

Working in Solidarity with Cuba
U.S. Women and Cuba Delegation 2014
by Paloma Andazola-Reza

It is challenging to synthesize the experience of being a delegate with the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration. The experience is both personally profound and politically critical. At the core of this work is a socio-cultural exchange, a citizen-to-citizen diplomatic engagement that aims to disrupt the distorted, often negative, inaccurate and limited narratives U.S. peoples learn about Cuba. The delegation provides the groundwork for moving towards a deeper socio-cultural-political solidarity with Cuban peoples. The work is imperative; building solidarity work with Cuban peoples is as vital to Cuba's ongoing transformation as it is to transformation in the U.S. We have much to learn from Cuba and Cubans. It is through this delegation experience that we are tasked to see Cuba more clearly and to understand Cuba's sophistication and propensity to thrive under incredible challenges. We don't claim to own the story about Cuba or know the full extent of Cuban's experiences. Yet in the brief time we were there, the people we met and the places we visited, allowed us important insight. We leave committed to building ongoing relationships with Cuban peoples, to forging deeper political alliances, disrupting the stereotypes and misinformation about Cuba and acting in solidarity with Cuba by holding our own government accountable to ending its imperial policies against the sovereign nation. We are indebted to the people we met and the country of Cuba for trusting us with its wisdoms and visions. We act in solidarity with Cuban peoples and support ongoing transformation of Cuba in its own vision.

Our experience as delegates is a testament to the sincere and diligent work the U.S. Women and Cuba delegation leaders have put forth over the years in building collaborative, trusting relationships with Cuban communities. As a result, we were immediately able to begin building our own connections, and engage with prominent leaders from national government entities to grassroots community organizers and workers, gaining deeper insight into Cuba and its people in their complexity. Each site we visited, each connection we made, each monument we stood before, and each street we walked down, allowed us an understanding beyond any common tourist/traveler experience. Accompanied by brilliant guides every moment was an opportunity to learn the deeper histories, the nuances of culture, the daily struggles and the extraordinary successes of Cuba. Cubans will say in many different ways that they "are not a perfect society but they are mobilized", humility is mixed with pride in every story, and it is true, Cubans mobilize. They are intentional, community-centered, intergenerational, and creative in organizing for a better society. Their struggles are met with resourcefulness and tenacity. Cubans are proud of their country and committed to each other even under the constraints and stress of developing within limited resources, compounded by the impacts of policies against them such as the U.S. embargo/blockade. Cuba thrives in many ways as more perspicuous example of working towards an equitable society, unlike the U.S. inundated in capitalist corporatism and neoliberal policies, Cuba can tout incredible successes of its socialist policies, especially in the areas of education, health care and culture. As Cuba sustains and expands on the values of the revolution its commitment to the voices of community is what makes Cuba an astoundingly intellectual, innovative, and culturally brilliant country.

As a delegate the daily agenda is rigorous. Our days are packed with site visits to national and providential organizations, communitarian projects, museums, monuments and mausoleums, civic plazas, health care facilities, factories, art collectives, various neighborhoods (including four different providences) and invitations into private homes. This well organized and thought out agenda provides delegates the opportunity to understand Cuban peoples struggles, issues, concerns and successes in diverse contexts and voices. Being a delegate inspires critical self-reflection and fuels our desire to work for justice that can only exist in the context of such an experience; the work of building person-to-person, community-to-community diplomatic and cross-cultural healing relations. Yet some of the bigger tasks of our work are here, in the U.S., challenging our government's role in the abuse (a pattern of trying to maintain power and control) of Cuba and its peoples. As delegates we need to challenge the core of this pattern, U.S. ideologies of capitalism, racism, neoliberalism and imperialism. Because of this experience we are reminded that this work is two-fold, it must always be done in collaboration with those that experience abuse and injustice, and we must look to our own power, privilege and access to mobilize within our own country and communities. As delegates we are made new, humble, and invigorated in our own work and we now hold a steadfast commitment, in solidarity, with the Cuban peoples. We dedicate ourselves to what Cuba shared with us: community, passion, humility, ingenuity, struggle, celebration, and joy. Revolution is a process more than an event, and in Cuba it is still happening.

Agenda Highlights of the 2014 Research U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration Delegation **Paloma Andazola-Reza**

Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP)-We visited ICAP (The Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples) and were accompanied by an ICAP representative in each province/municipality we visited including Havana, Santa Clara, Cienfuegos, and Trinidad. ICAP was formed after the revolution to build international alliances with other countries due to international imperialist attacks against Cuba's sovereignty and isolation as a result. ICAP collaborates with over 100 countries and 1000 organizations in "combined efforts across issues not just politically but also organizes across respective needs" (CITE). ICAP is a space where solidarity is manifested through numerous ways.

Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC)-The FMC (Federation of Cuban Women) is a national organization started by Vilma Espín (late wife to Raul Castro) a year after the revolution. FMC works with more than 81,000 grassroots organizations in Cuba and internationally with groups such as the UN Human Rights Council, NGO International Federation of Women. FMC is national institution that works with the congress of Cuba, addressing issues and supporting of grassroots organizations with a focus on *libertad* of women in all forms including economic, body, health, autonomous decision-making, universal access, education, labor, freedom from violence, sexual orientation, etc. FMC exists within a multilevel political team approach to working on issues affecting Cuban women. As our host (NAME) stated, "We don't have a perfect society but we are mobilized".

El Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX)-CENESEX (National Center for Sexual Education) began as an initiative of the FMC. Established in 1989, Mariela Castro Espín, daughter of Raul Castro and Vilma Espín acts as the director for this national organization. CENESEX, operates in a role similar to FMC, a national center to address issues involving LGBTQ peoples, gender identity, disabilities, gender violence, and promote public campaigns, brought about through grassroots initiatives, against discrimination, homophobia, for sexual health, reproduction and LGBTQ rights. CENESEX believes its work to be critical for "training for a new society" (CITE). CENESEX provides integrated services and acts as a resource to grassroots community organizers to address issues at a national congressional level and in collaboration with varied government ministries. The experience at CENESEX highlighted the ways U.S. identity politics and consumer-capitalist appropriation of communities and political issues distorts the significance of this work. CENESEX shows that in a communist-socialist society, the work is again about *libertad* with community inclusive and varied approaches; a coordination of state and community. CENESEX taught us that the broader liberty and revolution narratives are critical component to addressing these issues and that Cuba as a country must collectively pursuing the liberty and visibility of all peoples in its society to be successful.

Comision Nacional de Alfabetization (Literacy Campaign Museum)- The museum focuses on the history of the literacy campaign enacted following the revolution. Cuba has to date 99% literacy rate. Cuba's literacy model has been used globally for literacy being implemented in several countries around the world. The campaign was a massive mobilization (over 268,000 literacy teachers *maestras*) that broke many social norms especially for young women. The Literacy Campaign is an amazing example of community collaborative work, as the *maestras* worked side by side their students in their daily work often rural farmers and at night taught them to read. The campaign extended its value of literacy to hard of seeing and blind Cubans with access to materials in braille. An adult student stated "I have never felt Cuban until I learned to read and write". Education is at the center of Cubans values and is the heart of the vitality of the country. The docent stated "raising self-esteem of Cubans through education a critical value for Cuban society and transformation".

Todas Las Manos Communitarian Project in Zona La Timba-The neighborhood of La Timba has historically been geographically isolated from center of Havana so many services inaccessible for its people. Communitarian projects like Todas Las Manos is an excellent example of community based participatory program development. Communitarian projects focus on the historical traditions of the neighborhood and act as a "house of culture" for the community. Todas Las Manos not only creates and provides social and cultural services, it acts center for community mobilization attending to repairs and needs of the neighborhood.

Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (CDR), Zona , Santa Clara, Cuba CDR- CDR are the grassroots organizations at a neighborhood/zone level. We were welcomed into the CDR by its members, the entire neighborhood, children, youth and elders, with performances of dance, music and poetry. A CDR member stated CDR's are "very important because it is where the people are at". CDR organizes campaigns for block donations, support delegate representatives in local government, organizes community celebrations and generally works for the betterment and voice of each neighborhood. CDR is the heart of community grassroots work that informs and aims to implement national policies of community vision.

Hogar Maternidad (maternity home) (#), Santa Clara-The visit to the maternity home permitted the delegates the opportunity to learn about the medical system in Cuba in the context of women with high-risk pregnancies. Maternity homes in Cuba serve secondary care facilities that offer a more home like environment for women with at-risk pregnancies. Women get necessary medical support and education throughout their stay. All services and medications are free to the patients as are all medical services and medications are in Cuba.

Industria Productora de Utensilios Domésticos (INPUD)-INPUD Primero de Mayo (the National Industry of Household Products) was the first factory started by Ernesto Che Guevara in 1964 immediately following the revolution. Six micro-industries operate within INPUD. Workers are unionized. Agreements focus on collective efforts for safety, efficiency and education. Workers are able to negotiate their interests to improve industry. A conflict resolution team addresses employee issues and concerns. Salary is defined at a national level by industry. Workers get summer off. 50% of the INPUD boards are women and there are 2 women directors and women hold the majority of management positions. As our guide stated "women make best managers".

Mejunje- Mejunje serves as a space for anyone in the community to come to. Mejunje is a place where people gather to share culture and beliefs and acts as a organizing space for political issues (LGBTQ rights and cultures, addressing race, though art, etc.). There is an art gallery, indoor and outdoor entertainment spaces for films, concerts, conferences, community fairs, and workshops. Mejunje they are centered in the daily struggles of Cubans stating "there is no revolution without struggle". Community members state "once people come here they leave their masks behind". Mejunje is supported by the work of the Cuban Federation of Women and acts as an integrated space to celebrate communities. We visited Mejunje and engaged in a dialogue with several LGBTQ activists from various providences, to build alliances around LGBTQ issues cross-country. Activists remarked that there is a need for research on LGBTQ issues in order to promote change. There limited research on LGBTQ life in Cuba and homophobia is still a struggle. This work is an ongoing project by delegation and is currently focusing its work on struggles and experiences of lesbians in Cuba.

Trazos Libres-Trazos Libres is a community project in Cienfuegos aimed at illustrating the importance of art in society. Trazos Libres is a representation of the intersections of art, community organizing, and socio-cultural-political struggle and voice. Not only are the artists at Trazos Libres committed to voices of community through art, they are highly educated scholars working to uphold art as a critical value to transformation and integral to daily life of Cubans. Trazos Libres focuses on art that "gives to the community" and does not shy away from examining critical issues such as race and gender in Cuban society. Trazos Libres is a center where art is a vital component to revolution and liberation, a mechanism for highlighting the contributions and struggles of Cubans while illuminating the beauty and complexity of Cuba.

Che Guevara Mausoleum- Visiting the museum and mausoleum of Ernesto Che Guevara is a sacred, educational and crucial experience. Che Guevara's image is everywhere in Cuba. Coming from the U.S. where Che Guevara's image is often appropriated and Che as a historical figure perhaps misunderstood, we lack the deeper context of his significance, his role in the revolution and the complexity of this, and his deeper meaning to the Cuban people. The visit to his Mausoleum gave us insight into the deep, profound devotion and honor Cuban's hold for Che Guevara. It reminds us that what we learn is one-sided and that we must attempt to understand the significance and complexity of not just Che but of the revolution itself outside of the versions we are told in the U.S. Our work must include dialogue about how we participate in the capitalist driven consumption of the "other" and people and practices that are deeply sacred.