

**Gender Issues in Cuba:  
Building Bridges—Remaining Gaps  
By Ana Karim**

## **Introduction**

Last year in a gender studies course at American University I analyzed a national reconciliation proposal by Cuban dissident, Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, using a gender analysis lens. I wanted to evaluate how this man and his movement, if you could call it that, incorporated women into their dreams for a different future for Cuba. The literature review for this project examined women's advances in Cuban society, as well as how the concept of gender was being addressed in Cuba's academic circles. I was pleasantly surprised when I stumbled upon an article written by a professor at the University of Havana, Marta Núñez Sarmiento, which compiled a comprehensive list of academics, primarily in the Havana area, that were using gender as a lens through which to do their research—whether it be in the field of psychology, public health, literature or the social sciences. My interest being piqued by how many academics were using gender as an analytical tool, I sought to explore and read these writings. However, the majority of these works are not accessible here in the United States, either because they have not been published or have only been published in Cuba, or because the political isolation between the two countries makes it difficult to exchange academic works.

In the spring of 2008, I had the opportunity to travel to and live in Cuba for several months. During this period, I chose to explore more fully the state of gender studies in Cuba, reading the works of and interviewing various academics. What I soon discovered is that there is a plethora of academic work being done on gender in Cuba, but that significant gaps still exist within academia and between academia and grassroots level gender relations and ideology (not unique only to Cuba). Therefore, for this essay I chose to focus on four individuals who through their academic and community-level

work are trying to fill in some of these gaps--they include Marta Núñez Sarmiento, Norma Vasallo Baruetta, Julio César González Pagés, and Mariela Castro Espín. I describe how I spent time with them, their musings on the state of gender issues in the country as expressed verbally or through their academic work, or as in the case of Mariela Castro, whom I did not meet, the visible and tangible work they are doing in society to raise awareness on gender issues. There is no doubt that these individuals are among many others who are using a gender approach in their work, but a full analysis of all their works would make for a broader thesis or even the basis for a dissertation. Here, I only focus on these four who energized and informed me about the state of gender studies and issues in Cuba.

### **Marta Núñez Sarmiento**

On a pleasantly mild January afternoon, I sat in the lovely courtyard at Marta Núñez Sarmiento's home in the Playa municipality of the city of Havana. Núñez Sarmiento is a researcher and professor for the Center of International Migration Studies at the University of Havana. She has a PhD in economics (Moscow, 1983) and an M.A. in Sociology (Chile, 1971). Her focus on gender started when she began to study and research women and labor in Cuba after the Revolution, examining women in traditional and non-traditional roles. As her career developed, she began examining and writing about images of women in mass media and now her work focuses more closely on gender and politics. Núñez Sarmiento teaches at the University, but is also contracted to work with study abroad programs as well as speak with delegations of foreigners who want to understand better the status of women and gender studies in Cuba.

Over a cup of Cuban coffee, I shared with Núñez Sarmiento how I had discovered her article and was interested in learning more about gender ideology in Cuba and how gender studies was advancing in the academic arena. She was kind enough to share some of her most recent work. One was the unpublished revision of her article, “Gender Studies in Cuba: Methodological Approaches, 1974-2001” and the second was a working paper that she presented at the LASA XXVII Congress in Montreal in September 2007—“A Gender Approach of an Impossible Transition”. In the following section, I will summarize Núñez Sarmiento’s conclusions from these works as well as personal interviews and share how she contributes to the building of bridges in the area of gender studies in Cuba and on the world stage.

When researching and documenting the work of academics in Havana who are applying a gendered lens to their own work, Núñez Sarmiento’s does not focus or analyze the content of their work, nor propose how gender theory should be applied to research, but rather seeks to synthesize their motivations for using gender as an analytical tool in their research and to keep a present running list of their past and present works. She highlights their methodological approaches and gender perspectives. She concludes from her interviews with 26 scholars<sup>1</sup> that many use a gender approach intuitively and are drawn to the task of bringing to light matters that concern women and those who are marginalized, hidden, or discriminated against in Cuban society. In turn, they seek to move toward greater social justice in their society and to eliminate specifically the discrimination against women and homosexuals. Their work incorporates a gender

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<sup>1</sup> Her sample included 22 women, 4 men, ranging in age from their 20s to 65 years of age. The racial composition was 21 white and 5 black. Occupationally, 6 were sociologist, 5 historians, 4 in arts and letters, 2 lawyers, 3 psychologist, 3 demographers, 1 biologists, 1 engineer, and 1 psychiatrist. All are from the Havana area.

perspective that is not just about examining the dichotomous separation of men and women, but also about understanding the broader understanding of gender as a political term as well as the historical, political, and economic factors that have constructed and/or perpetuated gender stereotypes and roles. Consistent with the feminist perspective, these academics seek to understand their own subjectivities as well as of those studied, to reveal and challenge power structures in the spirit of revolutionary practice, to maintain an openness to evolving, dynamic conceptions of theory, and to promote consistency in ethical practices that promote the goals of justice and equality. Their work privileges qualitative research methodology, not only because it is coherent with feminist ideology, but also practically speaking, it is cheaper to do in Cuba. Núñez Sarmiento's most recent bibliographical compilation of their works can be found at the end of this essay.

The second article Núñez Sarmiento shared provided an interesting point of connection for us. While I had been working on a gender analysis of Payá Sardiñas's proposal for a future Cuba, she was applying the gender perspective of analysis to the two U.S. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba reports (2004 and 2006). We both concluded that each of these proposals suffered equally from short-sighted, less than just, analyses of women in Cuban society. For Núñez Sarmiento another equally important interest in writing the article was to "socialize the possibilities of the gender approach as a scientific instrument to find new angles of knowledge in mainly political topics, and to emphasize its value beyond the gender relations analysis" (Sarmiento 2007, 1). In other words, she hoped to promote and demonstrate how using gender as an analytical tool, is a valuable and revolutionary method by which to evaluate and criticize if need be, political processes and proposals.

She concludes in this paper that the authors of the Commission reports erred in omitting the ongoing development of just gender relations in Cuba. According to her, the reports have no analysis of how men and women experience their lives in Cuba and exclude any exploration of women other than those associated with dissident activity. She also criticizes the reports' lack of historical understanding of the evolution of the socialist projects of the Cuban Revolution and how women specifically and society in general have contributed to and/or benefited from them. Thirdly, Núñez Sarmiento presents the reports as examples of patriarchal and paternalistic stances by the Bush Administration to exert power and domination in the international arena. As gender theory seeks to disentangle patriarchal dominant relations, Núñez Sarmiento posits that these reports fail miserably to convey an attitude of cooperation, understanding and, equal footing on the international level. Finally, Núñez Sarmiento concludes that the reports manipulate the meanings and understandings of every day life in Cuba of which only the Cuban people, men and women, can describe, analyze, and use to determine their own future (Sarmiento 2007).

Núñez Sarmiento's work is bridging the gap that exists between an isolated Cuba and the rest of the world. In an attempt to highlight and share with the world the number of Cuban academics who are using a gender lens to do their research, she makes the small step of introducing the world to Cuba's efforts. Although the academic world in Cuba was slow to embrace feminist ideology, mostly because of a feared linkage to Western, capitalistic imperialism, since the 1980s the academic world has gradually opened up more and more to the gender perspective in academic work. Núñez Sarmiento's work seeks to expose this work and the evolution of this process to the wider international

arena. Additionally, her work as demonstrated by the latter article tries to close the gap of misunderstandings and misinformation that the United States government has about Cuba. There is a long history of propaganda from both sides of the Florida Straits on a variety of issues—Núñez Sarmiento only addresses one, but also demonstrates how a gender approach can be applied to political and international issues.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest barriers for many academics in Cuba is actually being able to publish works inside Cuba, much less outside in international academic journals. This fact alone aids to perpetuate the gap between any supposed advances made in scholarly work on gender with grassroots level attitudes and behaviors. One of the shortcomings that Núñez Sarmiento acknowledges about her own research is that her sample is small and that it predominantly looks at the work of Havana-based academics. Although there is recognition of work done at other centers of higher education like in Santiago de Cuba or Santa Clara, the simple fact of limited transportation and the literal and figurative distance between those outside centers and the capital have contributed to the reality that these works and their authors remain relatively obscure.

### **Norma Vasallo Barrueta**

In a small, two-room office locate in the psychology *facultad*, I wait to meet Norma Vasallo Barrueta, Director of Women's Studies at the University of Havana. She is meeting with a representative from Oxfam, discussing the final details of a book she and various colleagues and former graduates of the Women's Studies Master's program are about to release (Oxfam is helping to fund the publication of the book). As their meeting ends, I observe the excitement they both share about the release of this book. Vasallo Barrueta then invites me to the book presentation event and we sit down to talk.

I first encountered Vasallo Barrueta's name in a *Latin American Thought* class at American University. Because of my interest in women's issues in Cuba, my professor suggested I take a look at Vasallo Barrueta's work. The problem was that I could only access two of her works and they left me uninspired and with several questions. To meet her in Cuba and discuss her work as well as that of the Center was exciting and promising. She was trained as a psychologist and lectures internationally about Cuba's social and economic restructuring. She has examined how global economic factors have impacted women, a woman's ability to reach decision-making positions, and how professional women's roles have changed in Cuba.

One of Vasallo Barrueta's ongoing research projects, "Social Subjectivity of Women: A Study of Cuban Women in Different Roles and of Different Generations", seeks to explore how women's perspectives on their roles in society have changed or not since the Revolution. Whereas many writings about 'women in Cuba' tend to lump all women into one category, Vasallo Barrueta tries to offer an analysis on the individual woman's experience and subjectivity. Though she, like many others have done and still do, lists the advancements made for and by women in the Cuban society since the Revolution, namely access to health care and education and participation in the workforce, she then attempts to parse and explore the individual interpretation of those experiences.

In the 1997 publication of this study, three generations of women were interviewed and asked to describe their meaning of "being a woman" (88). The three groups studied were "grandmothers", or those born in the 1930s, "mothers", or those born in the 1950s, and "daughters," or those born in the 1970s. Vasallo Barrueta was interested

in understanding how the new social project of the revolution affected the feminine subjectivity of women across these three generations. She concluded that the demands placed on women by the socialist project exist alongside the traditional demands, especially in regards to domestic work and position, and create “an ambivalence in feminine subjectivity” (91). Although there were some differences in subjectivity across the generations in regards to education, professional aspirations, and self-determination, traditional expectations of motherhood and of being a housewife were still present. She states about the youngest generation of women studied,

We are in the presence of a generation that is beginning to be the transmitter of subjective changes derived from the objective transformations that have benefited women, but it is a generation that still cannot liberate itself entirely from what constitutes one of the greatest perceived barriers against women’s self-realization as human beings—their leading role in domestic life (91).

For Vasallo Barrueta, the depth of the changes effected in the legal and political reality of Cuba over the past 40 years have not had a direct correlation or linear effect on subjective changes in subjectivity. In her estimation this lag is attributed to the cultural transmission of traditional roles and expectations of women in the family setting. She believes that “great social transformations require more than three generations for the evaluation of their effect on individual and social subjectivity and on the molding of personal trajectories” (91).

Another area of study that Vasallo Barrueta engages in relates to women’s status and opinions with regards to the economic crisis in Cuba during the 1990s—commonly referred to as the *Periodo Especial*. In a preliminary study, she compared women from the traditional sector (ST) of the economy with women from the emerging sector (SE)

who were self-employed (a measure allowed during the crisis period to boost the economy). She sought to understand their perceived level of satisfaction with their jobs and their perceptions of the crisis and the economic transformations in Cuba. She found few differences with regards to their perceptions of the utility of their work, but found differences in their perception of interest and intensity of their work (97). Both groups of women felt that the quality of the home environment was negatively affected by the crisis, but the women of ST criticized the workplace more. Both groups favorably rated the economic transformation measures, but felt that an inequality of benefits had evolved as a result of some of the measures, like acceptance of the dollar and the creation of stores where money can be freely exchanged (98).

In general, even though the crisis affected women negatively, the women studied recognized that they “are now more creative, organized, and strong” (98). Vasallo Barrueta concludes her description of the study and her essay by stating, “Women, stronger after having endured much hardship without renouncing their rightful place in society, have in the main overcome the setbacks posed by the special period. In sum, Cuban women today can look confidently to their future” (99).

Vasallo Barrueta’s research is an important contribution to the discussion of women in Cuba. Even though the reiteration of the advancements of women in health care, education and work still needs to be heard internationally, it is her attempt to access the opinions of Cuban women that is more refreshing and takes a small step past the rhetoric and propaganda that has come out from Cuba for many years.

Vasallo Barrueta’s work as the director of the Women’s Study Center at the University of Havana is also an important means by which she helps to bridge the gap in

the academic world with regards to gender. The Center offers a three-year master's degree program in gender studies and seeks to produce new generations of professors, community leaders, and other professionals trained in feminist thought and equipped with the theoretical and analytical tools to conduct further research and/or to shape and transform the work they do post-graduation. Vasallo Barrueta states that like many other women's studies programs, even in more developed nations like the United States, the program at the University of Havana is small and competes for recognition and funding at the University. Enrollment continues to grow though and small steps are being made to raise consciousness to gender issues in all aspects of academic research.

As mentioned in the introduction to Vasallo Barrueta, I was fortunate enough to be in Cuba when the Center released its most recent collection of works done by professors and former graduates of the program in a book entitled *Mirar de otra manera*. The book contains articles and studies examining the issue of gender on various levels. The first section makes a historical and theoretical case for using gender as an analytical tool then proceeds to explore gender in literature, gender and sexual harassment, gender identity, sexism as perpetuated in schools and their curricula, gender as portrayed in communications mediums, and historical analyses of women in Cuban history. The authors of these articles collaborate with the Center, teaching courses or workshops, as well as teach in other departments like sociology, history, and psychology. Several also serve posts in national organizations such as the Federation of Cuban Women and the Family Department of the Juan Marinello Center for Investigation and Development of Cuban Culture. Though these women still represent the elite academic level, their research and more importantly, the teaching they do through various mediums serves to

gradually extend the concepts of gender analysis and awareness to future generations of students who then will go into the community to serve.

Though Vasallo Barrueta's work as well as those who collaborate with the Center is laudable, several gaps still remain. The curriculum that the Center carries out at the University primarily concentrates on the study of women and has yet to branch out and explore the many connotations and ramifications of gender. This is not for a lack of awareness by Vasallo Barrueta, but rather in general the process is very slow, especially at the institutional level of the University, to expand the discussion to homosexuality and other concepts of gender. Also, and this is not unique to Cuba, the disconnect between academia and grassroots is still large. The publication of the book mentioned above is a wonderful accomplishment, but the reality is that it will not be accessible to many Cubans outside the academic circles. What Vasallo Barrueta and others who teach and write hope is that those they teach will then continue the ripple of influence in their communities, in their churches, and in their professional contacts.

### **Julio César González Pagés**

His long, curly ponytail and raspy, gravely voice could be seen and heard at any event or conference held in Cuba that had anything to do with gender. Julio César González Pages, assistant professor of philosophy and history at the University of Havana, is an energetic individual whose academic and practical work attempts to span the time of history and to promote changes in gender ideology and awareness. González Pagés received his doctorate in History at the University of Havana and serves as the president for the Gender and Peace Commission of the NGO Cuban Movement for Peace. In 1999, González Pagés obtained the Rutgers' Research Scholarship for women's

studies and spent two years researching, teaching, and studying at City University of New York. Part of his doctoral work was to compile a comprehensive history of women's political and feminist movements in Cuba until the Revolution of 1959. This doctoral work became the basis for his first book, *En busca de un espacio: Historia de Mujeres en Cuba*.

González Pagés has launched from this initial work into the task of broadening the understanding of the concept of gender in Cuban society. Although continuing his teaching and research on feminist movements in Cuba, his work has branched out into two other significant areas. The first is in exploring, studying and teaching on issues related to masculinity. Recognizing the long-standing *machista* culture in Cuba, with its tendencies toward domination, sexual potency, and lack of emotional expression (of “soft” emotions like fear, sadness, etc.), González Pagés encourages the analysis, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the concept of man so as to fully acknowledge the stereotypes, expectations, and limitations of presently existing concepts. Just as the concept of woman and her role in society has to be examined and deconstructed, the obsession with a virile, strong, aloof, non-parental, non-crying man needs to be examined and challenged. He does not see these objectives as independent from one another, nor a competition between feminism and masculinity, but rather as complimentary, intertwined tasks that the Cuban academia has not yet fully embraced or explored (González-Pagés 2008).

As with the hegemonic perception of woman, González Pagés challenges the hegemonic perception of man that is primarily white, urban, and heterosexual. Through conscious-raising workshops throughout Havana, he pushes the envelope of discussion to

consider different kind of men, different kinds of attitudes, and different behaviors that are possible. Linked to this then is his second area of focus, which is to address the issue of sexual diversity in Cuba—specifically homosexuality and transvestitism. He sees the theme of homosexuality as a “Pandora’s box that has always been very jealously covered up in the history of Cuba, as if the issue did not exist” (González-Pagés 2004, 9). True to his historian nature then, he sets out to uncover the history of stigmatization of homosexuality, as well as the contradictions between rhetoric and action in the sociopolitical culture of Cuba. He challenges the academic and professional communities to go past dichotomous discussions about gender and explore the complex connotations and sociopolitical ramifications of gender. His mission is well summarized in the following quote,

*Contribuir a transformar los modelos de masculinidades dicotómicas, encerradas en soluciones sin salida, podría ser uno de los mas loables aportes de los estudios sobre masculinidades* (González-Pagés 2004, 10).

In both of these areas, González Pagés is part of bridging the gap between the academic setting and the grassroots level, the historical past and present, and the wide spaces between the concepts of gender in two specific ways. First, as a professor, he teaches courses on masculinity and serves as the primary advisor for graduate students who focus on issues of masculinity and sexuality, primarily men. In November 2007, he helped coordinate and facilitate the University Forum on Masculinity and the Culture of Peace. At this forum, students and professors from various departments of the university and from different agencies presented their studies and articles related to gender and more specifically masculinity. Some of the topics presented by students who have worked with González Pagés included: Masculinity and emigration of Cuban baseball

players in the United States, Masculinity in black men in Cuba, pornography and sexual education, male prostitution in Cuba, and female baseball players. As tutor and advisor to a new generation of students, Pagés raises awareness and sensitivity as well as fosters critical thinking and analysis with regards to the nuances of gender. He incorporates and urges his students as well as his colleagues to use the skills and critical eye of the feminist movement to aid in the expansion and liberty from the constraints of stereotypical and negative aspects of masculinity.

Outside of the academic setting, González Pagés is also making inroads into the Cuban society. With his involvement with the Gender and Peace Commission, he has promoted and organized workshops in the Havana community that educate, raise consciousness, and challenge a culture of violence and intolerance. Workshop titles and themes (and their respective audiences) have included the following: “Masculinity and Violence” (for social workers in the Plaza de la Revolución municipality), “Masculinity and Culture” (for students at the Amadeo Roldán Music School of Old Havana), “Masculinity, Variations for a Change” (for managers of the Labor Center of Cuba) and “Masculinity and a Culture of Peace” (for prisoners at the Valle Grande prison). González Pagés also shares that workshops and manuals have been produced for prostitutes and police. Outside of Cuba, he extends his contribution and collaborates with other social scientists from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Spain to form the *Red Iberoamericana de Masculinidades*<sup>2</sup>, a virtual resource site that highlights recent articles, conferences, videos, blogs, and discussion forums on the topic of masculinity.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.redmasculinidades.com/index.php>

González Pagés is committed in his research, in his advising of students and in his community involvement to meet people where they are, to examine and understand first what is important to them, where their ideology stems from, and then to go forward in partnership to reconstruct concepts related to gender. As in the case of Vasallo Barrueta and Nunez Sarmiento, Gonzalez Pages is part of the elite academic circle, but is committed to extending beyond the ivory tower. As with the others, limitations in funding as well as the general public's limited access to their publications and/or websites (as is the case for González Pagés) means that the gaps they are trying to close will be slow-going.

### **Mariela Castor Espín**

I never actually met or interviewed Mariela Castro Espín. I only saw her on the television and learned of her work through her writings and events she sponsors through CENESEX (the National Center for Sexual Education). As is well known, Mariela Castro Espín is the daughter of now president, Raul Castro, and former director of the Federation of Cuban Women, Vilma Espín. Castro is a trained clinical psychologist and has served as the Director of CENESEX since 1990. The government-funded organization<sup>3</sup>, founded in 1989 provides a space for a multitude of professionals and offers a master's degree, research, community work, social communication, counseling and sexual therapy (Reed 2006, 8). Mariela Castro states more broadly that the CENESEX's mission is to contribute to "the development of a culture of sexuality that is full, pleasurable and responsible, as well as to promote the full exercise of sexual rights" (quoted in Reed 2006, 8). Its main objectives are to lead the way in sound theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.cenesex.sld.cu/> for full description its full history, mission, and specific programs/resources provided through the agency.

research, providing the foundation for sexual education in Cuba. On their website, they claim that their objective is to “defend the idea that sexual education with an integrated focus contributes to the process of growing and learning, creates guidelines that promote relationships between parents, children, teachers, students and helps rise above contradictions in order to make decisions, establish projects, win new spaces of autonomy and to promote the rupture of sexist stereotypes.”

Exploring their website or even visiting the mansion they house in Vedado, one quickly discovers that the Center and its director serve as a beacon in the night and an open and accepting environment for all who seek community, services, or education. They are leading the way to broaden acceptance and legislative backing for the rights of individuals with varying sexual orientations. A click on the “sexual diversity” link takes viewers to a comprehensive page of news, lists of activities and events, resources, and access to discussion forums as well as to a toned-down version of on-line dating called “*Club de amigas y amigos*”. Though not explicitly stating the link is for people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender, it is obvious that individuals are using this resource to connect with others in their neighborhoods and provinces. Just as her mother was a formidable force for the rights of women, Mariela is the celebrity face of LGBT rights and respect on the island today. She and CENESEX collaborate with a number of gay activists on the island as well as various governmental offices, NGOs, and educational centers.

During my five-month stay in Cuba, one of the most exciting and monumental events that occurred in Havana was the second annual *Jornada Cubana por el día Mundial contra la Homofobia* (the Cuban Conference for World Day against

Homophobia) which took place May 17, 2008, but was part of a weeklong series of related events. The program was organized by CENESEX in collaboration with various government agencies, civil society and various institutions of the state such as MINCULT, the Fundación Ludwig, UNEAC, Centro Nacional de Prevención ITS-VIH/Sida (CNP), CCPCC, FMC, FEU, Universidad de la Habana, ICAIC, and Instituto Cubano del Libro. Mariela Castro appeared on television prior to the event promoting all activities, articles were written in the national newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* and a showing of *Brokeback Mountain* was aired on national television. Additionally, a televised debate on *Dialogo Abierto*, a program shown on the education channel gathered experts and leaders in Havana, to discuss issues related to homophobia. The program included interviews conducted on the street and responses to phone calls during the show's airing.

The May 17<sup>th</sup> day of events was titled, "Diversity is the Norm" and the primary objective of the program's activities was to publicly discuss and combat all types of discrimination due to sexual orientation or gender identity. Mariela Castro inaugurated the event at the open-air *Pabellon* conference center in the heart of Vedado—one of the main business hubs of Havana. Throughout the day panel discussions and presentations were conducted on issues ranging from sexual diversity, sexuality in literature and film, HIV-AIDS prevention, and homophobia. A book fair highlighting books that focused on gender and sexuality themes was open all day and various kiosks handing out educational material, condoms, and even offering free blood tests for STD and HIV detection were present. Mariela Castro also released her newest book, *La Transexualidad en Cuba*. The book is a compilation of works by authors in different scientific disciplines that explores

the topic of transexuality—the biological, psychological, public health, and juridical aspects surrounding this topic are surveyed.

This event, unlike the first annual one for which only a film showing at “23 y 12” theater was held, was extremely visible and drew hundreds of people--gay, straight, transsexual, transvestite, many of whom were waving the rainbow flag freely. Accompanying several of my gay and lesbian friends to the event, I could not help noticing the looks of astonishment on their faces. Being in their 50s and 60s, they remember too easily how being homosexual in Cuba was stigmatized. During the puritanical phase of the late 1960s and 1970s discovered homosexuals experienced societal, political and economic discrimination and were sometimes sent to camps for rehabilitation and reeducation. This event marked for them an opening in the psyche of their culture and they attributed much of the success of the event to Mariela Castro’s endorsement and work.

Though many activists are promoting greater openness to sexual diversity in Cuba, Mariela Castro is the “superstar” face that represents a possible shift in the official perspective of Cuba toward sexual orientation diversity. Though she publicly supports her father, her uncle Fidel Castro, and the socialist goals of the Revolution, she demonstrates a willingness to examine errors of past attitudes and behaviors. In an interview published May 6, 2008 with the Mexican paper, *La Jornada*, she recognizes the mistakes of the past and promotes a new path for the future,

*En la historia de un ser humano se cometen errores y uno tiene que ir aprendiendo y sacar lecciones de esos errores. Pero las instituciones también cometen errores y tienen que ser capaces de reconocer por qué fue un error y qué se va a hacer para que ese error no se repita, qué leyes hay que establecer, qué valores hay que instituir.*

She calls upon institutions and by association, those who maintain these institutions, to evaluate their past behaviors and to envision legislative ways to respect and promote expanded values. Mariela Castro's work did not end or begin with the *Jornada* in May. Rather this event, with her promotion and support, has served as yet another step toward healing some of the wrongs of the past and paving the way for a different future for individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

One of her most ardent campaigns at present is to modify and reform the Cuban Family Code. The Code of 1965 has been lauded as a progressive piece of legislation that sought to promote equal household responsibilities and childrearing duties between men and women. Castro is attempting to get the Cuban National Assembly to amend this Code by adopt one of the most liberal gay and transsexual rights law in Latin America. The proposed legislation would recognize same-sex unions, along with inheritance rights. Transsexuals would also have the right to free sex-change operations and allow them to switch the gender on their identity card, with or without surgery. Adoption is not included in the bill nor is the term marriage. In June 2008, the government of Cuba authorized sex-change operations for transsexuals.

Despite the lauded work of Mariela Castro and CENESEX, gaps still remain in the acceptance of sexual diversity in Cuban culture and freedom of expression with regards to the issue. Only one month after the *Jornada*, an unofficial gay pride parade was cancelled in Havana and several organizers were detained. News reports stated that the march was organized with Florida's Unity Coalition and part of the objectives of the march was to seek an apology from the government for its past repression, incarceration, and inhumane treatment of gay citizens and those diagnosed with AIDS. The event was

not sanctioned by CENESEX and therefore was cancelled (Sanchez 2008.) On the one hand, it would be naïve to ignore that *any* links to Florida for *any* issue raises a red flag, given Cuba's negative, long-standing history with the United States and more specifically the hard-line, Cuban-American population in Florida. The crackdown demonstrates still how any issue, whatever the topic, is always politically enmeshed and the Cuban government still exerts control on what can or cannot be expressed. On the other hand, for many the crackdown demonstrates that even though Mariela Castro and CENESEX are making small, important strides, there is impatience for more to be done and to be done more quickly.

### **Conclusion**

As I stated in the introduction to this essay, many more academics and professionals are addressing the issue of gender in Cuba. Some continue to focus their work and research mostly on women and their roles and rights in Cuban society, while others like González Pagés are branching out further into broader connotations of gender. On the whole, Cuban academic work still lags in its academic rigor with regards to gender, but the impetus is there and new projects and connections are being made within and without Cuba. Additionally, as in other countries, academic work in Cuba must bridge the gap to influence the ideology and stereotypes that are found at the street level. In part, workshops and community conscious-raising projects can help, but there also needs to be greater utilization of existing state structures to disseminate resources and education to the general public. One example of this could be within the very institution that supports the above four individuals as well as conducts its own research and conferences—the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). Although it is an important

organization that has led the way for women's rights and gender studies, it does not appear to use its massive and far-extending network of community based offices throughout the country to educate and promote a shift in ideological and cultural gender stereotypes.

In an interview with MEDICC Review, Mariela Castro acknowledges that changing people's mentalities is one of the most difficult and slow things to do. Breaking through and shifting inherited gender stereotypes still has a long way to go. Part of the analysis and the changing of long-held attitudes is to assist one another in recognizing which elements of the traditional masculinity or femininity are actually doing damage and which can contribute to greater freedom, fulfillment and dignity (8). The FMC has a long history of promoting these goals in its rhetoric and in the research it conducts, but to work as a true NGO, how can it break from its strong government ties and connect more effectively at the grassroots level? Hopefully, an individual like Mariela Castro, who's heritage is so completely intertwined with the history and life of the FMC will continue to be a leading force in making such things happen.

Finally, it is worthwhile to ask how gender studies and gender ideology in Cuba correlates with the present transition in Cuba's government. Raul Castro seems to offer a more approachable and dialogical leadership style than his brother, Fidel. However, the paternalistic and patronizing system of Cuba's government still exists and exerts its power over the Cuban society. If gender is to be an important approach in anything from community organizing to political leadership, then the system as a whole would need to critically evaluate how it governs its people, how it allows or does not allow freedom of

speech, or how it allows its academics, professionals, and average citizens to challenge dominant power structures. To do so would truly reflect a more egalitarian society.

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## Appendix

(This represents a list of Cuban academics and up to five of their works as compiled by Marta Núñez Sarmiento. No changes were made to the format from her copy except the tabs and spacing to better demonstrate which articles pertained to which author.)

**Alfonso Fraga, Juan Carlos:** Sociologist and demographer. Heads the 2002 Census of Cuba and the Center for Studies of Population and Development of the National Office of Statistics of Cuba.

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**Alvarez Suárez, Mayda:** Psychologist. Heads the Center for Studies on Women at the Federation of Cuban Women.

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**Artiles Visbal, Leticia:** Biologist and anthropologist. Professor, Havana School of Medicine.

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**Luisa Campuzano:** Philologist, essay writer. Professor, School of Arts and Letters, University of Havana. Editor in chief of the journal *Revolución y Cultura*. Director of the Women's Studies Program at Casa de las Américas.

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**Farnós Morejón, Alfonso:** Economist and demographer who has published seven articles. National officer at United Nations Fund for Population Activities Regional Office for Latin America in Havana. Professor, Center for Demographic Studies, University of Havana.

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**García Pérez, Gladys Marel:** Historian, Institute of History.

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**González Pagés, Julio César:** Historian. Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Havana.

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**Mesa Castillo, Olga:** Lawyer and sociologist. Professor, School of Law, University of Havana. Vice president, Union of Lawyers of Cuba, and head, section on family law.

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**Montero Sánchez, Susana:** Teacher and specialist in Hispanic language and literature. Director, program Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, Institute of Literature and Linguistics.

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**Miñoso Molina, Gryska:** Sociologist, Center for Social Studies, Cuban Institute of Radio and Television.

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**Moro Parada, Sonnia:** Historian, Institute of History.

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