

**INTERVIEW WITH MARIELA CASTRO ESPÍN,
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*Monday to Friday from 9:00 to 10:00 p.m.
Host: Edmundo García*

Symbols:

EG: Edmundo García

MC: Mariela Castro

EG: Interview with Mariela Castro Espín, Director of Cuba’s National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX). Mariela, thank you so much for accepting to have this first conversation for ‘La Noche se Mueve’ and our audience in South Florida.

MC: Thank you for this meeting.

EG: It’s been a while since we last met, so I’d like to start by offering my condolences for your mother’s death. I know you loved her very much.

MC: Thank you very much.

EG: What did she mean to you and the woman you have become?

MC: Well, first of all she was a very sweet and affectionate mom who made great contributions to our education. Despite her many obligations she really looked after us and paid attention to our contradictions, because we’re all so different from one another. Now that I have three children myself, I can’t help wondering how she could devote so much time to every one of us, and talk and listen to and help us in times of trouble, and always with respect for what each of us was. Of course, like any other mother, she would try to set boundaries, and as we grew up we would try to set our own.

Her life story as a human being is really beautiful. As all children do, when I was a girl I wanted to be like my folks, but I didn’t have it in me to be like her, because we had very different personalities and temperaments. Still, she always taught me good things. We had the usual fights children often have with their parents as part of domestic life, but I always looked up to her as a human being, for she had qualities and abilities as a woman that I could only have in my dreams. Not that I’m any less worthy; it’s just that we’re so different. My current job has made me go deeper into the history of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which started the work I do now, and from the professional viewpoint I have to know what they did in the past for the sake of continuity.

EG: Did Vilma ever get involved with the issues you deal with?

MC: Oh yes, absolutely. It’s precisely because she started this work that I’ve had to study what’s done so far, and I’ve found out they did incredible things and she searched into rather uncharted subjects and fought tooth and nail for the recognition of homosexual and transsexual rights, albeit she had more success with the latter.

EG: So she kept up with those topics?

MC: Yes, she worked along those lines.

EG: It was never disclosed.

MC: Never. I knew very little myself until 1990, when I started in CENESEX as an expert and interviewed Dr. Celestino Álvarez Lanjonchere to learn his opinion on what was being done or should be done about gays and lesbians in Cuba and all their suffering, and he described me all the things that I had no idea my mother had done, even a document she had asked him to write in general terms about homosexuality and homophobia, two unfamiliar concepts at the time, to try and convince her fellow Political Bureau members of the need to come up with a policy on homosexuals and the recognition of their rights.

EG: Is there any record of what sort of reception the document got in the Political Bureau?

MC: Not that I know of.

EG: Have you tried to find out?

MC: I'd like to, but I don't know where to begin.

EG: With your father.

MC: What he always says is that my mom was right; that she fought hard to that end and had to be very cautious because they were all very sexist men, and it was already hard for a woman to be up there with them as it was. So she was always careful and sweet and patient but managed to tough it out. Even my dad tells me that I must follow her lead and be careful and patient like her in order to succeed, but I remind him that we're two different persons with different temperaments and from different times.

EG: You have done things in a different way and been a lot pushier than Vilma when it comes to standing your ground for your ideas.

MC: Yes, because first of all my mom was a chemical engineer and I studied psychology and pedagogy and became a professor, which makes you look at things from another perspective and helps you discover and speak the right language and feedback from what others have to say, in this case my students, and you use that to review and revise your speech; that's what a teacher does. Moreover, everything the FMC had achieved in thirty years smoothed the way for me. Right now I'm writing a paper where I say the first steps taken in Cuba in favor of equal rights for women made it so much easier to break up the so-called gender stereotypes and thus **anatomize** the heterosexist pattern. In short, all the earlier efforts for the good of women and sex education laid the groundwork for me. I threw myself into the task from the outset because the time was ripe and the circumstances were favorable, so I put two and two together and decided it was the right moment to do something.

EG: There have been setbacks.

MC: Many, at all times, and I know there will be many more!

EG: Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the Cuban Parliament, has great affection for you and believes in your ideas. However, when we met in Canada I asked him whether he would stand by your project on same-sex marriage or side up with the Catholic Church against it, he made no comment. Is same-sex marriage still a taboo subject, not to Alarcón perhaps, but to Cuban society and/or its leadership?

MC: Well, I don't think Alarcón is prejudiced, but his post involves a great deal of public responsibility and the obligation to be very careful and take his time to think about what must be done. Besides, he has got letters from a number of church leaders who oppose both same-sex marriage and adoption and sex change operations.

EG: Speaking of religious leaders, I interviewed [Vicar-General of Havana Monsignor] Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in Havana and he told me you two have had long, heated conversations. What's your view on the position of the Cuban Catholic Church now that its relations with the State are going through a true honeymoon period?

MC: Look, I've never been against any religion, on the contrary, I think...

EG: But are you an atheist?

MC: I'm a nonbeliever, as they say.

EG: Don't you ever commend yourself to God?

MC: I don't know, I commend myself to someone's trust, for instance. I can say I have faith, but in what I don't know.

EG: Alright, but do you have spiritual faith in something beyond material life?

MC: I don't know whether my faith is material or not, but as a person I believe in the circumstances and in people and in what happens around me.

EG: So how can you describe in general your conversations with Cuban Catholic and Christian Church leaders?

MC: I don't really have any links with them, only with Carlos Manuel and the people who work with him. Look, Carlos Manuel is a very wise man and a beautiful person. I have faith in Carlos Manuel (laughter), I trust him. At the beginning of the year I was very sad at my mother's decease and felt like marrying again.

EG: Did you wed your husband again?

MC: I called it a second wedding, and asked Carlos Manuel to bless my marriage.

EG: So you had a church wedding?

MC: Not a church wedding; it would have been too compelling and I'm not willing to commit myself too much, I'm up to my ears with commitments. Carlos Manuel suggested I should do it, but I told him what I needed was his wonderful human and spiritual presence, as well as all what his own spirituality entails from a cultural viewpoint. Since I was brought up in the tenets of Christianity, I can feel them all the time in his speech and constant educational messages. It was Fidel's habit of quoting the Bible in his speeches what aroused my interest, especially in the Old Testament.

EG: The Old rather than the New Testament?

MC: That's right.

EG: What parts do you like best?

MC: It's been a while since I last read it, but I usually need to go through a thing or two.

EG: I'm going to give you the New Testament as a gift.

MC: It's OK; I have it from priests who are friends of mine.

EG: Mariela, what does Carlos Manuel, held by some to be a liberal, think about your support of same-sex marriage?

MC: He even wrote something in *Palabra Nueva* about marriage and family that I liked, and he gave me some facts that I studied and kept in mind. He's glad that I don't try to tear down as traditional an institution as heterosexual marriage. Some concepts go a very long way in history and do no harm; heterosexual marriage is one of them, and there's no need to dismantle it. Others, such as the male and female stereotyping, must be dismantled, since they cause a lot of problems, including violence, as men are taught to find macho relish in violence to prove their manhood. They say women and men are raised to live in harmony, but then we found ourselves in great discord. Some things do need changing because they hurt, but it's not the case of heterosexual marriage and what it means, which is fine and makes many people happy. Therefore, we don't have to talk about same-sex marriage as long as we can come up with other concepts and categories that make gay and straight equally happy.

EG: Same-sex marriage as such is not on CENESEX's agenda then?

MC: It's not same-sex marriage what we're putting forward, but the inclusion of provisions in the Family Code to grant homosexual couples living together the same rights as heterosexual couples.

EG: But that's easy to approve.

MC: It's easy, but we want to make sure it's clear to everyone because many people are prejudiced about us, thinking we're singing the praises of same-sex marriage, since at first I said that if we want to eliminate all forms of discrimination and homophobia we had to entitle both homo and heterosexual couples to equal inheritance and personal rights.

EG: What made you change your mind?

MC: Seeing that people were reluctant, several homosexual couples who work with us in CENESEX asked me to remove that obstacle, since they'd rather live as unmarried couples without the restrictions binding on a civil marriage today, which can even make you lose your house, just to give you an example of something that must be changed.

EG: Does that still happen?

MC: Yes, it does.

EG: Can't it be prevented?

MC: Look, it's complicated, and the request comes from people who have had a really rough time of it.

EG: Would you have to take the issue all the way up to the Parliament?

MC: To the Parliament, yes. Now we're designing a small publicity campaign about our proposal of changes to the Family Code for Cuban families to grasp the advantages of those amendments, a large number of them, and the benefits they will bring. By January it should be ready for discussion with the Party and the people, so there's some consensus of opinion by the time it gets to the Parliament and more understanding about the need to change things. The only thing we request regarding homosexuality is that same-sex couples living together have the same inheritance and personal rights. Most likely they won't be granted adoption rights, but these homosexual couples I know keep telling me, 'Don't lock horns with them over adoption, for we can work it out, or marriage, for it's not that important; getting married holds no interest for us here.

EG: In other words, you should engage only in fights you can win.

MC: Exactly, but it hurt anyway. I thought if we did things like that we would continue to be seen as homophobic, but if the main beneficiaries of our work were the ones who gave me the clues to what mattered most to them, so be it. And that's what we're proposing.

EG: Which doesn't mean these issues will be put aside forever, that is, they could be taken up again sometime.

MC: Exactly, some other time, we'll probably leave it behind as our society advances and people's attitude toward these things change. We must carry on working in the meantime, talking to people and developing education and communication strategies. Otherwise it will be like with racial discrimination, which we thought abolished in Cuba but many people are still racist, except that such attitudes are forbidden by law.

EG: It's also a cultural phenomenon.

MC: But the cultural phenomenon can be changed by means of education and communication, and that's what we're doing.

EG: Mariela, in the specific case of the homosexual community, do you champion the cause of their right to join any institution or association that exists in Cuban society?

MC: I'm not sure what you mean.

EG: The homosexual community can take part in everything. It's a clear question and I'm not going to beat about the bush. For instance, there was a big debate in the U.S. during the Clinton years, concerning the presence of gays and lesbians in the military, which ended up with the 'Don't ask, don't tell' concept: don't say you're a homosexual and don't ask others about their sexual orientation. It happened in a male chauvinist culture, inside institutions seen as archetypes of machismo. What's your stance on the presence of homosexuals in the Cuban Armed Forces?

MC: Well, I guess that as the Cuban society becomes less homophobic or **homophagous**, I don't know which term is better, it will extend to all institutions, but I think the essential thing is to start with the family, where homosexuals and even transsexuals most suffer, as our studies and programs have shown. Remember that in the case of transsexuals our work covers not only their sexual orientation, but also gender identity issues.

EG: On the issue of transsexualism, which some people find so troublesome, is it true Cuba performed a sex-change operation more than 20 years ago?

MC: It was in '88, and quite successful. The subject is very well.

EG: After that one-time experience, has that subject –whose identity remains confidential– managed to lead a good life?

MC: Yes, without any problem. The subject has even got married and divorced three times (laughter).

EG: Why do you laugh?

MC: Because she's a very joyful, fun-loving person.

EG: Mariela, I'm asking you this because I've seen cases, in the U.S. and elsewhere, of people who have undergone surgery to change their sex and then have become insane or committed suicide, and even cases of men who transitioned to become females and then started to have sex with women, that is, psychologically unbalanced.

MC: There's international consensus as to the steps to follow for diagnosis and treatment.

EG: Is there a protocol?

MC: Yes, and it's applied worldwide. We have links with an International Association where we do research and close contacts with some of its doctors. [The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association] meets every two years to discuss their scientific findings, reach agreements, draw up documents and revise the protocols, and they establish how to proceed from the technical-professional viewpoint. Of course, there are places where economic interests prevail and they do it to anyone who wants to change their sex and can afford the operation, and there's where people get damaged.

EG: Cuba would never do that, right? My point is, the enemies and out-and-out critics of this project, which is CENESEX's brainchild, say they're trying to have the chance to perform these operations in Cuba at a lower cost in order to turn it into a source of profit. Of course, your answer is not for me, I'd just like to hear what you have to say about it.

MC: A resolution by the Ministry of Public Health legitimizes the work of the National Commission for the Integral Care of Transsexual Individuals, a multidisciplinary research group that I chair from CENESEX and whose first studies were recently published in a book, as well as that of a Special Health Care Center we have in a hospital under our methodological supervision. This resolution states the service is free of charge and only for Cuban citizens, not for foreigners. It's not a profit-making program.

EG: What if people from other countries go to Cuba to have surgery, some who says, for example, 'I want to be a woman'?

MC: The resolution prevents us from operating on foreigners.

EG: It's important to hear you say that, because they talk about it in other countries, and that's where my question came from. I think it's important that you make clear there's no gender reassignment surgery available to foreigners in Cuba.

MC: No, no, the resolution states it's a specialized free service for and a right of the Cubans.

EG: So foreigners must refrain from going to Cuba for that purpose.

MC: It's a non-profit health service as yet unavailable to foreigners.

EG: What's the financial cost of one operation for Cuba, taking into account that your country pays for the service after all?

MC: I've been asked before and I forgot to do the calculations, although an estimate was made for the future, since the resolution issued this year gave the go-ahead to resume surgery.

EG: No other operations so far?

MC: No, only partial reassignment surgery, that is, female-to-male mastectomy for women and testicle removal in the case of men, but the final touch of genital reconstruction is scheduled for next year. A medical team is getting ready to that effect, working with very experienced, first-class Belgian doctors who master these microsurgery techniques, more precise and refined, which produce much better results and make it possible for the patient to come through much better, even with a higher sexual response.

EG: Is this kind of surgery facing stronger moral opposition in Cuba than same-sex marriage?

MC: Yes, our churches have been complaining about it very vigorously. When you explain to the Cuban people that it's part of a treatment that will help those patients feel happier and even get over their psychological problems after so much anxiety and distress in their lives resulting from the contradiction between their biological sex and gender identity, they do understand. That's why the campaign we'll launch in 2009 will be against homophobia from January to July and against transphobia from July to December. People will learn about both concepts so they can understand it's justified from the professional and humanitarian viewpoint.

EG: Do you think you're in the majority or the minority? Leaving aside the Church, I think those programs don't enjoy great popularity in the Cuban society as a whole.

MC: With regards to society's approval, I'm in the minority. That's why we're engaged in this educational campaign to spread information. Like I said, our people understand when we present them with facts and spell out the big picture to them.

EG: So you don't know how much the operation costs...

MC: I can't remember now, but the Ministry of Public Health has the figures. I can look for it and let you know some other time. Besides, the cost changes from one country and health system to another.

EG: Are there many transsexuals waiting or is it a small percentage?

MC: Well, it's a very small percentage worldwide.

EG: You mean a minimal percentage compared to the world population at large...

MC: Yes, it's a very small number. In Cuba we have twenty-odd cases awaiting surgery.

EG: But only with the Commission's approval and recommendation?

MC: No, they've been already recommended; these are all proven transsexuals.

EG: By 'proven' you mean that psychologically speaking...

MC: Yes, they all passed every diagnosis and the only way for them is forward.

EG: Mariela, when it comes to gay rights much is said and commented about male same-sex couples, perhaps because they're less inhibited. Is female homosexuality frowned upon more than male homosexuality in Cuba?

MC: Yes, because of machismo.

EG: So machismo rears its ugly head here too?

MC: Machismo is always around, never goes away; it simply changes its shape.

EG: Even among women themselves?

MC: That's right. Straight men and women all over the world are not as disdainful of male homosexuals as they are of female ones, of whom they have little or no understanding. Lesbians are more vulnerable than men everywhere. Cuban homosexuals may be scorned and looked down on, but they're not the victims of physical attacks. Judging by reports I receive from organizations in this field, the number of women who are murdered worldwide is sky-high, and it's even worse with lesbians. Some of them are even victims of gang rape by men who pretend it's the only way to get it into their head what they're supposed to do with their sex and other things typical of the prevailing mindset in patriarchal societies.

EG: Do you work with both groups in CENESEX?

MC: Yes. Our focus on transsexuals is the result of a well-knit system that set in motion in 1979.

EG: I mean male and female homosexuals.

MC: Let me explain. Our work with transsexuals is more systematized, and we have included transvestites and other individuals from the rather broader transgender spectrum. In 2004 we started a program called OREMI for about sixty female homosexuals in Havana, who meet once a week at CENESEX, have joined several of our programs and cooperate with us to implement various strategies and research works. They have proved to be a very interesting target group; some of them are being trained to become health promoters or popular education methodologists in order to do a better job in our communities.

We've been working twice a week with transsexuals and transvestites and meeting with their families, and it's been wonderful. We have not done anything yet with either homosexual women's families or homosexual and bisexual men, who are more heterogeneous. More men are likely to come to the Center now that we're starting to organize male support groups.

EG: In the case of bisexuals, who are the least mentioned even if I'm sure you have figures too, how common are they compared to the homosexuals?

MC: Look, our studies on HIV/AIDS gave us an insight into the high rate of bisexual men in Cuba, and I mean men who have sex with other men. I don't have figures, nor do I know if there are any.

EG: Is there a bisexual female population?

MC: We have no data. In our ORAMI group we have lesbians, bisexuals and, to quote their own definition, heteroflexible women.

EG: What's that?

MC: Women who identify themselves as heterosexual but have occasional lesbian relationships.

EG: Isn't that bisexuality?

MC: They don't see themselves as either bisexual or lesbian persons.

EG: Is it because they do it only now and then?

MC: Exactly. Therefore they use that name in their group.

EG: Do you think we Cubans are a liberated nation? I read once that at least 5% of Cuban men have had male-male sex.

MC: Yes, it was the conclusion of a study about AIDS that the figure is around 5%, and they say the number is between 5 and 10% worldwide.

EG: There are cultures like the Arabic where...

MC: Okay, but don't forget the Koran condemns homosexuality!

EG: Before you're married, but not so after that.

MC: I'm not so familiar with Arabic culture, but I've noticed contradictions between what we know and what they say about their life and religion and the various interpretations of the Koran. There's a great deal of inconsistency, so I'd like to learn more about it one day.

EG: From your own experience, how do you see Cuba, and yourself, in 5 or 10 years? I ask you because I read what you write for the media. What changes do you see in the future of the Cuban society?

MC: Well, I don't know whether this is how I see it or how I'd like it to be. I recently said I'd like the socialist experiment to continue, but in a more flexible way. I'd like a socialism that makes us happier, a more glorious and dialectical socialism. From my professional position I work toward that end, and I'd like to see a similar effort in other areas where I have no business meddling in for lack of professional jurisdiction. I'd like this socialism to be more dialectical so that it can be splendid.

EG: How do you see Mariela Castro Espín 5 or 10 years from now?

MC: I think I'll still be working in CENESEX.

EG: Any independent political vocation?

MC: No, none, I don't like politics, although my work has a major impact on politics because we make proposals based on scientific research for the development of social policies. That is, I care about politics as a citizen, as a professional, as CENESEX director.

EG: Mariela, several times you have said to be in favor of lifting certain restrictions or controls which prevent ordinary Cubans from travelling, basically the so-called 'white card'. What's your opinion about that?

MC: What I've said is that I'd like that Cuban policy to be made more flexible or modified. It was enforced for protection against unfriendly U.S. policies on the Cuban people, mainly the Cuban Adjustment Act, which fosters illegal immigration and trafficking in people; the economic and financial blockade on the Cuban people's right to survive, and the violation of migration agreements by not providing the promised number of visas every year. As a result, people try to find other ways to leave. Immigrants have travelled the Florida Strait back and forth since colonial times. Furthermore, migration evolved from being just a legal figure to a matter of human nature. The world was always populated by people who emigrated, as human beings are constantly moving around in search of a place of their choice where they can settle.

EG: That's the question: what would have to happen?

MC: I think if the U.S. –and some of its European allies– stop their hostile policies, our emigration laws will surely change, as will the travel ban and many other issues. And we need the Cubans who live in the U.S. to help bring forth that change.

EG: Would a legitimate, respectful dialogue about those issues between President Barack Obama and your father be fruitful for the aspirations and preferences of the Cubans who live in the island?

MC: Absolutely. Should Obama and my father meet as presidents, on an equal footing and with respect for each other's sovereignty, many things will change for the benefit of all Cubans.

EG: Here and there.

MC: Here and there.

EG: Let's suppose, now that your father has stated several times his willingness to meet with Obama even in a third country, that Obama takes him up on his offer, but first decides to ask Mariela for advice, and he asks her: 'How do you think I should start a conversation with your father, who is the Cuban president? I mean, really!'?

MC: I wouldn't know how to chat him up (laughter), he takes great care to ensure he doesn't speak out when I'm around.

EG: Why is that? Are you indiscreet sometimes?

MC: It's because I give many interviews.

EG: Is that a problem?

MC: Not really, we've talked about that.

EG: Do you ever get into arguments?

MC: Yes, all the time.

EG: Because of your interviews?

MC: That too, but we've learned to respect each other.

EG: Now that he's the President, do you talk with him and see him more often?

MC: Less often.

EG: Do you miss him?

MC: Yes, I do.

EG: So do you get mad with each other now and then?

MC: Yes, since as far as I can remember.

EG: Who gets more upset, you or your dad?

MC: Both of us.

EG: So what would be your advice to Obama?

MC: That he should pay attention, if he cares of course, to the few things my dad has said in some interviews. But first of all, that he should come. I mean Obama, not the President of the United States. Just Obama.

EG: Impossible if he's the President. So that's Mariela's advice?

MC: But he can! Your job can entail a lot of pressure, but as a human being you don't have to go by the book at all times. Presidents have wide-ranging powers, but Obama is a smart person and I think he's good at getting along and getting by in politics, complex though politics may be in the U.S., always under pressure. I'm sure he'll be the first U.S. president to come closer to Cuba without making demands or being manipulative, but with respect, because Cuba respects the U.S. and therefore the U.S. should respect Cuba. So in case anybody wants to tell him, Mariela is asking Obama to start by releasing the Cuban Five.

EG: Among the main causes of discord, say, the embargo, the Cuban Five, the travel restrictions and so on, what do you think it should be the first topic to start building a relationship with Cuba?

MC: As far as I and all Cubans are concerned, the Cuban Five. Set them free and let justice be done. That's our foremost request, and let justice move on as it should afterward, which would be wonderful even for the U.S. Such is our No. 1 priority: keep the blockade if you will, but release the Cuban Five.

EG: Let's go back to your professional life. I'd like you to tell me about domestic violence in Cuba.

MC: Women everywhere, in all patriarchal societies, are the victims of violence. I call it the pathology of power, since it's about exerting power unevenly.

EG: In the U.S., if you raise your voice to your wife you can be taken to court and issued a restraining order. How aware are Cuban men and women of their rights? Is there a law against domestic violence?

MC: We have severe laws against domestic violence and very harsh sentences, mainly for cases of sexually abused children.

EG: That would be an extreme, but domestic violence...

MC: Do you mean the more general gender-based violence?

EG: Like when a man who slaps a woman in the face.

MC: Men and women in Cuba are still unaware of the various forms of gender-based violence. Research has it that psychological and verbal abuse prevails over physical abuse, which is more obvious and easier to prove in a court of law. We recently went to the TV program *Diálogo Abierto*, where we described psychological violence as a drop of water that falls on you every day and explained that if you're not conscious of the facts you'll never learn to set limits on things, and there must be limits. Negotiation and the mutual definition of limits are part of a couple's life.

EG: Will society mediate in cases of domestic violence reported by one of the parties?

MC: Well, the law allows for that!

EG: But since it seldom happens, what's the cultural problem?

MC: It seldom happens for lack of knowledge. The FMC is launching more and more information and education campaigns to increase public awareness, especially among women, who are the main victims. But men are also victims of their upbringing and the way manhood is portrayed all over the world, which makes them very vulnerable and likely to become victimizers. So we have a lot of work to do, because what we're doing is not enough.

EG: Is there a lot of domestic violence?

MC: According to reports, most cases seen by our Counseling Homes for Women and Families are on the qualitative side, like women who come asking for help or counsel and even legal advice. The problem is, very few ask for counsel about the most frequent psychological violence.

EG: Are the older generations more prone to domestic violence than the younger ones?

MC: It's more common among older people and decreasing among the younger ones. However, many people hold that young people's relations are violent as a rule, although they don't actually mean gender-based violence but simply violence both between and within the two sexes. But much still remains to be done in that field. We have made great progress, but not enough to be able to at least make a few changes.

EG: Mariela, you have been to the United States on two occasions.

MC: Only once, in 2002.

EG: Wait a minute: did you travel to the U.S. with a visa granted by the George W. Bush administration?

MC: Yes, it seems they didn't know me very well yet (laughter).

EG: Is that what you think? (Laughter)

MC: I don't know, they just gave me a visa. The first time I was going to a Congress but the visa came too late. I got it later on and could attend a Conference on Sexology in Los Angeles, but the only place I could see was the hotel where I stayed because we had sessions the whole day long, as is usual in these meetings. Then I did some work in Virginia and Washington, D.C., where I had a great time.

EG: How long did you stay? Tell me about your American experience.

MC: I spent 12 days in the U.S. I didn't have to work too hard to communicate because almost everybody spoke Spanish. Most people I saw were Latinos, including many Cubans and Salvadorians. The sight of so many poor and homeless people in the very capital city of the Empire was a real shock to me, as I didn't expect to see that.

EG: Did you get to see the White House?

MC: Yes, I stood there, watching it.

EG: What was in the mind of Mariela Castro Espín, the daughter of Raúl and niece of Fidel, when she laid eyes on the White House? Did you think of your family at that moment?

MC: No, no, no, not my family. It was Cuba what came to mind, and I got so mad. There were demonstrations in support of Palestine and other causes, and I felt so much rage, the rage of the world, and the arrogance of the White House. I was so annoyed!

EG: Mariela, what's left of that girl I once knew? I won't do the math, but many years ago I met a girl who even thought of becoming a dancer, who was in search of ways to express herself. I remember one day when we were talking with Antonio Gades in [Cuban dancer Lorna's] place. Whatever happened to that girl who loved going to the theater and dancing so much and wanted to do performing arts?

MC: I really enjoyed it while it lasted. I almost gave up Sexology for dancing, something our mutual friend [Cuban musician] Jorge Luis Prats advised me not to do, so I listened to him and stuck to Sexology.

EG: Was it a good piece of advice?

MC: I think so, although I didn't give up dancing for good. I kept taking dancing lessons with a retired professor, going to performances and flirting with flamenco, which I never really learned, but I had fun with it and still enjoy it very much, as I do rumba and Santeria dancing.

EG: Santeria too?

MC: I love it!

EG: Do you practice?

MC: No, no, but I like it.

EG: Has any Santeria priestess ever told you who your father is?

MC: Oshún. Another one told me I was also the daughter of Changó.

EG: Do you think you're related to Oshún?

MC: Yes, and also to Changó, to both of them.

EG: What do you have in common with Oshún?

MC: Ah, the fawning.

EG: And with Changó?

MC: The strength.

EG: Mariela, there are eight hundred thousand Cubans in Southern Florida, maybe even one million...

MC: Scratch that out: from Oshun I got the honey, not the fawning (laughter).

EG: You're every inch a Cuban but your husband is Italian. How come? How do you manage to bring things into line?

MC: Well, he's Sicilian, and Sicily has something in common with Cuba.

EG: That you're all island creatures, maybe?

MC: That too, but also our Spanish ancestors. Spain was Sicily's last important colonizer.

EG: What do you tell your Italian husband when you're angry?

MC: I'd rather not say (laughter).

EG: Mariela, again, there are seven or eight hundred thousand Cubans in Southern Florida. Some of them don't want anything to do with Cuba anymore, let alone the Revolution, Fidel and Raúl; they just dream of and live a different history. However, there's a group of Cubans who favor reconciliation despite their differences. What's your opinion about that Cuban community unmarked by hatred toward Cuba? Will there be any room for them in Cuba's future?

MC: Hey, it would be lovely if we could come together and live in greater harmony! I wish they could find some room here, for I also believe that most Cubans who live abroad have set up their own associations, which is a very positive and beautiful attitude toward the reestablishment of cordial relations. In my opinion, the more the tension between our two countries is relieved, the better our reunion will be.

EG: Two years ago there was a debate in Cuba about what came to be known as the "e-mail war" and eventually the so-called "gray decade" of Cuban culture. But other things were discussed, such as the UMAP (Military Units in Support of Production) and the views on homosexual behavior at that time. Did all that have any impact on your struggle?

MC: Look, it was a chance to put my point of view. I always see opportunities in times of contradiction, and I liked the fact that there was a debate for people to speak their mind and get it all out, which they did.

EG: Did you talk about those problems with your dad then?

MC: Yes, we talked about it; he was paying careful attention...

EG: How do you think he was feeling about the debate?

MC: He kept up with what was going on and sometimes wanted to know my opinion. I always told him I thought it was a good thing, since society needed debate to move forward, and he paid attention. Never did I see him worried, except for the smooth progress of a productive, nationwide discussion that was part of a social project which concerned everyone, and as such it should move in the right direction.

EG: What would you say were the reasons for the mistakes during that period in this, your regular field of work?

MC: Well, everything I learned about it—keep in mind I didn't live through those days—came from my mom and dad, who always said it was wrong to scorn homosexuals. That's what I grew up hearing. I remember I would come home from the university complaining about things I had seen in that process to strengthen people's revolutionary principles which they used to have it in for the homosexuals. As a Young Communist League leader in my school, I managed to prevent any homosexual from being punished. Every time I made it clear to them that I was against those procedures, they agreed that it was the wrong thing to do.

EG: I asked you before about the presence of homosexuals in the military because of the "don't-ask-don't-tell" policy we've seen in the U.S. But what about political organizations like the Communist Party or the Young Communist League?

MC: I believe the Communist Party should legitimize homosexual membership. We all know there are homosexuals in its ranks, only they're still in the closet. Some of the gay young men who collaborate with CENESEX are Party leaders in their workplaces and quite respected by everyone.

EG: Is by any chance the 'don't-ask-don't-tell' compromise silently happening in Cuba too?

MC: Well, some Party members don't mind being in the open and they still work as leaders.

EG: But members-to-be are not questioned about it anymore, right?

MC: No, not anymore. Look, I'd like to propose the explicit inclusion in the Party statutes that no one should be banned on account of their sexual orientation.

EG: For the 2009 Party Congress to discuss?

MC: I'd love to, and I will put it forward.

EG: Finally, Mariela, would you send your regards in your own words to all Cubans, regardless of where we live? Putting aside our ideological, philosophical and conceptual differences, don't you think that our love for Cuba can bring us together and overcome such differences?

MC: Yes, of course. Our message is 'unity in diversity'.

EG: So will we be able to live with our differences?

MC: We will overcome any difference as long as we ride together under the fundamental principles of national sovereignty.

EG: Thank you, Mariela.

MC: Thank you. Oh, I forgot a very important thing. When we talked about the Family Code, I said we're in favor of granting equal rights to both homosexual and heterosexual consensual unions. I'm talking about legal unions, not marriage.

EG: What do you mean by 'legal union'?

MC: A legal union is a same-sex marriage (laughter).

EG: Thank you very much, Mariela.

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**Final - INTERVIEW WITH MARIELA CASTRO ESPÍN,
HAVANA, DECEMBER 18, 2008**

Radio Program "La Noche se Mueve"

Miami, 1210 am

www.lanochesemueve.us

Monday to Friday from 9:00 to 10:00 p.m.

Host: Edmundo García

Symbols:

EG: Edmundo García

MC: Mariela Castro

EG: Interview with Mariela Castro Espín, Director of Cuba's National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX). Mariela, thank you so much for accepting to have this first conversation for 'La Noche se Mueve' and our audience in South Florida.

MC: Thank you for this meeting.

EG: It's been a while since we last met, so I'd like to start by offering my condolences for your mother's death. I know you loved her very much.

MC: Thank you very much.

EG: What did she mean to you and the woman you have become?

MC: Well, first of all she was a very sweet and affectionate mom who made great contributions to our education. Despite her many obligations she really looked after us and paid attention to our contradictions, because we're all so different from one another. Now that I have three children myself, I can't help wondering how she could devote so much time to every one of us, and talk and listen to and help us in times of trouble, and always with respect for what each of us was. Of course, like any other mother, she would try to set boundaries, and as we grew up we would try to set our own.

Her life story as a human being is really beautiful. As all children do, when I was a girl I wanted to be like my folks, but I didn't have it in me to be like her, because we had very different personalities and temperaments. Still, she always taught me good things. We had the usual fights children often have with their parents as part of domestic life, but I always looked up to her as a human being, for she had qualities and abilities as a woman that I could only have in my dreams. Not that I'm any less worthy; it's just that we're so different. My current job has made me go deeper into the history of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which started the work I do now, and from the professional viewpoint I have to know what they did in the past for the sake of continuity...

EG: Did Vilma ever get involved with the issues you deal with?

MC: Oh yes, absolutely. It's precisely because she started this work that I've had to study what's done so far, and I've found out they did incredible things and she searched into rather uncharted subjects and fought tooth and nail for the recognition of homosexual and transsexual rights, albeit she had more success with the latter.

EG: So she kept up with those topics?

MC: Yes, she worked along those lines.

EG: It was never disclosed.

MC: Never. I knew very little myself until 1990, when I started in CENESEX as an expert and interviewed Dr. Celestino Álvarez Lanjonchere to learn his opinion on what was being done or should be done about gays and lesbians in Cuba and all their suffering, and he described me all the things that I had no idea my mother had done, even a document she had asked him to write in general terms about homosexuality and homophobia, two unfamiliar concepts at the time, to try and convince her fellow Political Bureau members of the need to come up with a policy on homosexuals and the recognition of their rights.

EG: Is there any record of what sort of reception the document got in the Political Bureau?

MC: Not that I know of.

EG: Have you tried to find out?

MC: I'd like to, but I don't know where to begin.

EG: With your father.

MC: What he always says is that my mom was right; that she fought hard to that end and had to be very cautious because they were all very sexist men, and it was already hard for a woman to be up there with them as it was. So she was always careful and sweet and patient but managed to tough it out. Even my dad tells me that I must follow her lead and be careful and patient like her in order to succeed, but I remind him that we're two different persons with different temperaments and from different times.

EG: You have done things in a different way and been a lot pushier than Vilma when it comes to standing your ground for your ideas.

MC: Yes, because first of all my mom was a chemical engineer and I studied psychology and pedagogy and became a professor, which makes you look at things from another perspective and helps you discover and speak the right language and feedback from what others have to say, in this case my students, and you use that to review and revise your speech; that's what a teacher does. Moreover, everything the FMC had achieved in thirty years smoothed the way for me. Right now I'm writing a paper where I say the first steps taken in Cuba in favor of equal rights for women made it so much easier to break up the so-called gender stereotypes and thus **anatomize** the heterosexist pattern. In short, all the earlier efforts for the good of women and sex education laid

the groundwork for me. I threw myself into the task from the outset because the time was ripe and the circumstances were favorable, so I put two and two together and decided it was the right moment to do something.

EG: There have been setbacks.

MC: Many, at all times, and I know there will be many more!

EG: Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the Cuban Parliament, has great affection for you and believes in your ideas. However, when we met in Canada I asked him whether he would stand by your project on same-sex marriage or side up with the Catholic Church against it, he made no comment. Is same-sex marriage still a taboo subject, not to Alarcón perhaps, but to Cuban society and/or its leadership?

MC: Well, I don't think Alarcón is prejudiced, but his post involves a great deal of public responsibility and the obligation to be very careful and take his time to think about what must be done. Besides, he has got letters from a number of church leaders who oppose both same-sex marriage and adoption and sex change operations.

EG: Speaking of religious leaders, I interviewed [Vicar-General of Havana Monsignor] Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in Havana and he told me you two have had long, heated conversations. What's your view on the position of the Cuban Catholic Church now that its relations with the State are going through a true honeymoon period?

MC: Look, I've never been against any religion, on the contrary, I think...

EG: But are you an atheist?

MC: I'm a nonbeliever, as they say.

EG: Don't you ever commend yourself to God?

MC: I don't know, I commend myself to someone's trust, for instance. I can say I have faith, but in what I don't know.

EG: Alright, but do you have spiritual faith in something beyond material life?

MC: I don't know whether my faith is material or not, but as a person I believe in the circumstances and in people and in what happens around me.

EG: So how can you describe in general your conversations with Cuban Catholic and Christian Church leaders?

MC: I don't really have any links with them, only with Carlos Manuel and the people who work with him. Look, Carlos Manuel is a very wise man and a beautiful person. I have faith in Carlos Manuel (laughter), I trust him. At the beginning of the year I was very sad at my mother's decease and felt like marrying again.

EG: Did you wed your husband again?

MC: I called it a second wedding, and asked Carlos Manuel to bless my marriage.

EG: So you had a church wedding?

MC: Not a church wedding; it would have been too compelling and I'm not willing to commit myself too much, I'm up to my ears with commitments. Carlos Manuel suggested I should do it, but I told him what I needed was his wonderful human and spiritual presence, as well as all what his own spirituality entails from a cultural viewpoint. Since I was brought up in the tenets of Christianity, I can feel them all the time in his speech and constant educational messages. It was Fidel's habit of quoting the Bible in his speeches what aroused my interest, especially in the Old Testament.

EG: The Old rather than the New Testament?

MC: That's right.

EG: What parts do you like best?

MC: It's been a while since I last read it, but I usually need to go through a thing or two.

EG: I'm going to give you the New Testament as a gift.

MC: It's OK; I have it from priests who are friends of mine.

EG: Mariela, what does Carlos Manuel, held by some to be a liberal, think about your support of same-sex marriage?

MC: He even wrote something in *Palabra Nueva* about marriage and family that I liked, and he gave me some facts that I studied and kept in mind. He's glad that I don't try to tear down as traditional an institution as heterosexual marriage. Some concepts go a very long way in history and do no harm; heterosexual marriage is one of them, and there's no need to dismantle it. Others, such as the male and female stereotyping, must be dismantled, since they cause a lot of problems, including violence, as men are taught to find macho relish in violence to prove their manhood. They say women and men are raised to live in harmony, but then we found ourselves in great discord. Some things do need changing because they hurt, but it's not the case of heterosexual marriage and what it means, which is fine and makes many people happy. Therefore, we don't have to talk about same-sex marriage as long as we can come up with other concepts and categories that make gay and straight equally happy.

EG: Same-sex marriage as such is not on CENESEX's agenda then?

MC: It's not same-sex marriage what we're putting forward, but the inclusion of provisions in the Family Code to grant homosexual couples living together the same rights as heterosexual couples.

EG: But that's easy to approve.

MC: It's easy, but we want to make sure it's clear to everyone because many people are prejudiced about us, thinking we're singing the praises of same-sex marriage, since at first I said that if we want to eliminate all forms of discrimination and homophobia we had to entitle both homo and heterosexual couples to equal inheritance and personal rights.

EG: What made you change your mind?

MC: Seeing that people were reluctant, several homosexual couples who work with us in CENESEX asked me to remove that obstacle, since they'd rather live as unmarried couples without the restrictions binding on a civil marriage today, which can even make you lose your house, just to give you an example of something that must be changed.

EG: Does that still happen?

MC: Yes, it does.

EG: Can't it be prevented?

MC: Look, it's complicated, and the request comes from people who have had a really rough time of it.

EG: Would you have to take the issue all the way up to the Parliament?

MC: To the Parliament, yes. Now we're designing a small publicity campaign about our proposal of changes to the Family Code for Cuban families to grasp the advantages of those amendments, a large number of them, and the benefits they will bring. By January it should be ready for discussion with the Party and the people, so there's some consensus of opinion by the time it gets to the Parliament and more understanding about the need to change things. The only thing we request regarding homosexuality is that same-sex couples living together have the same inheritance and personal rights. Most likely they won't be granted adoption rights, but these homosexual couples I know keep telling me, 'Don't lock horns with them over adoption, for we can work it out, or marriage, for it's not that important; getting married holds no interest for us here.

EG: In other words, you should engage only in fights you can win.

MC: Exactly, but it hurt anyway. I thought if we did things like that we would continue to be seen as homophobic, but if the main beneficiaries of our work were the ones who gave me the clues to what mattered most to them, so be it. And that's what we're proposing.

EG: Which doesn't mean these issues will be put aside forever, that is, they could be taken up again sometime.

MC: Exactly, some other time, we'll probably leave it behind as our society advances and people's attitude toward these things change. We must carry on working in the meantime, talking to people and developing education and communication strategies. Otherwise it will be like with racial discrimination, which we thought abolished in Cuba but many people are still racist, except that such attitudes are forbidden by law.

EG: It's also a cultural phenomenon.

MC: But the cultural phenomenon can be changed by means of education and communication, and that's what we're doing.

EG: Mariela, in the specific case of the homosexual community, do you champion the cause of their right to join any institution or association that exists in Cuban society?

MC: I'm not sure what you mean.

EG: The homosexual community can take part in everything. It's a clear question and I'm not going to beat about the bush. For instance, there was a big debate in the U.S. during the Clinton years, concerning the presence of gays and lesbians in the military, which ended up with the 'Don't ask, don't tell' concept: don't say you're a homosexual and don't ask others about their sexual orientation. It happened in a male chauvinist culture, inside institutions seen as archetypes of machismo. What's your stance on the presence of homosexuals in the Cuban Armed Forces?

MC: Well, I guess that as the Cuban society becomes less homophobic or **homophobic**, I don't know which term is better, it will extend to all institutions, but I think the essential thing is to start with the family, where homosexuals and even transsexuals most suffer, as our studies and programs have shown. Remember that in the case of transsexuals our work covers not only their sexual orientation, but also gender identity issues.

EG: On the issue of transsexualism, which some people find so troublesome, is it true Cuba performed a sex-change operation more than 20 years ago?

MC: It was in '88, and quite successful. The subject is very well.

EG: After that one-time experience, has that subject—whose identity remains confidential—managed to lead a good life?

MC: Yes, without any problem. The subject has even got married and divorced three times (laughter).

EG: Why do you laugh?

MC: Because she's a very joyful, fun-loving person.

EG: Mariela, I'm asking you this because I've seen cases, in the U.S. and elsewhere, of people who have undergone surgery to change their sex and then have become insane or committed suicide, and even cases of men who transitioned to become females and then started to have sex with women, that is, psychologically unbalanced.

MC: There's international consensus as to the steps to follow for diagnosis and treatment.

EG: Is there a protocol?

MC: Yes, and it's applied worldwide. We have links with an International Association where we do research and close contacts with some of its doctors. [The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association] meets every two years to discuss their scientific findings, reach agreements, draw up documents and revise the protocols, and they establish how to proceed from the technical-professional viewpoint. Of course, there are places where economic interests prevail and they do it to anyone who wants to change their sex and can afford the operation, and there's where people get damaged.

EG: Cuba would never do that, right? My point is, the enemies and out-and-out critics of this project, which is CENESEX's brainchild, say they're trying to have the chance to perform these operations in Cuba at a lower cost in order to turn it into a source of profit. Of course, your answer is not for me, I'd just like to hear what you have to say about it.

MC: A resolution by the Ministry of Public Health legitimizes the work of the National Commission for the Integral Care of Transsexual Individuals, a multidisciplinary research group that I chair from CENESEX and whose first studies were recently published in a book, as well as that of a Special Health Care Center we have in a hospital under our methodological supervision. This resolution states the service is free of charge and only for Cuban citizens, not for foreigners. It's not a profit-making program.

EG: What if people from other countries go to Cuba to have surgery, some who says, for example, 'I want to be a woman'?

MC: The resolution prevents us from operating on foreigners.

EG: It's important to hear you say that, because they talk about it in other countries, and that's where my question came from. I think it's important that you make clear there's no gender reassignment surgery available to foreigners in Cuba.

MC: No, no, the resolution states it's a specialized free service for and a right of the Cubans.

EG: So foreigners must refrain from going to Cuba for that purpose.

MC: It's a non-profit health service as yet unavailable to foreigners.

EG: What's the financial cost of one operation for Cuba, taking into account that your country pays for the service after all?

MC: I've been asked before and I forgot to do the calculations, although an estimate was made for the future, since the resolution issued this year gave the go-ahead to resume surgery.

EG: No other operations so far?

MC: No, only partial reassignment surgery, that is, female-to-male mastectomy for women and testicle removal in the case of men, but the final touch of genital reconstruction is scheduled for next year. A medical team is getting ready to that effect, working with very experienced, first-class Belgian doctors who master these microsurgery techniques, more precise and refined, which produce much better results and make it possible for the patient to come through much better, even with a higher sexual response.

EG: Is this kind of surgery facing stronger moral opposition in Cuba than same-sex marriage?

MC: Yes, our churches have been complaining about it very vigorously. When you explain to the Cuban people that it's part of a treatment that will help those patients feel happier and even get over their psychological problems after so much anxiety and distress in their lives resulting from the contradiction between their biological sex and gender identity, they do understand. That's why the campaign we'll launch in 2009 will be against homophobia from January to July and against transphobia from July to December. People will learn about both concepts so they can understand it's justified from the professional and humanitarian viewpoint.

EG: Do you think you're in the majority or the minority? Leaving aside the Church, I think those programs don't enjoy great popularity in the Cuban society as a whole.

MC: With regards to society's approval, I'm in the minority. That's why we're engaged in this educational campaign to spread information. Like I said, our people understand when we present them with facts and spell out the big picture to them.

EG: So you don't know how much the operation costs...

MC: I can't remember now, but the Ministry of Public Health has the figures. I can look for it and let you know some other time. Besides, the cost changes from one country and health system to another.

EG: Are there many transsexuals waiting or is it a small percentage?

MC: Well, it's a very small percentage worldwide.

EG: You mean a minimal percentage compared to the world population at large...

MC: Yes, it's a very small number. In Cuba we have twenty-odd cases awaiting surgery.

EG: But only with the Commission's approval and recommendation?

MC: No, they've been already recommended; these are all proven transsexuals.

EG: By 'proven' you mean that psychologically speaking...

MC: Yes, they all passed every diagnosis and the only way for them is forward.

EG: Mariela, when it comes to gay rights much is said and commented about male same-sex couples, perhaps because they're less inhibited. Is female homosexuality frowned upon more than male homosexuality in Cuba?

MC: Yes, because of machismo.

EG: So machismo rears its ugly head here too?

MC: Machismo is always around, never goes away; it simply changes its shape.

EG: Even among women themselves?

MC: That's right. Straight men and women all over the world are not as disdainful of male homosexuals as they are of female ones, of whom they have little or no understanding. Lesbians are more vulnerable than men everywhere. Cuban homosexuals may be scorned and looked down on, but they're not the victims of physical attacks. Judging by reports I receive from organizations in this field, the number of women who are murdered worldwide is sky-high, and it's even worse with lesbians. Some of them are even victims of gang rape by men who pretend it's the only way to get it into their head what they're supposed to do with their sex and other things typical of the prevailing mindset in patriarchal societies.

EG: Do you work with both groups in CENESEX?

MC: Yes. Our focus on transsexuals is the result of a well-knit system that set in motion in 1979.

EG: I mean male and female homosexuals.

MC: Let me explain. Our work with transsexuals is more systematized, and we have included transvestites and other individuals from the rather broader transgender spectrum. In 2004 we started a program called OREMI for about sixty female homosexuals in Havana, who meet once a week at CENESEX, have joined several of our programs and cooperate with us to implement various strategies and research works. They have proved to be a very interesting target group; some of them are being trained to become health promoters or popular education methodologists in order to do a better job in our communities.

We've been working twice a week with transsexuals and transvestites and meeting with their families, and it's been wonderful. We have not done anything yet with either homosexual women's families or homosexual and bisexual men, who are more heterogeneous. More men are likely to come to the Center now that we're starting to organize male support groups.

EG: In the case of bisexuals, who are the least mentioned even if I'm sure you have figures too, how common are they compared to the homosexuals?

MC: Look, our studies on HIV/AIDS gave us an insight into the high rate of bisexual men in Cuba, and I mean men who have sex with other men. I don't have figures, nor do I know if there are any.

EG: Is there a bisexual female population?

MC: We have no data. In our ORAMI group we have lesbians, bisexuals and, to quote their own definition, heteroflexible women.

EG: What's that?

MC: Women who identify themselves as heterosexual but have occasional lesbian relationships.

EG: Isn't that bisexuality?

MC: They don't see themselves as either bisexual or lesbian persons.

EG: Is it because they do it only now and then?

MC: Exactly. Therefore they use that name in their group.

EG: Do you think we Cubans are a liberated nation? I read once that at least 5% of Cuban men have had male-male sex.

MC: Yes, it was the conclusion of a study about AIDS that the figure is around 5%, and they say the number is between 5 and 10% worldwide.

EG: There are cultures like the Arabic where...

MC: Okay, but don't forget the Koran condemns homosexuality!

EG: Before you're married, but not so after that.

MC: I'm not so familiar with Arabic culture, but I've noticed contradictions between what we know and what they say about their life and religion and the various interpretations of the Koran. There's a great deal of inconsistency, so I'd like to learn more about it one day.

EG: From your own experience, how do you see Cuba, and yourself, in 5 or 10 years? I ask you because I read what you write for the media. What changes do you see in the future of the Cuban society?

MC: Well, I don't know whether this is how I see it or how I'd like it to be. I recently said I'd like the socialist experiment to continue, but in a more flexible way. I'd like a socialism that makes us happier, a more glorious and dialectical socialism. From my professional position I work toward that end, and I'd like to see a similar effort in other areas where I have no business meddling in for lack of professional jurisdiction. I'd like this socialism to be more dialectical so that it can be splendid.

EG: How do you see Mariela Castro Espín 5 or 10 years from now?

MC: I think I'll still be working in CENESEX.

EG: Any independent political vocation?

MC: No, none, I don't like politics, although my work has a major impact on politics because we make proposals based on scientific research for the development of social policies. That is, I care about politics as a citizen, as a professional, as CENESEX director.

EG: Mariela, several times you have said to be in favor of lifting certain restrictions or controls which prevent ordinary Cubans from travelling, basically the so-called 'white card'. What's your opinion about that?

MC: What I've said is that I'd like that Cuban policy to be made more flexible or modified. It was enforced for protection against unfriendly U.S. policies on the Cuban people, mainly the Cuban Adjustment Act, which fosters illegal immigration and trafficking in people; the economic and financial blockade on the Cuban people's right to survive, and the violation of migration agreements by not providing the promised number of visas every year. As a result, people try to find other ways to leave. Immigrants have travelled the Florida Strait back and forth since colonial times. Furthermore, migration evolved from being just a legal figure to a matter of human nature. The world was always populated by people who emigrated, as human beings are constantly moving around in search of a place of their choice where they can settle.

EG: That's the question: what would have to happen?

MC: I think if the U.S. –and some of its European allies– stop their hostile policies, our emigration laws will surely change, as will the travel ban and many other issues. And we need the Cubans who live in the U.S. to help bring forth that change.

EG: Would a legitimate, respectful dialogue about those issues between President Barack Obama and your father be fruitful for the aspirations and preferences of the Cubans who live in the island?

MC: Absolutely. Should Obama and my father meet as presidents, on an equal footing and with respect for each other's sovereignty, many things will change for the benefit of all Cubans.

EG: Here and there.

MC: Here and there.

EG: Let's suppose, now that your father has stated several times his willingness to meet with Obama even in a third country, that Obama takes him up on his offer, but first decides to ask Mariela for advice, and he asks her: 'How do you think I should start a conversation with your father, who is the Cuban president? I mean, really!'

MC: I wouldn't know how to chat him up (laughter), he takes great care to ensure he doesn't speak out when I'm around.

EG: Why is that? Are you indiscreet sometimes?

MC: It's because I give many interviews.

EG: Is that a problem?

MC: Not really, we've talked about that.

EG: Do you ever get into arguments?

MC: Yes, all the time.

EG: Because of your interviews?

MC: That too, but we've learned to respect each other.

EG: Now that he's the President, do you talk with him and see him more often?

MC: Less often.

EG: Do you miss him?

MC: Yes, I do.

EG: So do you get mad with each other now and then?

MC: Yes, since as far as I can remember.

EG: Who gets more upset, you or your dad?

MC: Both of us.

EG: So what would be your advice to Obama?

MC: That he should pay attention, if he cares of course, to the few things my dad has said in some interviews. But first of all, that he should come. I mean Obama, not the President of the United States. Just Obama.

EG: Impossible if he's the President. So that's Mariela's advice?

MC: But he can! Your job can entail a lot of pressure, but as a human being you don't have to go by the book at all times. Presidents have wide-ranging powers, but Obama is a smart person and I think he's good at getting along and getting by in politics, complex though politics may be in the U.S., always under pressure. I'm sure he'll be the first U.S. president to come closer to Cuba without making demands or being manipulative, but with respect, because Cuba respects the U.S. and therefore the U.S. should respect Cuba. So in case anybody wants to tell him, Mariela is asking Obama to start by releasing the Cuban Five.

EG: Among the main causes of discord, say, the embargo, the Cuban Five, the travel restrictions and so on, what do you think it should be the first topic to start building a relationship with Cuba?

MC: As far as I and all Cubans are concerned, the Cuban Five. Set them free and let justice be done. That's our foremost request, and let justice move on as it should afterward, which would be wonderful even for the U.S. Such is our No. 1 priority: keep the blockade if you will, but release the Cuban Five.

EG: Let's go back to your professional life. I'd like you to tell me about domestic violence in Cuba.

MC: Women everywhere, in all patriarchal societies, are the victims of violence. I call it the pathology of power, since it's about exerting power unevenly.

EG: In the U.S., if you raise your voice to your wife you can be taken to court and issued a restraining order. How aware are Cuban men and women of their rights? Is there a law against domestic violence?

MC: We have severe laws against domestic violence and very harsh sentences, mainly for cases of sexually abused children.

EG: That would be an extreme, but domestic violence...

MC: Do you mean the more general gender-based violence?

EG: Like when a man who slaps a woman in the face.

MC: Men and women in Cuba are still unaware of the various forms of gender-based violence. Research has it that psychological and verbal abuse prevails over physical abuse, which is more obvious and easier to prove in a court of law. We recently went to the TV program *Diálogo Abierto*, where we described psychological violence as a drop of water that falls on you every day and explained that if you're not conscious of the facts you'll never learn to set limits on things, and there must be limits. Negotiation and the mutual definition of limits are part of a couple's life.

EG: Will society mediate in cases of domestic violence reported by one of the parties?

MC: Well, the law allows for that!

EG: But since it seldom happens, what's the cultural problem?

MC: It seldom happens for lack of knowledge. The FMC is launching more and more information and education campaigns to increase public awareness, especially among women, who are the main victims. But

men are also victims of their upbringing and the way manhood is portrayed all over the world, which makes them very vulnerable and likely to become victimizers. So we have a lot of work to do, because what we're doing is not enough.

EG: Is there a lot of domestic violence?

MC: According to reports, most cases seen by our Counseling Homes for Women and Families are on the qualitative side, like women who come asking for help or counsel and even legal advice. The problem is, very few ask for counsel about the most frequent psychological violence.

EG: Are the older generations more prone to domestic violence than the younger ones?

MC: It's more common among older people and decreasing among the younger ones. However, many people hold that young people's relations are violent as a rule, although they don't actually mean gender-based violence but simply violence both between and within the two sexes. But much still remains to be done in that field. We have made great progress, but not enough to be able to at least make a few changes.

EG: Mariela, you have been to the United States on two occasions.

MC: Only once, in 2002.

EG: Wait a minute: did you travel to the U.S. with a visa granted by the George W. Bush administration?

MC: Yes, it seems they didn't know me very well yet (laughter).

EG: Is that what you think? (Laughter)

MC: I don't know, they just gave me a visa. The first time I was going to a Congress but the visa came too late. I got it later on and could attend a Conference on Sexology in Los Angeles, but the only place I could see was the hotel where I stayed because we had sessions the whole day long, as is usual in these meetings. Then I did some work in Virginia and Washington, D.C., where I had a great time.

EG: How long did you stay? Tell me about your American experience.

MC: I spent 12 days in the U.S. I didn't have to work too hard to communicate because almost everybody spoke Spanish. Most people I saw were Latinos, including many Cubans and Salvadorians. The sight of so many poor and homeless people in the very capital city of the Empire was a real shock to me, as I didn't expect to see that.

EG: Did you get to see the White House?

MC: Yes, I stood there, watching it.

EG: What was in the mind of Mariela Castro Espín, the daughter of Raúl and niece of Fidel, when she laid eyes on the White House? Did you think of your family at that moment?

MC: No, no, no, not my family. It was Cuba what came to mind, and I got so mad. There were demonstrations in support of Palestine and other causes, and I felt so much rage, the rage of the world, and the arrogance of the White House. I was so annoyed!

EG: Mariela, what's left of that girl I once knew? I won't do the math, but many years ago I met a girl who even thought of becoming a dancer, who was in search of ways to express herself. I remember one day when we were talking with Antonio Gades in [Cuban dancer Lorna's] place. Whatever happened to that girl who loved going to the theater and dancing so much and wanted to do performing arts?

MC: I really enjoyed it while it lasted. I almost gave up Sexology for dancing, something our mutual friend [Cuban musician] Jorge Luis Prats advised me not to do, so I listened to him and stuck to Sexology.

EG: Was it a good piece of advice?

MC: I think so, although I didn't give up dancing for good. I kept taking dancing lessons with a retired professor, going to performances and flirting with flamenco, which I never really learned, but I had fun with it and still enjoy it very much, as I do rumba and Santeria dancing.

EG: Santeria too?

MC: I love it!

EG: Do you practice?

MC: No, no, but I like it.

EG: Has any Santeria priestess ever told you who your father is?

MC: Oshún. Another one told me I was also the daughter of Changó.

EG: Do you think you're related to Oshún?

MC: Yes, and also to Changó, to both of them.

EG: What do you have in common with Oshún?

MC: Ah, the fawning.

EG: And with Changó?

MC: The strength.

EG: Mariela, there are eight hundred thousand Cubans in Southern Florida, maybe even one million...

MC: Scratch that out: from Oshun I got the honey, not the fawning (laughter).

EG: You're every inch a Cuban but your husband is Italian. How come? How do you manage to bring things into line?

MC: Well, he's Sicilian, and Sicily has something in common with Cuba.

EG: That you're all island creatures, maybe?

MC: That too, but also our Spanish ancestors. Spain was Sicily's last important colonizer.

EG: What do you tell your Italian husband when you're angry?

MC: I'd rather not say (laughter).

EG: Mariela, again, there are seven or eight hundred thousand Cubans in Southern Florida. Some of them don't want anything to do with Cuba anymore, let alone the Revolution, Fidel and Raúl; they just dream of and live a different history. However, there's a group of Cubans who favor reconciliation despite their differences. What's your opinion about that Cuban community unmarked by hatred toward Cuba? Will there be any room for them in Cuba's future?

MC: Hey, it would be lovely if we could come together and live in greater harmony! I wish they could find some room here, for I also believe that most Cubans who live abroad have set up their own associations, which is a very positive and beautiful attitude toward the reestablishment of cordial relations. In my opinion, the more the tension between our two countries is relieved, the better our reunion will be.

EG: Two years ago there was a debate in Cuba about what came to be known as the "e-mail war" and eventually the so-called "gray decade" of Cuban culture. But other things were discussed, such as the UMAP (Military Units in Support of Production) and the views on homosexual behavior at that time. Did all that have any impact on your struggle?

MC: Look, it was a chance to put my point of view. I always see opportunities in times of contradiction, and I liked the fact that there was a debate for people to speak their mind and get it all out, which they did.

EG: Did you talk about those problems with your dad then?

MC: Yes, we talked about it; he was paying careful attention...

EG: How do you think he was feeling about the debate?

MC: He kept up with what was going on and sometimes wanted to know my opinion. I always told him I thought it was a good thing, since society needed debate to move forward, and he paid attention. Never did I see him worried, except for the smooth progress of a productive, nationwide discussion that was part of a social project which concerned everyone, and as such it should move in the right direction.

EG: What would you say were the reasons for the mistakes during that period in this, your regular field of work?

MC: Well, everything I learned about it –keep in mind I didn't live through those days– came from my mom and dad, who always said it was wrong to scorn homosexuals. That's what I grew up hearing. I remember I would come home from the university complaining about things I had seen in that process to strengthen people's revolutionary principles which they used to have it in for the homosexuals. As a Young Communist League leader in my school, I managed to prevent any homosexual from being punished. Every time I made it clear to them that I was against those procedures, they agreed that it was the wrong thing to do.

EG: I asked you before about the presence of homosexuals in the military because of the “don't-ask-don't-tell” policy we've seen in the U.S. But what about political organizations like the Communist Party or the Young Communist League?

MC: I believe the Communist Party should legitimize homosexual membership. We all know there are homosexuals in its ranks, only they're still in the closet. Some of the gay young men who collaborate with CENESEX are Party leaders in their workplaces and quite respected by everyone.

EG: Is by any chance the ‘don't-ask-don't-tell’ compromise silently happening in Cuba too?

MC: Well, some Party members don't mind being in the open and they still work as leaders.

EG: But members-to-be are not questioned about it anymore, right?

MC: No, not anymore. Look, I'd like to propose the explicit inclusion in the Party statutes that no one should be banned on account of their sexual orientation.

EG: For the 2009 Party Congress to discuss?

MC: I'd love to, and I will put it forward.

EG: Finally, Mariela, would you send your regards in your own words to all Cubans, regardless of where we live? Putting aside our ideological, philosophical and conceptual differences, don't you think that our love for Cuba can bring us together and overcome such differences?

MC: Yes, of course. Our message is ‘unity in diversity’.

EG: So will we be able to live with our differences?

MC: We will overcome any difference as long as we ride together under the fundamental principles of national sovereignty.

EG: Thank you, Mariela.

MC: Thank you. Oh, I forgot a very important thing. When we talked about the Family Code, I said we're in favor of granting equal rights to both homosexual and heterosexual consensual unions. I'm talking about legal unions, not marriage.

EG: What do you mean by 'legal union'?

MC: A legal union is a same-sex marriage (laughter).

EG: Thank you very much, Mariela.

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