly broken for various reasons, such as: (1) resource scarcity due to the blockade and its impact on the quality of care, which varies from one institution to another; (2) personal relationships with the doctor whom the patient chooses to treat their health problem; (3) regional differences that persist despite the many investments that have been made; and (4) cultural factors associated with women’s education about different illnesses.

The State of Health of Men and Women: Life Expectancy and Morbidity by Sex

The right to healthcare for Cuban men and women does not exist only in program designs or in legal documents. This reality is illustrated by three health indicators: life expectancy, mortality, and morbidity.

Of all the indicators that are used to evaluate the health of the population, the one that best reflects human progress is life expectancy at birth. This indicator represents a basic human desire to live a longer life.

Life expectancy at birth is one of the indicators that show progress that has been made in terms of well-being for Cuban men and women. From 1952 (when life expectancy was 60.22 years for men and 64.11 years for women) to 2007, life expectancy grew by almost 16 years for both men and women. Cuban demographers affirm that this is an uncommonly high rate of growth, 0.22 years annually (ONE 2004). But the most noteworthy aspect of this improvement is that it was achieved in a society where resources are distributed more evenly. For that reason, it is more representative of an equitable reality for different social groups and regions, as opposed to other countries where average statistics for each sex mask important differences in class, race, ethnicity, and geographic region. Improvement of life expectancy is related, furthermore, to the overall transformations of the economy and the healthcare system that have changed the panorama of Cuban society.

In 2005, Cuba was third among countries in Latin America for life expectancy for men and women, with a rate of 78.7 years for women and 74.8 years for men (V. Milosavljevich 2007). Health statistics in Cuba show that this indicator improved in 2007, when men had a life expectancy of 76 years and women of 80.02 years, an average of 78 years and a gap of four years between sexes (ONE 2007b).

Greater life expectancy for women would appear to place women at an advantage, which is true, especially when we keep in mind the risks that masculine culture places on men, greatly reducing the number of years they are likely to live compared to women.

Cuban women, although they live longer, reach old age with a lower quality of life; women in Cuba have higher morbidity rates than men and suffer from more incapacitating illnesses.

Progress with regard to life expectancy in Cuba shows parity between men and women. A study by Cuban researchers on life expectancy indicates an increase in the differential in life expectancy between men and women, from 3.27 years in 1969-70, to 3.8 years between 2001 and 2003 (ONE 2004). However, this increase in the gap between men’s and women’s life expectancies is small, and some Cuban studies show that the median differential in other countries with similar populations is actually greater by two years (López, et al. 2004).

According to the study on life expectancy carried out by the National Statistics Office (ONE) between 2005 and 2007, differences* in life expectancy were observed between geographic regions. Some findings of interest include: (1) men in the city of Havana have the lowest life expectancy (73.86 years), with a gender gap of 5.68 years; (2) women in Villa Clara have the longest life expectancy, 81.14 years; (3) Isla de la Juventud has the lowest life expectancy for women, 78.99 years; and (4) the smallest gap is found in Pinar del Rio, where men have a life expectancy higher than the national average and women lower. The life

* These are minimal differences. All geographical regions of Cuba have a life expectancy of above 73 years, placing Cuba above some other countries of Latin America in 2005.
expectancy differential in Pinar del Rio (2.84 years) is well below the national average of four years, which indicates a comparatively worse situation for women in this region (ONE 2007b). The differences by territory in part explain why the national gap is as small as it is, but they do not explain the reasons why female life expectancy is greater in some regions than others.

Epidemiological profiles of both sexes allow us to analyze differences in the state of men’s and women’s health according to indicators like mortality and morbidity rates over different geographical regions and ages. These profiles can help to identify dynamics and trends that explain mortality rates in Cuba.

**How have Mortality Rates by Sex Changed in Cuba and what are the Causes? How Can they Be Explained from a Gender-Based Perspective?**

The 20th and beginning of the 21st century have been marked by a significant decline in overall mortality and a change in the epidemiological profiles of the causes of death in Cuba. This is true for both genders, and it is the result of prevention work and more equitable social resource distribution. The smaller difference in mortality rates by sex is the principal result of a social and health policy focused on overcoming avoidable gender differences.

The crude death rate dropped from an average of 9.7 between 1955 and 1959, to 6.9 between 2001 and 2003. Infant mortality dropped the most during that period, from a rate of 58 deaths per 1,000 live births to 6.3 deaths. The decline in the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) continued in 2007, when the rate reached 5.3 deaths per 1,000 live births (ONE 2007c). Lower mortality rates are the most significant results of the healthcare programs that now treat almost all the illnesses and health problems present in the Cuban population.

The crude death rate has not shown the same decline as the IMR. In 2007 the crude death rate increased slightly, to 7.3 deaths per 1,000 people (MINSAP 2007).

The crude death rate by sex in 2007 was 6.7 for women and 7.8 for men. This means that more men died than women, in all age groups. The differential between the male and female rates has always been less than 1; at older ages the rate is less favourable for men, but in any age group more Cuban men die than Cuban women. Changes in this indicator from 1970 to 2007 reveal a larger decline in crude death rate for women than for men; the increase between 2003 and 2007 occurred in both sexes, but slightly more among men than women (MINSAP 2007).

In 2007, the IMR also showed a differential between infant boys (5.7) and girls (4.8) (MINSAP 2007). For this age, health professionals blame the differential on biological factors associated with the inferior maturity level of the male sex which causes a lower rate of survival. Health studies find that the weight of biological and cultural factors in the death rates of males and females varies depending on their age; biological factors are more important at early ages, while cultural factors play an important role in adults.

From the first half of the 20th century to the second, Cuba shifted from a country where communicable diseases including malaria, typhoid, and tuberculosis, among others, were the norm, to a society where the greatest incidence of disease is among non-communicable illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease, and accidents.

Both genders exhibit this change in the epidemiological profile, as illustrated by the mortality rates by sex and by illness*. The data in the following table shows the similarities and differences between men and women for the year 2007.

The highest figures for both men and women are for heart disease, cancer and cerebrovascular disease. Analysis of the differential between men and women shows that men have higher rates of death due to self-injury (suicide), cirrhosis and other chronic liver illness, accidents, and cancer. Women have higher rates of death due to diabetes mellitus and cerebrovascular disease.

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* Statistically comparing epidemiological profiles by sex over such long periods is difficult because disaggregation of health statistics by sex is a very recent phenomenon.
Further disaggregating the data into more specific types of illness reveals that among heart diseases only chronic ischemia (thickening of the arteries) has a higher incidence among Cuban women than men*. The rate is higher particularly among women more than 80 years old.

According to 2007 data for both genders on the years of potential life lost (YPLL) rate, the highest number of years are lost due to the three largest causes of death among men: heart disease (11.1), cancer (17.6), and accidents (6). The two diseases that affect women’s mortality more than men’s, cerebrovascular disease and diabetes mellitus, have lower rates of 3.8 and 1.5 years, respectively (MINSAP 2007). A 2002 study on health statistics for Cuban men and women showed that the YPLL for male heart disease in 2001 was 9.4 years, and for women 4.8 years (MINSAP 2002).

These illnesses are linked to unhealthy lifestyle choices that men and women make. The fact that these choices are more frequent among men causes their higher mortality rate.

The distribution of illnesses and health problems between men and women is also linked to traditional gender roles and habits. A census carried out by the National Epidemiology and Health Institute in 1995 found a higher prevalence of smoking among men than women (although the census also found an increase in smoking among women). A higher prevalence of alcohol consumption was also found among men. These lifestyles are significant causes of such illnesses as cancer and heart disease.

Diabetes is linked to inadequate nutrition, which causes obesity among women. The body mass index for Cuban women is higher than that of men, and nutritional studies identify that Cuban women have a higher rate of poor nutrition and are more likely to consume less healthy foods – both are causes of obesity. Among employed women, this trend could also be related to time distribution between the dual roles that they fulfill. Poor nutrition causes hypertension, which in turn is a leading cause of heart disease; the incidence of hypertension is higher among Cuban women older than 45 years, an age at which they undergo important changes in reproductive health. The survey cited above also found that women tend to have more sedentary lifestyles and are more likely to be overweight or obese, and that these problems worsen with age (MINSAP 1999).

Longitudinal studies on Cuban women’s health indicate increases in hypertension and other diseases that lead to strokes and heart disease. The rate of male mortality due to cerebrovascular disease in Cuba was higher than the rate for women up until 1992. From 1992 until today, the rate has been higher for women. Looking at mortality rates for this disease by age and sex, we see that the rate increase for women occurred mainly in two age groups, women 85 years and older and women 45-49 years of age. For the first group old age is clearly a factor, but further studies are needed to know if another factor was declining quality of life caused by the crisis of the 1990s. The higher rate in the 45-49 age range seems to indicate a societal health issue, although access to healthcare services has remained the same (MINSAP 2002).

The data also show a higher rate of male mortality due to accidents and suicides. Many attribute this to a culture of risk-taking among Cubans, which manifests itself in different ways.

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* The cited report offers a rate of 65.3 per 100,000 women and 59.3 per 100,000 men. See boxes 56 and 57, pp. 71-72.
Statistics by age group for motor vehicle accidents found that the risk for both sexes grew with age, particularly in age groups 10-19 years and up. In all age groups, the rate is higher for men; and the differential between men and women increases with age. In 2007, the rate was 12 per 100,000 male residents and 3.4 per 100,000 female residents. The rate of 2.2 (18) for bicycle accidents in 2007 is made up entirely of males from the adolescent age group. Death by accidental electrocution shows a rate of 2.2 for men versus 0.3 for women (MINSAP 2007). The risk of dying from an accident is linked to masculine stereotypes, which associate manhood with bravery. This justifies behavior such as not using protective gear in dangerous situations, or drinking and driving. It is also assumed that in the cases of death from motor vehicle accidents where both men and women are involved, the man is typically driving and the woman riding as a passenger.

In 1982, a team of sociologists set out to investigate the use of protective gear in a unit of the electric company in Havana. They found that, among linemen, not using protective gear followed a machista cultural pattern in which men put themselves in risky situations in order to prove their bravery and manhood.

In the annual health report, falls are the only accident that shows a higher mortality rate for women than men. The greater time spent by women in the home and by men in the workplace translates into more accidents happening to women in the home and to men in public spaces.

Among adolescents, accident rates are also linked to risk-taking and the socialization that young men receive from their families, where conditions encourage them to spend time in activities in the street or playing “male-appropriate” games. The childhood culture that Cuba has deliberately created encourages gender equality and protects children and adolescents, but these new family values coexist with old patriarchal ones when it comes to raising children. Patriarchal values may encourage or allow practices such as riding a bike while hanging onto a truck more among men than among women of the same age. Self-injury (suicide) affects men more than women by a differential of 3.8, the largest differential of all the causes of death. A 2002 study on Cuban women found a larger percentage of women than men who attempted suicide in 2001, when 74.6 per cent of all suicide attempts were made by women (MINSAP 2002). This means that Cuban women attempt suicide more, but succeed in their attempts less. In both men and women, suicide is often associated with mental health problems related to their gender roles and demands placed on them by feminine and masculine cultures.

**Cancer Mortality and Morbidity**

Cancer is the second-largest cause of death for both sexes, but different types of cancer show different patterns among men and women – with the exception of respiratory cancers, which are the top cause of cancer death for both Cuban men and women, although the rate of incidence is higher among men. This is an important disease to study because it is the only cause of death that has shown a constant growth rate for both sexes in recent years.

Societal gender inequalities with regard to sexual and reproductive health also affect mortality and morbidity for both genders. The incidence of breast and cervical cancers reflects gender inequalities in health on all continents. These types of cancer are closely linked to the quality of women’s sexual and reproductive lifestyles, and have a significant influence on female mortality and morbidity rates.

Breast cancer is one of the largest causes of death among women in Latin America. Its prevalence is linked to lack of access to health services that provide women with regular check-ups and mammograms for early detection of the disease. It is significant, however, that a country like Haiti, with significant inequalities in heath care access, had the lowest rate for these cancers in 2005 (1.5) and Uruguay, which has the best performance on the continent in health indicators, had the highest rate (36.6). Other factors must have an influence.
According to this year’s data, Cuba is sixth in breast cancer mortality with a rate of 19.1. This is despite a national program of free consultations for early detection which, since it is free, is ostensibly accessible to all women (V. Milosavljevich 2007). It is necessary to study the impact of this national program that monitors breast cancer and the medical practices for early detection.

Breast cancer also has a large influence on morbidity rates; it has the highest impact of all cancers that affect morbidity rates for Cuban women. In 2004 the rate was 52.9 per 100,000 inhabitants. The highest incidence is found among women between 35 and 39 years of age, and the rates increase as age increases (MINSAP 2007).

However, although breast cancer causes the most morbidity among women out of all types of cancer, with a crude rate of 43 per 100,000, the mortality rate due to breast cancer was 23.7 in 2007 in Cuba, below that of respiratory cancers (MINSAP 2007).

According to Dr. Rojas Ochoa, the high incidence of breast cancer could be one possible explanation for the small differential in overall mortality rates between Cuban women and men. Comparing the mortality rate due to breast cancer among Cuban women with women from other countries shows that this illness has a higher incidence among women with women from other countries shows that this illness has a higher incidence among Cuban women (Interview with F. Rojas 2008). Between 1997 and 2002, Cuba showed the third-highest mortality rate due to cancer of the trachea, bronchial tubes, and lungs among 29 countries in Latin America. In Trinidad and Tobago, a country whose life expectancy differential was at that time six years, the rate for women was 4.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to a rate of 23 women per 100,000 inhabitants in Cuba. The female-male ratio (F/M) was 0.5 in Cuba and 0.3 in Trinidad and Tobago (UNIFEM 2005). All this would seem to indicate that women in Cuba smoke less than men, but more than women in other nations. A comparative study between Cuba and 10 countries in the Americas explains the slight difference in higher female mortality rates between 10 and 34 years of age, and recommends targeting mortality from heart disease, suicide, and respiratory disease (López, et al. 2004).

The second leading cause of cancer death among Latin American women is cervical cancer. Cuba has a mortality rate of 10.1 for this type of cancer, the sixth-lowest rate among countries in 2005 (V. Milosavljevich 2007). Early detection of this cancer was one of the most important programs of 1968, which was very effective in its national coverage and results. The incidence of this cancer in the morbidity rate of Cuban women was 34.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2004, below skin cancer which had a rate of 49.7, nearing the breast cancer rate (MINSAP 2007).

Both illnesses also have an important impact in psychological health problems given the effect they have on the sexual and reproductive lives of women.

Men exhibit a higher morbidity rate due to cancer in all provinces, except for the special municipality of Isla de la Juventud, where the situation is reversed. A comparison between regions and by sex of morbidity due to cancer shows that the three provinces with the highest rates are, in order of highest to lowest incidence: Villa Clara, Havana, and Santi Spíritus, with rates of 413.8, 321.3, and 319.2 per 100,000 inhabitants respectively for men, and 358.4, 292.2, and 270.1 respectively for women (MINSAP 2007).

Comparing the mortality rate due to cancer for men and women reveals that prostate cancer causes more deaths for men than do breast cancer and cervical cancer for women, if each is looked at independently. Prostate cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death among men, only behind respiratory cancer, and with a higher rate than breast cancer among women: 41.6 per 100,000 inhabitants of the male population (MINSAP 2007).

The geographical analysis of these types of cancer also reveals rural-urban differences. While breast cancer and prostate cancer rates are higher in urban areas, 17.1 per 100,000 and almost 30 per 100,000, respectively, for 2007, there is a higher rate of uterine cancer in rural areas, with a value of 11.4 (MINSAP 2007).

Although Cuban women benefit from a longer life expectancy than men, just like their counterparts in America they get sick more than men and this translates into a poorer quality of life.
Studies on disease patterns by sex are based in the analysis of patient records. The same studies find that illnesses like hypertension and asthma appear more among women than men (MINSAP 2004).

Patient registries show a greater incidence of migraines, stress, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol among women; the rate of these afflictions among women is twice that among men, and their frequency increases after 45 years of age.

An interview with a stomatologist working in Luyanó Moderno* refers to differences in the habits of men and women in caring for their oral health, and the more frequent incidence of certain oral illnesses in women or men. But statistics and research are almost non-existent in this area of healthcare and it is not possible to arrive at clear conclusions.

The increase in incapacitating physical and mental illnesses is a phenomenon that in Cuba, like in other countries, is linked to the aging process of the population – particularly the female population. The longer lifespan of women is seen as a result of biological and social factors, while in fact the investment that has been made to improve the health of the entire population has led to an increase in women’s life expectancy.

But what conditions await older women in Cuba? Geriatric studies from a gender-based perspective are scarce in the country, but the existing studies point to some differences that suggest socio-cultural factors as determinants of a higher incidence of physical and mental incapacity among Cuban women over 60. Compared to men, older Cuban women are 2.4 times more likely to have dementia and 3.7 times more likely to have Alzheimer’s, worsening their quality of life. The poorer quality of life of elderly women is seen in illnesses like osteoporosis, associated with nutritional habits that generate physical incapacity and frequent broken bones (MINSAP 1999). Broken hips are a significant cause of death for women of this age; in 2001 the female rate was nearly twice the male rate: 141 and 75, respectively (MINSAP 2002). The evaluation of the nutritional state of older persons by a family doctor in central Havana in 1999 found that 70 per cent of the older population was malnourished; of these, 24.6 per cent were undernourished, and 44.2 per cent were obese or overweight yet malnourished. The majority were women (G. Pita 1999).

In 2001, illness records for patients 60 and over showed a higher prevalence of chronic, non-communicable illnesses among women of these ages, in particular hypertension, diabetes mellitus, heart disease, asthma, cerebrovascular disease, and high cholesterol (MINSAP 2002).

Continued field research is necessary to find out what effects the special period has generated for women’s health, given the historical conditions of a context where patriarchal family culture was dominant and new demands were generated on public institutions that welcomed women as part of a liberation project. Although this liberation project allowed women to be more independent and to experience greater cultural formation, this has at times been at the cost of women renouncing motherhood, reducing their free time, and living in situations that are consistently stressful and taxing on their health. This is a result of “role overload” and conflict between a cultural model of liberation that demands new and multiple commitments and a model that pushes to reproduce sexist values and participation patterns.

All the women interviewed for this study identified with that idea that “role overload” has impacted the health of Cuban women. One of them stated: “I have a thyroid problem that has to do with stress I lived through in 2001 with a problem at home. This was when we moved and the legalization process of the new house and difficulties with the old house created stress that gave me a large goiter that ended up needing surgical intervention, which left me with hypothyroidism and a dependency on pharmacological treatment” (Interview with C. Linares 2008).

Numerous studies now recognize the link between stress and different physiological illnesses. From that standpoint it makes sense that the

* An enclosed territory in the municipality of San Miguel del Padrón in the city of Havana.
role overload in the conditions of the economic blockade of Cuba, and the precarious uncertainty it creates in the daily lives of Cuban families, could have a significant impact on women’s health. Rojas Ochoa affirms that Cuban women live at a health disadvantage due to their central role as family caretakers, a situation that obligates them to battle with the supply problems which they have faced in everyday life for almost 50 years, and which generate stress that can become chronic (Interview with F. Rojas 2008).

In summary, the reality of the state of health for men and women is a reflection of the gender contradictions in Cuban society. On one hand, men and women have reached a higher quality of life that has allowed them to use all their human capacities, reflected in growing life expectancy. At the same time, for both men and women, patriarchal perceptions and practices continue to have an influence on epidemiological profiles, with males suffering higher mortality rates and women higher rates of disease.
Cycles of family development are shaped by three fundamental processes: (1) formation processes of constituting a stable relationship with a partner; (2) expansion processes that begin with pregnancy and continue with raising children; and (3) dissolution processes due to separation, divorce, death, and emigration. All of these processes are important, and certain parameters must be met for the evolution of the family life cycle to be healthy for each family member.

For many Cuban families, gender relations are a complicated mix. This mix is the result of the coexistence of two competing cultural models: a patriarchy that is pushing to reproduce itself and continue, and a culture of equality that is emerging despite the resistance it encounters from its predecessor.

Family formation in Cuba has undergone significant changes in the last 50 years, influenced in great part by two related events: the social revolution and the sexual revolution.

The sexual revolution began around the world in the 1960s, although in Cuba this process developed parallel to a deep social revolution powered by new political leadership. It is not possible to distinguish which of the many changes that emerged during this period had to do with just one revolution or the other; all of the changes were most likely linked to both. Legal, political, and institutional changes, along with changes in healthcare, education, and other areas, changed the Cuban approach to and practices of sexuality and reproduction. The scope of this change included the entire process of courtship before marriage, and extended to all stages of the family life cycle.

Both events generated radical and progressive changes in the social situation for Cuban women, which were manifested in changing family structures, roles, and daily household experiences. These transformations did not impact all families equally across different territories and social groups, but they were influential enough that today’s Cuban families cannot be seen exclusively as products of the patriarchal cultural model. The situation for women has changed in terms of the place they hold within the family and the place their families hold in their life projects; women’s identities include new ways of considering and living motherhood, and new conceptions of family roles within diverse goals and projects.

New diversity in family models and roles includes single parenting and women heads of households, new models of motherhood and fatherhood within the family, greater tolerance for homosexuality and interracial courtship and acceptance of stable homosexual or interracial relationships, formation of couples that break the established age patterns of the patriarchal model (traditionally pairing younger women with older men), less value placed on the myth of virginity, and increased acceptance of sexual relations before marriage. These are just a few of the new attitudes in the changing model that is democratizing sexual relations.

These changes have reached both men and women, but their impacts have differed in intensity and content in feminine and masculine cultures. This inconsistency gave rise to the urgent national debate in the 1990s over a cross-cutting approach to gender and masculinity theory, which introduced the idea that a culture of gender equity had to do not only with changes in the situation for women, but with changes in societal and familial power relationships between men and women.

**Process of Formation and Dissolution of Couples**

Current studies show that many of the indicators designed to evaluate family life processes have different implications for men and women,
due to their unequal positions in family structure and the inequitable distribution of their responsibilities.

One of the battlegrounds between the patriarchal culture and the culture of gender equity in Cuba is the institution of marriage.

In any society, marriage’s importance comes from the role it plays as the foundation of a family and the functions a family fulfills in transmitting culture. This function does not only have to do with procreation, as there are many modern marriages that do not produce children and are no less significant for that reason. Rather it has to do with the role that marriage plays as a social space to construct strategies for solidarity, socialization, and social survival. In the midst of this reality are important conflicts stemming from a sexist division of labour.

Cuban legislation on family issues has progressed from the patriarchal law contained in the Spanish Civil Code. New transformations have promoted the creation of a society that protects the rights of women and children. Such changes are the fruit of a collaborative relationship between the FMC and the Cuban Society for Civil Rights and Family (O. Mesa 2008).

The legal framework, which created the Family Code passed in 1975, favours progress toward equal rights for men and women. Several of the articles of the law deserve special attention, including the sections that refer to non-formal marriages, marital economic arrangements, and divorce.

The first of these articles legitimizes consensual unions, an age-old form of partnership in Cuba. Although common, these unions often led to discriminatory attitudes against women and their children. Legal recognition of consensual unions was a decisive measure meant to formalize children’s right to a name, and to eliminate the social practice that classified children born in wedlock as “legitimate” and children born out of wedlock as “illegitimate.” Women were stigmatized as “concubines” and had no right to demand that the father fulfill his role as a protector and caregiver for his child. In general, the recognition of consensual unions led to greater freedom for men and women in their choice of partners and manner of partnership. By the year 2007, 69 per cent of children were born to a mother in a consensual union (ONE 2007).

The articles of the Family Code dealing with marital economic arrangements established the universality of joint ownership in marriage. In a society where economic mechanisms that generate inequalities between men and women still exist, this joint property system ensures a more just distribution of goods and provides protection for women and children. The scarcity of goods in Cuba over the last 50 years has forced the country to use labour and employment mechanisms to distribute wealth. Given that the workplace still favours men to a great extent, despite the advances made in the incorporation of women into public employment, joint property in a marriage is a guarantee that essential goods will be shared. The joint property system ensures that women will not be vulnerable in the case of divorce.

Legal recognition of consensual unions, previously only present in rural areas, has led to a growth of this kind of partnership across the country. In Cuba, consensual unions have become a common form of partnership before marriage. In 1980, 11 per cent of marriages were between people already established in consensual unions; in the year 2007 that figure rose to 30 per cent. This practice seems to be equally popular among men and women, with some small variations in certain provinces (ONE 2007).

In 2007, the Cuban marriage rate was 5.1 per 1,000 inhabitants; despite an increase in consensual unions, this rate reflects the continued prevalence of marriage as the way to build a family. This situation is not consistent across the country; the provinces in the Eastern region of the country report values below the national average, while Havana has one of the highest rates, at 7.6 (ONE 2007).

There are substantial differences between how men and women in Cuba build relationships and sexual partnerships. Cuban women get married earlier than men, and are also the first to leave their family homes. In fact, phenomena indicating an early start to their sexual lives, such as engaging
in sexual relations and becoming young parents, are more frequent among women than men.

One indicator that reflects the differences between Cuban men and women and the ongoing prevalence of the traditional culture is the average age of first marriage. In 2007, women between the ages of 14 and 19 accounted for 14 per cent of first marriages; only four per cent of first marriages included men between those ages. In data regarding the age distribution of people entering into their first marriages, there is a clear prevalence of women under age 24; starting at age 25 the situation reverses, and men account for the greater part of persons getting married for the first time in older age groups (ONE 2007). Early marriages and pregnancies put gender equity at risk, as they often force women to renounce training and advancement in the workplace or labour market. This can create a vicious cycle that reinforces female dependency.

The greater freedom that Cuban women enjoy today translates to greater opportunities to rebuild sexual relationships when they aren’t working. The introduction of legal mechanisms that allow divorces to be granted without appearing before a judge, or to be conceded in court by default, was an important step in ensuring that the right to divorce could benefit both men and women. Olga Mesa affirmed that Cuban laws protect Cuban women: “They have ensured that in almost all cases of divorce where there is a separation of property, women keep the home and the men must leave. Cuban mechanisms allow people to facilitate an exit from poorly conceived marriages” (O. Mesa 2008).

One of the most important transformations for Cuban families has to do with the educational advancement of women. This progress has helped a greater number of women obtain their economic independence and, as a result, set a much lower tolerance for violent practice generated by the patriarchal culture in couples’ relationships. Educational advancement and greater legal flexibility for divorce help explain a higher divorce rate in the country. The crude divorce rate went from 0.5 per one 1,000 inhabitants in 1960 to 3.1 per 1,000 in the year 2007 (ONE).

Cases studies on the process for dissolving marriages in Cuba affirm that women are more likely to request a divorce. Other cases, however, still show situations in which women fear divorce because separation from their partners implies economic insecurity for them and their children.

There is now less prejudice facing Cuban women after a divorce, and greater respect for their social function. This environment has led to an increase in the number of women who remarry. In 2007, 49 per cent of divorced women eventually remarried, compared to 51 per cent of men (ONE).

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*Less tolerance does not mean that domestic violence is absent from romantic partnerships.*

Cuban women and their children are also protected by a child support system that forces the father to provide ongoing care for his children after a divorce. Beyond simply recognizing the rights of women and children, the law establishes obligatory wage garnishment for those who do...
not comply voluntarily with their legally-established responsibilities. One challenge that remains is to establish procedures guaranteeing payment from parents who are not state workers.

The institutionalization of abortion in Cuba, along with expanded access to contraception, came about as the result of women’s struggles to control their own bodies. These victories have contributed to women’s empowerment in the context of their romantic relationships.

Abortions were practiced widely in Cuban society in the 1950s, though under conditions that put women’s health at risk. Use of contraceptives was low at that time. Many women were pressured to resort to abortion due to the stigma of having an illegitimate child, or the challenge of raising a child in poverty. The circumstances now are different: women may choose abortion if they choose to continue their education, feel that they are not prepared for motherhood, do not have the economic conditions in place to guarantee a healthy childhood, or simply do not want to have children.

The most recent information shows that abortion statistics are not always higher in countries that allow abortions to be practiced freely; is an invalid argument against legalization. In Cuba there was an early period of growth in the number of abortions, especially among adolescents, which concerned healthcare workers for quite some time. Now, however, the conditions under which abortions are practiced represent a reduced health risk, and improved education on contraceptive techniques has reduced the number of abortions. In 1993, 70 per cent of women used some method of birth control; in 2007 the figure rose to 77.1 per cent (MINSAP 2007).

In 1980 the abortion rate was 42.1 per 1,000 women, and in 2007 the number was 20.4, a reduction by just more than one half. This reduction was spread across all age groups, though the number of abortions among adolescents, where there is greater risk, remains high.

Use of birth control is an indicator of the freedom that Cuban women enjoy; easy access to contraception allows women to control their fertility and to decide which life project they want to prioritize.

Access to birth control and the legalization and institutionalization of abortion offer real guarantees for women’s rights to control their own bodies. On the other hand, the more frequent use of birth control among women and female control of fertility may also be an expression of men not assuming full responsibility. Reproduction is an activity in which men and women share the same rights and responsibilities.

Nonetheless, everything seems to indicate that progress is being made in men’s commitment to family planning, though the situation varies in different regions of the country. The Reproductive Health Survey carried out in 2001 in Holguín and Cienfuegos showed gender parity in contraceptive use, 91.9 per cent for men and 93.9 per cent for women. More significant differences were detected on the issue of sterilization, which is more widely practiced among women (24.4%) than among men (0.3%) (ONE 2004).

In recent years, in certain limited studies, data show that more young men are using condoms, which may be a product in part of the AIDS prevention campaign. AIDS affects more men than women in Cuba, but just as in other countries, women may be subject to situations that put them at higher risk of contracting this illness and other sexually transmitted diseases. Sexually transmitted diseases affect men more frequently than women in the country (ONE 2004). Women in Cuba may be at risk, however, even if they do not engage in irresponsible or risky activity; their male partners may engage in extramarital sexual relations.

HIV and AIDS occur with greater frequency among homosexual men in Cuba, though still at a level that classifies the country internationally as a “low-transmission” country. Nonetheless, there has been an increase in women infected with the virus since 1996. By the year 2007 Cuba reported that women accounted for 19 per cent of the infected population (Oxfam International 2008). Of 29 countries that reported data in the year 2005, only eight reported a percentage lower than the one observed in Cuba, while three more reported the same value (UNIFEM 2005).
Women are at the center of the Cuban strategy for control and prevention of HIV and AIDS. In 1986, the country increased attention to pregnant women in their HIV-AIDS strategy, with an exam in the first trimester. From 1986 to 2007, 31 cases of infection were detected out of the 369 births of children to mothers with HIV (8%), within a total population of pregnant women of 3.8 million (Oxfam International 2008).

**Heads of Households**

Power is not exclusively an attribute of the public sphere. Power is also an axis along which gender relations are structured, and an element in play within marriages and parent-child relationships. In this context, power is not only expressed as a relationship of influence, but also as male domination/female obedience.

The study of women’s empowerment in romantic partnerships has centered on the changing heads of the household; these studies only provide a vague vision of complex power relationships. If we take the concept of power as the capacity to exert influence over other members of the family and impose one’s will, the situation for women may be very different in each home.

The central role of Cuban women in most households allows them to make decisions about such things as the daily tasks that guarantee the survival of the family, children’s education, and care for the sick. But in many Cuban households, women are not included in larger family decisions, do not collect the resources necessary to run the household, and are not recognized by their family members as heads of household.

In certain Cuban homes where women make important economic contributions, men share power. However, many studies do not take this dynamic into account; they are more concerned with a clear dichotomy of female heads of household vs. male heads of household.

Domestic violence adds another layer to the power dynamics in Cuban homes. Living with physical mistreatment or symbolic violence limits women’s capacity to exert influence and make decisions, putting them in a subordinate position.

Even though the statistics on heads of households do not reflect the full complexity of the power relationships in the home, they do provide some evidence of growing women’s empowerment. In 1953, 9.6 per cent of the heads of households were women; the number rose to 32 per cent in 2002. Male leadership of households experienced a slight decrease during that same time period, from 54.2 per cent to 47 per cent.

This variation is neither statistically nor qualitatively significant. The population and housing census of 2002 revealed a ratio by sex of heads of household of 1.46, which means the majority of households are still led by men. Nonetheless, this is lower than the rate of 5.94 reported in the 1953 census. This trend holds true across most of the country, except in Havana where 54 per cent of the households are led by women (M. Franco and A. Alfonso 2008).

Female heads of household in Cuba occur to a great extent in single parent households (nuclear or not) and in non-nuclear families. In 2002, 56.7 per cent of male heads of household were in nuclear families, while 24.9 per cent of women were single parent heads of nuclear households and 37.5 per cent were heads of non-nuclear homes (M. Franco and A. Alfonso 2008). This situation mirrors trends for heads of households throughout Latin America. For that same year, 16 countries of the region identified that 89 per cent of female heads of household lived without a spouse, while 87 per cent of male heads of household lived with their partners (V. Milosavljevich 2007).

This phenomenon stems from the male figure leaving the home when couples fall apart. In Cuba this is compounded by the existence of a large number of widows, as women’s life expectancy in the country is greater than men’s. These elements make statements about women’s empowerment as heads of households very relative.

The processes of creation or dissolution of romantic partnerships interfere with the reproductive function of families, which is one of the reasons families exist in all cultures.

If we compare the situation for Cuban women today with the situation of their grandmothers and ancestors, signs of greater women’s em-
powerment are found in many families. Examining the life histories of Cuban women confirms that Cuban mothers and wives today have more opportunities and greater capacity to make decisions in their homes than their ancestors in their own family tree did (R. Fleitas 2002-2008). This was also observed in the course of conducting interviews for the study, upon comparing data from younger women to those generations who experienced changes in their families at the start of the Revolution. All of the women interviewed agreed that even though there is still a sexist division of labour in domestic tasks, they now have more decision-making power in their households than their mothers and grandmothers experienced.

Expansion of the Cuban Family: Child Care

Analyzing fertility in Cuba using the infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR) helps us to understand quality of life for Cuban families during their expansion cycles. These indicators also allow us to recognize gender disparities and the treatment of children as they grow into adults.

The MMR of any country reflects the quality of women’s reproductive healthcare, access to this care, and the state of women’s sexual and reproductive health in general. Sexual and reproductive health directly impacts the beginning of the family expansion process, as the mother’s survival is fundamental for the first stage of child development in which breast milk is a baby’s exclusive nourishment.

From 2000 to 2005, Cuba had the fourth lowest MMR out of 27 Latin American countries, with an MMR of 33 (maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). Puerto Rico held the first place, Uruguay second, and Chile third, with rates of 25, 27, and 31, respectively. Cuba’s MMR continued to decrease through the year 2007, reaching a rate of 30.2 (ONE 2007).

Studies have not been carried out regarding gender inequality by territory, but certain multi-sector health indicators suggest that the situation for Cuban women is not the same in all regions of the country: there are differences between rural, urban, and isolated provinces. Food insecurity during the 1990s led to malnutrition among pregnant women in the Eastern region and an increase in the rate of low birth weights. These problems affected the regions that were already at a disadvantage. This situation was less pronounced in the maternal mortality rate, as Cuban women have almost universal access to Maternity Homes - care centres which rectify nutritional imbalances and improve the quality of life for women prior to childbirth. Still, the maternal mortality rate in the country ranged from 104.7 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in Santiago de Cuba, to zero in Villa Clara, Cienfuegos and Santi Spiritus (ONE 2007).

Individual factors influence these results from region to region, and it is understood that the patriarchal culture is more deeply rooted in the Eastern part of the country than in the Western and central zones. When women encounter a situation of food insecurity, they redouble their roles as caregivers and may be further dividing the food provisions given to them by the State to palliate the food insecurity of their families, especially in families that include children and older adults.

It is difficult to assess the results of gender equity efforts without sufficient research or serialized statistics on men’s and women’s situations across geographic regions. Not all of the data collected in different annual studies are duly disaggregated by sex and geographic area. For comparisons between the MMR of Cuba and Latin America, and the IMR for children under one year of age and children under five, the variation between geographic areas within Cuba is insignificant; the data are fairly homogeneous for that scale of comparison. This does not mean that all Cuban families enjoy the same levels of well-being; it’s simply that the overall number of families in the country that suffer the trauma of losing a mother or a child under five is relatively low.

Quality healthcare for pregnant women and newborn children is achieved thanks to the presence of qualified medical professionals at 100 per cent of childbirths. Even though there is still room for improvement in certain performance
indicators, only five of the 27 countries of Latin America can guarantee that level of total coverage (V. Milosavljevich 2007).

Fertility rates measure female fertility; studies on reproductive health and on the resulting industrial activity have been linked exclusively to women’s reproduction. There are no data to contribute to an analysis on male fertility in Cuba, but the male fertility rate is most likely higher due to a more unstable practice in sexual relations, a greater number of second and third marriages with women of reproductive age, a longer period of fertility, and less responsible birth control use among men.

From 2000 to 2005, the total fertility rate in Latin America was 2.6 children per woman. Cuba is an exception in the region in that its fertility rate has decreased, falling below the replacement rate with a value of 1.6 children per woman. From 1950 to 1955 Cuba held the third position out of the four countries in advanced fertility transitions; the total fertility rate at that time was of 4.10 children per woman (V. Milosavljevich 2007).

The reduction in fertility, reproduction, and birth rates over the last 50 years has to do with several overlapping processes during that time: the mass incorporation of women into the workforce, higher quality standards for child care, and the deterioration of family and household life as a result of the economic blockade against the country. The blockade affects Cuban women most of all, given their central role in caring for their families, especially children. The reduction in fertility rates in Cuba is observed in all of the provinces and in both rural and urban areas; it includes women living under varied conditions and with diverse occupations, even unpaid domestic workers.

Between 2000 and 2005, Cuba ranked sixth among 21 countries in Latin America for the percentage of children born to mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 years (19.1%). Cuba was second in terms of children born to mothers age 35 or older. This explains why the country has one of the lowest median ages of fertility, at 25.2 years (V. Milosavljevich 2007).

Teen pregnancy continues to be a problem for Cuban families, as it leads to a higher incidence of premature births, cesarean births, high blood pressure, low birth weight, and consequently, higher maternal and infant mortality. The reproductive organs of young women are not always mature enough to ensure healthy pregnancies and childbirth. This issue also represents a problem for young women’s psychological health, as teen pregnancy often leads to an attitude of not wanting to accept motherhood, or rejecting the child. Young women have not yet concluded their formation as individuals, and children may demand more affection than they are capable of giving.

The greatest problem associated with teen pregnancy, however, is a social one. Early motherhood infringes on the time established for young women to finish the schooling they need to be able to compete in the public sphere. Without this education, the incorporation of these women into both public spaces and the workforce becomes more difficult, and this may put both the mother and the child at a disadvantage. If the young woman is also a single mother, her capacity to ensure a high quality of life for herself and her child is reduced, with further negative effects in reproductive and overall health. These circumstances may deteriorate further if these young women have more children. In the end, this model of child-bearing may limit women’s emancipation by creating a cycle that feeds into the patriarchal culture that keeps women in the domestic sphere.

Significant consequences are linked to the recurrence of this social phenomenon. Studies show a high rate of recurrence (60%) of maternity patterns between generations, reproduced from mother to child. In the rural areas this rate is slightly higher still (61.5%) (R. Fleitas 2000).

The impacts generated by teen pregnancy in Cuba are eased by the provision of free maternal and child healthcare and social security to protect single mothers. The reduction of the maternal and infant mortality rates to their current low levels demonstrates that this support is effective. Even teen mothers, when they receive timely maternal healthcare and support,
can have a problem-free pregnancy and give birth to a healthy child. This possibility is greater for mothers in their late teens (16-18 years old) rather than the earlier possible stage (12-15 years old).

The adolescent fertility rate in Cuba is now, in the early 21st century, at a low point, after increases during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The adolescent fertility rate measured in the year 2007 was lower than the rate measured in 1953: 44.6 and 58.6, respectively. While in the 1970s adolescents were the second largest group in the fertility distribution, in the last decade they are only the fourth largest. The data from Table 9 show the fertility rates for different groups over a period of 54 years.

### Table 9: Fertility Rates by Age Group

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>119.7</td>
<td>127.3</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>205.6</td>
<td>266.4</td>
<td>179.3</td>
<td>126.8</td>
<td>113.9</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>203.6</td>
<td>237.9</td>
<td>118.3</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>75.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>138.9</td>
<td>164.8</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>100.9</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>37.3</td>
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Source: (MINSAp 2007; R. Hernandez 1994)

The table shows that the group with the greatest drop in fertility rate in the 1990s was 15-19 year olds, who as an age group moved into fourth place by the year 2000. Cuban statistics reflect a drop in the fertility rate among 12-19 year olds from 57.1 to 33.3 per 1,000 from 1985 to 1996, a nearly 24-point reduction (ONE 1999).

The reduction is greatest in the group of 15-19-year-olds, followed by the group of 20-24-year-olds and 25-29 year olds. Fertility rates increased among older age groups; this suggests that a greater number of women are postponing maternity to age 29 and over (MINSAp 2007).

It should be mentioned that most of the teen mothers in the country are at the upper limit of their age group, 18 or 19-years-old. In recent years the median age at which women have their first child has risen. The impacts of teen pregnancy are more severe than those of pregnancies that occur late in women’s fertile life, and later pregnancies are still rare in Cuba.

In the year 2007, the 15-19 year old age group in nine provinces in the Western and central regions of the country showed a fertility rate below the national average; the provinces in the Eastern region, with the exception of Santiago de Cuba, reported values above the national average. The highest fertility rates were found in the provinces that have the lowest human development indices. These areas showed a strong recurrence of teen pregnancy, and high fertility rates in general. Despite this, all of the provinces, without exception, achieved a reduction in their teen pregnancy rates. This is due to the expansion of reproductive healthcare services to these areas and to the introduction of sexual education programs and family planning support. However, these efforts do not appear to be enough to change the structural behavior in this region yet. The Province of Santiago de Cuba is the most urbanized area of this region, and its rate was slightly below the national average.

Early pregnancy in Cuba is an issue that primarily affects women. In 1998, 73 per cent of children born to teenage mothers were fathered by men over the age of 20; 10 years later, that figure rose to 89 per cent (ONE 1998).

The low mortality rate for children under the age of five and the high child survival rate speak to the quality of family life. They reflect the protection that families receive in Cuban society, as well as the care that families provide for
their children. Cuban families prioritize children above all else, although this does not mean that they always treat children as subjects with rights nor allow them to participate in all relevant aspects of family life.

Cuban families do not appear to follow sexist standards in food distribution to children. In 2007 the rate of low birth weights was 5.2 per cent, which is low compared to other Latin American countries (MINSAP 2007). The 2007 UNICEF Report on the State of the World’s Children lists Cuba at five per cent, Chile at six per cent and Uruguay at eight per cent for the years between 1998 and 2005 (UNICEF 2006). The infant mortality rate for children under one year old is slightly higher in boys than in girls, though this tends to respond to biological factors rather than cultural ones.

No study on child health in Cuba has demonstrated the existence of discrimination in breastfeeding or the distribution of food to children, nor have they identified any widespread family attitudes that tend to privilege boys over girls in the provision of healthcare. The indicator on exclusive breastfeeding for children under six months old, at 26.4 per cent, is less than optimal. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) of 2006 evaluated breastfeeding practices in Cuban families with boys and girls under the age of two using six separate indicators. The results of the MICS show that slightly fewer girls than boys receive breast milk exclusively for the first six months, but the survey does not explain the reasons for this variance (MINSAP 2006).

Girls and boys enjoy equal privileges of full immunization coverage against various illnesses that have been eradicated in the country, including polio, measles, etc. The 2006 MICS shows similar standards of care and vaccination for girls and boys (MINSAP 2006).

Nonetheless, girls are under greater scrutiny in many Cuban families, and this watchfulness results in sexist standards for child development and education, justified by sayings such as “boys in the street and girls in the home.” This phenomenon is expressed most strongly when girls reach early adolescence, as families fear early pregnancy. When the likelihood of teen pregnancy is compared to the probability of death for young men in traffic accidents, it is clear that these fears are linked to sexist standards.

Family values on schooling for young children have progressed greatly in terms of gender equity. The education revolution has resulted in a growing rate of female participation in the academic system. This growing participation of women cannot be represented statistically; rather it has to do with the greater social acceptance of culture’s contribution to women’s emancipation, in the development of women’s capacities, and the improvement of women’s positions in society. While certain sexist criteria may occur in the selection of career paths for men and women, Cuban families recognize that schooling is a right for both boys and girls.

Studies show how families echo education based on sexist roles. The hierarchy of roles among adults in families is the first lesson that boys and girls learn, as most grow up in a family environment in which the men are still providers and the women are caregivers, or caregiver-providers (K. Suárez 2007; M. Romero 2006).

This contributes to a persistently outsized image of motherhood, synthesized in a popular saying in Cuba: “a father is just anybody, but there can be only one mother.” Different social programs that seek to value fatherhood in Cuban families run up against these family trends and beliefs.
The “role overload” experienced by working Cuban women, and the resulting conflict for these women between their public and family lives, is one of the most important gender issues that Cuban families face, with impacts on intimate relationships and childcare. On top of this, the situation in Cuba is shaped by the difficult economic situation generated by a stiff economic blockade that has lasted for nearly 50 years. The routines of family life, shopping for groceries and basic goods, and carrying out all of the necessary domestic activities, can be stressful and exhausting for women, leaving little time for rest. This can lead to health complications and high prevalence of illness among women. In an unjust paradox, the roles assigned to women force them to take care of everybody except themselves. This situation grows more severe when the woman does not have a partner or social safety net, though this is not the predominant scenario in Cuban families. While the majority of the heads of single-parent households are women*, these households only represent 11.8 per cent of homes, (M. Franco and A. Alfonso 2008) and even in these cases families extend beyond the borders of the household.

In some Cuban families the male partner may be absent from childcare activities, but often supplementary support is received from a network of female relatives or peers built around daily activities. In other families both partners care for children:

*I always had help from my husband, but he wasn’t the one who did the work. He supervised the children, but I did most of the work. You can’t imagine how much work I had to do and all that my children had to sacrifice as I cared for them and led a municipal business at the same time. (C. Linares 2008)

Many child care problems come from the overload of responsibilities that women must fulfill if they work or live alone, or if their partners do not share in the domestic workload. Coming home late can lead to children eating late and a lack of adult supervision. Child abuse often occurs not because parents believe in hitting as a form of education, rather because the stressful circumstances that arise in family life may lead to violent attitudes as women carry out their roles as caregivers.

Cuban women are at the center of their families, and their families play a central role in the decisions women make for their lives. A woman’s mobility in the workplace depends on her family situation, and the priority that she places on her family life.

The work I have been doing for several years now is a better fit for my situation. I am closer to home and I have a more stable schedule. When I was an administrator I didn’t have a set schedule; I was working all the time. My granddaughter could no longer go to the Children’s Circles, so I had to find a job close by, with a set schedule, to take care of her, support my daughter, and take care of my own health. That’s why I’m a cleaning assistant now, with great pride, because it’s the job that’s the best fit for me after being sick. I can keep helping my family and I am economically independent. (C. Linares 2008)

I was stationed in the Centennial Youth Column... I was working and going to school. I learned to graft orange trees; I would receive a lesson one night and go out into the field the next day. After I got married I didn’t work for a time, then I returned to my parents’ house and went back to work. (M. Silva 2008)

Often, however, the greatest responsibility for domestic caregiving falls upon women. In certain cases women feel guilty for the sacrifices that their children must make, including going to work with their mothers:

*I was stationed in the Centennial Youth Column... I was working and going to school. I learned to graft orange trees; I would receive a lesson one night and go out into the field the next day. After I got married I didn’t work for a time, then I returned to my parents’ house and went back to work. (M. Silva 2008)

* Heads of households with children.
Conflicts due to the growing role of women in society have led to the dissolution of many couples. Breakups and later remarriages create a new challenge for Cuban families: multiple parents. These arrangements often lead to the superimposition of education models that are conflictive from a gender standpoint.

The sexist model in Cuban families is propagated by the choices Cuban parents make in raising children. Parents are more flexible in deciding what toys girls may use, but more traditional when it comes to toys for boys. Male sexuality continues to be expressed in a different way than female sexuality. Teen pregnancy can be a direct result of these traditional education models that still prevail in Cuban families.

Sexist norms are also present in the distribution of household tasks, when parents decide to assign different responsibilities to their children based on their sex. Often girls are given a greater workload and involved more in household chores traditionally assigned to women, while boys are asked to take out the trash or make purchases in the market, activities that involve leaving the house.

Many members of Cuban families are aging. Older adults account for 17 per cent of the population, and 52.6 per cent of this older population sector are women*. Families reward women for the sacrifices they make to care for their families when they grow old; older women only account for 28 per cent of the population in retirement homes or shelters, while men (71%) pay the price for having abandoned their families. Of course there are many reasons that lead Cuban families to put older members in retirement homes, including women’s social responsibility and the difficult task of combining work and political responsibilities with caring for the elderly. Despite this, the difference in the proportion of men and women in retirement homes is significant.

Women’s identification with their families is clearer still when one considers that the average age of men in single-person households in the country (13.9% of households reporting in the 2002 census) is 51 years. This suggests that these homes are not simply the result of families abandoning older men (M. Franco and A. Alfonso 2006).

In the majority of Cuban households there is at least one older adult**, and most often this adult is a woman. Additionally, the fertility rate for Cuban women between 20 and 24 years of age has been steady for a long time***; these factors suggest that women over 50 are taking care of their elderly mothers, whether they have always lived together or because they move back in upon reaching old age.

Cuban women go from taking care of their children to taking care of their parents. In a domestic economy threatened by product shortages, taking care of older adults with diseases such as Alzheimer’s and dementia becomes a heroic task. While it is true that, compared to other societies, Cuban families receive health services and geriatric care has developed greatly over the last two decades, the burden of daily care for older adults falls mainly upon women and the quality of care depends on the household economic situation, purchasing power, and other socio-cultural factors. Conflicts often arise in families due to the time and dedication that caring for older family members requires, and the need for women to work in order to purchase everything necessary to provide quality care.

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* Data produced from absolute population values by age in Cuba’s 2007 annual demographic report. Table I.10, p.22.

** The study on households cited identifies this trend in all areas of the country, though it is more pronounced in Villa Clara and Havana, the provinces with the greatest aging population.

*** The highest fertility rates are observed in 20-24 year old women.
There is a growing academic and political understanding of gender-based violence as a human rights violation. In different places around the world, people are becoming aware of this social problem and realizing the importance of acting systematically to tackle it, as it is harmful to entire groups of human beings and especially to women.

Gender-based violence gathers force as people grow accustomed to its “normality.” The manifestations of gender-based violence in today’s society range from cruel and obvious violence to more subtle yet no less harmful expressions. Despite the social transformations implemented in Cuban society, our country is not exempt from the effects of gender-based violence, with implications for both men and women.

In the case of Cuba, many commonly recognized forms of violence against women are not practiced, including female genital mutilation, trafficking in women, female infanticide, differentiated access to food, state coercion or control over reproductive rights, etc. Some of these forms of violence simply are not characteristic of Cuban society, while others have been eliminated or tempered through the transformations in the social situation for women following the triumph of the 1959 Revolution.

The main forms in which gender-based violence is expressed in the country, according to available studies and statistics, include domestic violence against women and children, such as psychological and emotional violence and rape. Studies also reflect a significant increase in violence against women as a result of the severe economic crisis in the Cuba since the early 1990s.

Other forms of violence, such as forced prostitution or sexual harassment and intimidation at the workplace and in academic institutions appear to be less prevalent than domestic violence. Nonetheless, greater study and scientific analysis is warranted in order to effectively intervene in these situations, as there is little available published research on these forms of mistreatment in the country. One recently-published study shows the presence of various levels of sexual harassment in the everyday lives of the majority of women interviewed for the sample, especially workplace sexual harassment (K. López 2008). Another important conclusion of this inquiry is the impunity with which men invade women’s privacy and force women to act against their will. More disturbing still, many of the victims of these terrible actions were unaware that harassment is a form of gender-based violence, and many accept this violence as “natural” due to the patriarchal cultural beliefs that legitimize male power.

Prostitution is a social problem that was eliminated at the start of the revolutionary victory through a series of measures to reincorporate prostitutes into productive employment and society. In the years of economic crisis, the phenomenon of prostitution has grown. People engaged in this renewed phenomenon appear to share peculiar characteristics: they are young people with, on average, a high school education, many with student or workplace connections, they come from families that are not classified as living in severe poverty, and most engage in this practice of their own accord. Though pimping is a growing trend, these networks are still largely unorganized, and this type of procurement is heavily penalized in the country’s criminal code. Despite the curious characteristics, there are still no comprehensive studies and statistics on prostitution, only estimates and disparate research projects.

The reduction and or elimination of many of the forms of violence against women mentioned above is due to the changes generated in the social situation of women, the increase in gender
consciousness, the application of social policies by the Cuban State as a guarantor of women’s rights, and the incorporation of women as a decisive force for integration and social equity. These reasons suggest that even while many forms of gender-based violence continue to exist in Cuba, the magnitude of the problem in this country is proportionally less than what is experienced in other regions and countries.

In Cuba’s case, research on the mistreatment and victimization of women began to gain relevance in the 1990s. The few studies that were carried out before that time were isolated inquiries on specific elements. The fact that institutions began to analyze the issue of gender-based violence reflects the growing interest and concern of the scientific community to understand the causes and characteristics of violence against women in Cuba in order to contribute to the creation of strategies to deal with the problem.

The most significant findings of the studies carried out on the issue include (C. Navarrete, et al.; C. Proveyer 2003; C. Proveyer 2001):

- Crimes of battery, homicide, and assassination can be linked to gender-based issues.
- Female victimization is often produced in the context of romantic partnerships and within the home.
- There is a history of domestic violence in the childhood homes of many current aggressors; these aggressors were socialized within violent environments.
- There is no one special profile that describes all battered women or all aggressors.
- Violence occurs regardless of origin, class, race, profession, or level of schooling.
- Economic dependence is often a factor that leads to the perpetuation of mistreatment.
- Causes of aggression include jealousy, discrimination, alcoholism, economic problems, and frustration.
- Aggression can have physical, emotional, and intellectual effects.
- Victims rarely look for help because of fear, ignorance, shame, and persistence of myths and social stereotypes about violence that lead to self-blame.

One study examined all of the homicide deaths of women that were recorded by the Agency of Forensic Medicine from 1990 to 1995. According to this study, in the city of Havana, 45 per cent of these women were killed by their partners, and 52 per cent of these homicides occurred in the victim’s home (M. Ramos 1996).

Another study drew a comparison between groups of Spanish and Cuban women who had been victims of violence in their romantic partnerships. The results of this case study showed that Spanish women who participated in intervention processes – despite having less access to institutionalized aid than Cuban women – were able to find more effective ways to end the abusive situation. Even though greater legal and social protections are available in Cuba, this study clearly reveals that specific attention must be provided for Cuban victims of violence. The research also showed that Cuban women suffered less severe abuse and tolerated marital violence for less time than the Spaniards, which the study attributed to the social and economic positions of women in Cuba, and the accessibility of divorce (C. Proveyer 1999; 2000).

These early studies are predominantly descriptive, and have limited scope and reach in terms of their objectives and sampling. One important conclusion they draw is that the problem of gender-based violence in the country is significant, demonstrating the need for deeper analysis of the issue, since not all of this violence is manifested in the same way.

Despite some of the positive associations made by these studies, they reflect the need for a coordinated effort to analyze the core aspects of the issue and generate effective intervention plans. Studies must be more widespread in order to act on the results of this research on a broad scale. One success in the Cuban strategy on the issue of gender-based violence was the 1997 creation of the National Group for the Prevention and Treatment of Family Violence, specifically oriented to respond to violence against women. The emergence of this group, coordinated by the FMC, marked a new stage in addressing the issue as specific actions could be coordinated through the National Group.
in a multidisciplinary and multi-sector approach. The National Group has organized a work strategy that includes research, training, treatment, prevention, and dissemination of information; the group connects the efforts of different specialists, organizations and state institutions with common objectives around the issue.

The National Group for the Prevention and Treatment of Family Violence makes the prevention and treatment of gender-based violence more effective and collective. The group is also able to coordinate proposals with other actors in society when necessary. The National Group assigns certain objectives and tasks to each member organization, and even to the individuals they represent in the community: teachers, doctors, police officers, judges, attorneys, etc.

Doctoral and Masters theses published in recent years document the depth to which the topic of gender-based violence has been approached, and the institutionalization of certain tools and policies to respond to the problem. These publications offer valuable information regarding the occurrence of gender-based violence within couples. Multiple papers found that in cases in which the woman is the victim, as well as cases in which she becomes the aggressor, this behaviour is the consequence of systematic mistreatment from her partner (E. Pérez 2002; M. Oña 2002).

Some of the other important results of these studies are:

• 39.3 per cent of all victims of crime in the country are women; in 44.4 per cent of homicide cases and 70.5 per cent of assassination cases, there was a prior relationship between the victim and perpetrator.
• There are notable divisions along gender lines: one-fourth of the victims are women, while women account for only one-ninth of the aggressors.
• Of the women killed by men, 50 per cent were killed by their husbands and 60 per cent had some type of romantic relationship with the perpetrator. Women accounted for 94.4 per cent of the victims of rape, while 96 per cent of the perpetrators of rape were men (I. Hernández 2004; O. Guzmán 2004).

Various studies show that in Cuba proportionally fewer women die violent deaths at the hands of their romantic partners than in other countries. In Spain, for example, the ratio is five to one: for each man killed by his partner there are five women who suffer the same death. In Cuba, the proportion is three to one (X. Caño 1995).

These same studies show, however, that Cuba is very similar to other countries in terms of the spaces in which women are victimized, their relationships with their aggressors, and the past history of violence in cases where women were victims of killings, or killers themselves.

The ECLAC cites similar figures for violence experienced by women throughout Latin America and the Caribbean: women are usually attacked by their husbands or intimate partners, ex-partners, or other male family members or acquaintances (ECLAC 2007).

Although some of the figures presented below come from different studies that are not methodologically comparable, similar trends can be correctly identified in each of the countries that were studied. In Peru, the Demographic and Family Health Survey of the year 2000 revealed that 41 per cent of women had suffered physical abuse from their husbands, and 28 per cent were abused by other men (ISIS 2006). Similar percentages are reported in Nicaragua, according to data presented by the World Health Organization (Asling-Monemi, et al. 2003). Additionally, 40 per cent of women of reproductive age in Nicaragua were found to have suffered physical violence from their partner; in 70 per cent of these cases the violence was severe, and in 31 per cent of the cases women were beaten at least once during their pregnancy.

In Brazil, according to a 2001 study published by the Perseu Abramo Foundation, one in every five women reported having suffered some type of violence from a man. Upon further questioning, 43 per cent of the women interviewed confirmed that they had been victims of a form of violence considered to be gender-based violence; 33 per cent admitted having suffered physical violence involving firearms, aggression, or spousal rape (ECLAC 2007).
In Bolivia, the Ministry of Health and Sports, along with the Pan-American Health Organization, conducted two studies on the prevalence of family and domestic violence. The first study was conducted in 1997 and 1998 in three municipalities, Viacha, Mizque and Riberalta; the second study was conducted in 2003 in six municipalities and included a comparative analysis with the three previous localities and the municipalities of La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz. The conclusions indicated that from 1997 to 1998 the prevalence of domestic and family violence was 68.2 per cent; that is, nearly seven out of every 10 people were victims of violence in their own family. In 2003 the prevalence was 55.4 per cent (E. Arauco, R. Mamani and J. Rojas 2006).

Within Cuba, the comparative results from recent and previous studies between provinces reveal that domestic violence is present throughout the country, though it seems to occur with greater frequency in the Eastern region. This violence is most often psychological; to a lesser extent it is physical. The principal victims of violence are women and children, and the principal aggressors identified in the studies are male spouses (P. Valle and J.C. Carbonell 2001; T. Sánchez and N. Hernández 2003; I. Martiatu and J. Perojo 2005).

The institution that has carried out the most complete study on family and domestic violence in Cuba is the Centre for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS by its Spanish acronym). The Centre approached the issue from a macro-level social standpoint, characterizing and analyzing the different expressions of violence in Cuban society. One uniquely valuable element of this study is the series of recommendations it makes for social policies to prevent and treat this violence. The study was carried out among 564 adults, and it revealed that:

- 19.6 per cent of those interviewed admitted that beatings had occurred in their last romantic relationship.
- Nine per cent of those interviewed admitted to instances of psychological violence in their current romantic relationship: shouting or “evasion” (defined as one of the two abandoning the dialogue).
- 73 per cent of those interviewed reported that they had been struck by their mother, and 41 per cent by their father.
- Of the 81 people in the study with children over the age of 15, 19.3 per cent admitted to shouting at them, and 7.7 per cent admitted to hitting them (CIPS 2008; 2005; 2006).

These and other recent studies are probing the issue with sufficient depth to demonstrate how gender-based violence is manifested in our social surroundings. At the same time, they show that the different institutions and social actors in charge of treating and preventing this scourge are growing more aware of the issues involved (L. Acosta 2008; M. Ordaz 2008; C.M. Rodríguez 2006; I. Hernandez 2004).

These studies verify and reinforce the findings of previous research and they illuminate the problems of spousal violence, as well as violence against children, older adults, and vulnerable family groups stretching across the Cuban archipelago. These studies also demonstrate how Cuban society has been slow to recognize the more subtle expressions of violence. This latent violence can produce great harm for its victims.

Sexist education allows violence to be seen as “natural,” taken as part of culturally accepted male power. This explains the “invisibility” of some of the more subtle forms of violence, which leave their marks not on the body, but rather on the soul. Subtle violence is very effective because it goes unnoticed and is exercised through diverse symbolic constructions. This is the violence that Bourdieu called “symbolic violence.”

Studies on subtle manifestations of violence identify that there is little widespread knowledge among women about the issues of violence; patriarchal stereotypes perpetuate women’s subordination and feelings of inferiority. The same studies also show that there is no widespread knowledge and awareness about the different expressions and mechanisms of symbolic violence. There is a contradiction between what women identify in their responses and discourse, and the reality of continuing patriarchal stereotypes. An alarming finding is the tendency of young women to perpetuate models of female subordination.
All married women have had experiences of psychological abuse. Men want women for themselves; they think that we women are their property. My first husband was very violent. He came from an aristocratic but violent home. He didn’t grow up suffering physical abuse, but he did suffer psychological abuse. But I didn’t keep quiet! Like most Cuban women, I have a strong character (O. Mesa 2008).

The “normality” with which these manifestations of violence are viewed shows just how harmful it can be if women don’t identify this violence as something from which they deserve protection. This violence is often easily hidden, which makes the creation of appropriate strategies to remedy the situation very difficult, as nobody takes action against something that they do not consider to be harmful.

These results are still an early and imprecise look at the ways in which this social problem is manifested in different regions. A study on the prevalence of violence on a national level could offer more reliable results on the possible differences in magnitude and manifestation of violence in various regions, urban vs. rural areas, etc.

Despite all this, when we compare the results in our country to those across the region, we realize just how dramatic the situation is for women and men in other Latin American countries (ECLAC 2007).

Between 1990 and 2007, more than 900 Chilean women were killed, the majority of them victims of their partners or ex-partners. In the Bahamas, feminicide represented 42 per cent of all killings registered in the year 2000, 44 per cent in 2001 and 53 per cent in 2002. In Costa Rica, 61 per cent of all of the killings of women were femicides. In El Salvador, half of the cases of violence reported by the media in 2005 were homicides. In Puerto Rico, 31 women were killed as a result of domestic violence in the year 2004. In Uruguay, a woman dies every nine days as a result of domestic violence. In all cases, more women are killed by their partners than by strangers.

There are fewer studies that analyze the conduct of men who assault their partners. Early studies in Cuba show the need to incorporate this aspect into future research in order to achieve comprehensive results.

A group of studies has shown that male violence in Cuba is generally in line with international trends (C. Proveyer 2001; E. Espina 1999; S. García 1998; 2000):

• The study sample of men was demographically representative of men in Cuban society, and abusers used common strategies to exercise violence against women.
• The majority of the men were socialized in families in which there was violence, and they were either abused or witnessed violence carried out against their mothers.
• All of the men included in the studies were socialized (in their families and schools, as well as among their peers) according to sexist patterns of roles, values and demands upon them.
• The conceptions of masculinity described by the men in the study included traditional male stereotypes and attributes.
• Reference studies show that these men’s process of building male identity is marked by incorporation of cultural models that extol violence as an effective means to resolve conflict.
• Men’s violent behaviour against their partners is not associated to any special profile or pathology that makes them more prone to violence.
• Men do not identify their conduct as violent, though they are aware that their actions are not the most appropriate ones to resolve domestic conflicts.
• Family members and friends of women who are victims of domestic violence do not identify the abuse against them as violence.
• The men interviewed only maintain systematic aggressive conduct against their spouse or partner, and not in the rest of their social relationships.
• The causes of male mistreatment of women in couples in Cuba are most often related to the asymmetric relationships of male domination in Cuban society.

These studies demonstrate the impact of gender socialization for men and women, which reinforce and transmit male behavioural patterns and
stereotypical values of masculinity, contributing to the assimilation and reproduction of violence.

Aggressive male conduct is a direct result of socialization through symbolic and/or direct violence. Some studies on child abuse in Cuba (I. Artilles 1996; 1998; Y. Martínez 2004; E. Pérez, et al. 1996; 1997; E. Pérez 2004; Rondón 2004; I. Rondón and Santiago 2004; A. Brito 2004; M.A. Miranda 2004) reveal that:

- The majority of victims are girls, with an average age of around 10 years.
- In most cases of abuse perpetrated by family members or friends, the violence occurred in places where victims carried out their daily activities, frequently in their own homes.
- Intercourse occurs in less than 20 per cent of cases; abuse takes the form of touching and other sexual or erotic conduct. The abuse was not for use in child pornography, except in rare cases in which the perpetrator was a stranger. In most cases the aggressor carried out the abuse alone and directly upon the victim through flirting, seduction, convincing, and “affectionate” advances; this is a totally different profile from that of prostitution, given the lack of mediation or tolerance of third parties, material payment, etc.
- Perpetrators were overwhelmingly male and showed no indicators of sexual disorders. On the contrary, male perpetrators were part of the family environment of child victims, with direct or occasional power over them. In some cases the male perpetrators were the spouse or partner of the mother, and in other cases they were linked by family or friendship to the male power figure.
- There is a statistical correlation between child sexual abuse and the presence of violence or dysfunction in the household of the victim.
- The victims are predominantly female and the perpetrators are predominantly male.
- Father figures were often absent from these family groups (76.8% of child victims came from households separated by divorce.)

These studies help illustrate the manifestations of gender-based violence in Cuban society. While they still do not provide information on the full scope of the problem, they do offer useful information regarding different aspects of its manifestations in Cuba.

These results offer important information that helps to create diagnostics that aid institutions and professionals in charge of treating and preventing gender-based violence.

The Cuban State is a signatory to the CEDAW, and it fulfills its commitments through policies and social programs to guarantee full and equal rights for women. One of the basic tools for the protection of women is the passage of laws to create a social policy that contributes to effective intervention, treatment and prevention of domestic and family violence and to making visible the most hidden social problem in the world, one that lies in the shadows of family intimacy and “sacred private space.” Therein lies the importance of these victories, which have forced states to recognize gender-based violence as a violation of human and women’s rights and as a threat to peace and human development.

The social system has guaranteed the necessary means to enforce the principles set out in laws protecting the rights of women. Despite this, specific legislation (especially the criminal code) contains holes and extremes with respect to gender-based violence. Even though Cuban law lays out a series of measures to protect and promote women’s full incorporation in society under equitable conditions, legislation regarding domestic and family violence is still insufficient.

Authors such as Navarrete, Oña, Fabelo and Prieto Morales agree that there are not sufficient legal mechanisms to recognize and effectively treat “Battered Women’s Syndrome,” to provide protection for these women, and to refuse support for violent men. This legal gap facilitates the ongoing perpetration of these crimes.

The number of complaints of domestic and family violence filed still reflects underreporting on an international level; only approximately 10 per cent of cases are reported. As a result, educational and informational mechanisms must also be strengthened to raise greater awareness about the illegitimacy of violence and its tendency to
become a “hidden crime” when entrenched within daily family life.

The FMC and the National Group for the Prevention and Treatment of Family Violence have been working to modify the Criminal Code, and have promoted a series of policy recommendations that are being studied by relevant institutions (Y. González 2006). These modifications and recommendations include:

- Creating a legal tool, whether a law or legal decree, that brings an educational and preventative focus to the definition and legal treatment of domestic violence.
- Studying the Criminal Code in order to suggest modifications and/or additions of the definitions and penalties for domestic violence. These proposals would be part of the framework for a new Criminal Code that is currently being considered by the Ministry of Justice.
- Creating an inter-institutional commission to monitor the effectiveness of existing legislation on the issue.
- Training specialized personnel to respond to all instances of domestic violence.
- Offering support in follow-up and insisting on the implementation of Point 63 of the National Action Plan for Follow-up to the Beijing Conference, passed by the Council of State on April 7, 1997, which pushes for “coexistence and the possibility of establishing differentiated procedures for the legal resolution of family cases, considering the creation of family courts or tribunals.”

Underscoring the need to implement specialized municipal tribunals for family cases, special family procedure training workshops were organized in 2003, 2004, and 2006 by the Federation of Cuban Women and the National Union of Jurists in Cuba.

Crimes of gender-based violence must be fully incorporated into the law, and the law must be respected. Above all, compliance with the law must not be biased by sexist concepts still held by many authorities in the justice system, wherein violence is considered to be “natural” in the collective mindset. These sexist concepts have led to the fact that laws in many countries in our region and elsewhere have not been fully applied and respected.


Proof that the law itself is not enough, however, can be found in a Panamanian case in 2005, when the Public Defender’s Office carried out a monitoring study of the application of Law 38 on Domestic Violence in the District Attorney’s offices of six of the country’s nine provinces. This study found: many public authorities were unaware of the law or did not have full knowledge of its content; conflicts between the public prosecutors and administrative authorities; mediation between aggressors and victims, which is not considered in the legislation; withdrawal of claims; claims submitted before the incorrect authorities; non-application of precautionary measures; and a lack of service protocols (ECLAC 2007).
In order to prevent a similar situation in Cuba, the recommendation of the National Group for Treatment and Prevention of Family Violence was for the Criminal Code to be modified to include specific crimes of gender-based violence. Prevention and education mechanisms must also be expanded and improved, as they are key tools for the reduction of this social problem.

Laws are necessary within a range of institutional activities against gender-based violence. However, legislative measures on their own will not be enough to confront and prevent violent conduct. Work must continue and strategies must improve to deconstruct the sexist foundation of patriarchal culture that sustains this blight of violence. These efforts must be collective, and involve all of the structures currently active in Cuban society.

Currently, due to economic limitations, there are no special women’s centres or shelters in Cuba to serve victims of violence. Attention is provided mainly through Guidance Centres for Women and Families, which are municipal-level institutions under the FMC, as well as through therapy for sexual abuse, and orientation services provided by the Ministry of Public Health. Legal aid is provided by citizen’s rights services at the municipal District Attorney’s offices. The National Group has worked to train and raise awareness among specialists and social actors (police, justice system personnel, directing staff at public ministries, etc.) who are responsible for treating and preventing violence against women and other vulnerable members of families.

Actions have focused on coordinating inter-institutional and inter-sector efforts to comprehensively treat domestic and family violence. There is still much to be done, but progress can be observed in the awareness and actions of Cuban institutions and social actors.

During the last 15 years, progress has been made in prevention, detection, investigation, treatment, and reporting of domestic violence. However, it is not enough to be satisfied with this progress alone; we are only discovering the tip of the iceberg.

Silence and ignorance allow violence to continue to occur, legitimizing it as “natural.” This cultural acceptance of violence explains the impunity with which some of the most severe forms of violence, such as murder, are committed.

Efforts carried out by Cuban non-governmental organizations and institutions have produced significant results in disseminating information and raising awareness, providing training workshops, and carrying out other initiatives for the prevention and treatment of this social problem. These Cuban organizations include the most important universities of the country, integral neighbourhood transformation workshops in Havana, the Medical Forensics Agency, the Oscar Arnulfo Romero Centre for Reflection and Dialogue, the Martin Luther King Memorial Centre, the Felix Varela Centre, the SEMLAC web page, and others. These actions are supported by several international cooperation institutions such as Oxfam, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (COSUDE in its Spanish acronym) and Norwegian Popular Aid (APN in its Spanish acronym).

It will not be possible to eliminate violence against women if we do not deconstruct the daily appearance of patriarchal values in gender relationships -- sexist values become part of the culture and collective mindset that reproduces gender-based violence. Old myths must be deconstructed in order to build a new culture, a culture of equity.
The revolutionary project developed over the last 50 years in Cuba has been crucial in supporting women to reach the important spaces they hold in the Latin American and Caribbean context today. A new policy focus of development based on universalism shaped the changes to women’s social situation. This process has not been free of contradictions found in an underdeveloped country with an age-old tradition of patriarchal culture.

Currently, two cultural models clash in Cuba: a machista or male chauvinist model, which discriminates against women and still persists in society today; and a new model that values women’s right to equal opportunity. Women live with what we call a hybrid identity. For this reason we have decided not to present elaborate conclusions, deciding that it is more eloquent to speak in the language of victories and challenges.

Victories
• The formation of women as a new political actor, best represented by their organization (the FMC) with nearly 50 years of experience working for women’s rights. The FMC acts as an interlocutor with the government to draft national policy, and it shows significant results. These results have allowed Cuba to fulfill the benchmarks of Millennium Development Goal Three, related to gender equity, and to meet a large part of the commitments taken on in the National Action Plan from the Beijing Conference.
• A radical change in the social, economic, cultural, and political situation of Cuban women, which is evident in all aspects of progress made towards gender equity, and which reveals that progress has been made along the path toward women’s empowerment.
• The reduction and/or elimination of many forms of violence against women in Cuba, due in great part to the changes that have been made to women’s overall situation, the increase in awareness of gender issues, and the social policies applied by the Cuban State, which acts to guarantee both women’s rights and the involvement of women as crucial actors in building integration and equality in society.

• Progress in legislation and legal proceedings, which create a measure of protection for women’s rights in all areas of life. Although inconsistency still exists in the country between written law and practice, this does not diminish the impact of applying legislation.

Cuban women on the path to gender equality

Challenges
The starting point of any challenge taken on by Cuban society in this area is to maintain what gains have already been made. Some of the challenges that lay ahead are:
• To implement a cross-cutting gender-based approach in designing and executing social policy, economic policy, and all institutional decisions.
• To strengthen a gender-based perspective in education, and to perfect non-sexist socialization mechanisms in schools and other institutions with a socializing role (the family, workplaces, mass media, etc).
• For academia and institutions with a mandate to address gender-based violence to increase treatment of gender-based violence as a social and human rights issue, as well as to increase social services and systematic prevention strategies.
• To perfect programs and actions that help resolve the contradiction between the high demands of female leadership and participation in society and the reproduction of patterns that subordinate women in gender relations, above all in the private sphere.
• To encourage institutional actions and policies that contribute to solving problems faced in the home economy, which are affecting the quality of life of Cuban families and preventing greater female empowerment.

• To promote new measures to eliminate the “glass ceiling” that prevents women from reaching decision-making positions.
• For political and social institutions that act as protagonists in the struggle to eliminate discrimination against women (in particular the FMC) to adapt to new needs and complexities in Cuban society, foster greater buy-in among women and men, and continue pushing forward female participation.

Overcoming these challenges means working for the cultural changes needed to be able to continue on the path toward gender equity.
**Economically Active Population (EAP):** All persons who meet requirements to be included in the group of employed or unemployed workers; it refers to employed and unemployed workers within a fixed time period.

**Economically Inactive Population (also Not Economically Active Population or NEAP):** Population over the age of 12 who are inactive due to their social role or individual conditions, or persons with physical or mental limitations that do not allow them to work. This category includes students, retirees, disabled persons, and stay-at-home mothers.

**Employed:** Persons age 17 or older, or persons age 15 or 16 who have been specially authorized by corresponding authorities to work, who maintain formal employment with a salary paid in cash or in kind, or who possess independent employment.

**Employed in the economy:** The total number of people employed in different economic activities, whether or not they are of working age.

**Epidemiological profile:** The incidence of disease and its distribution across large populations. Different groups of people in different territories often produce different profiles, depending on their living conditions.

**Informal Sector:** The total number of non-professional own-account workers, home workers and paid domestic workers, unpaid family workers, and workers in companies with less than five employees.

**Morbidity:** The proportion of persons who get sick in a determined place and period of time.

**Occupational category:** A group of jobs with similar characteristics.

**Unemployment rate:** The rate calculated by dividing the total number of unemployed persons by the economically active population (employed + unemployed), multiplied by 100.


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