

Gender and Communism: Equality For All?
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As Americans, we are used to seeing the signs of gender biases, the role or stigma of a feminist, and even the radical attitudes demonstrated through sexually based crimes in the news, in comments, and even in our own thoughts. The United States has had years of injustice put upon its people from those in power, but what happens when the power stresses the importance of equality, the need for acceptance, and the liberal mind set to change things?

Within Cuba, immediately after the overthrow of the old government, came the representation of the “new woman”. This new woman was in charge of changing mindsets and setting up a home in the house of government for the representation of women. Their triumphs in the revolution were idolized, and acknowledged. Their presence was seen and was vibrant. They stood for the change stating that all women were equal to men in the home, in the work place, and even on the streets. However, over 50 years later, the customs and internal ideals that were vibrant before the revolution took over are still in place, and the machismo is still present with his use of piropo. How can a country fully eradicate a sexist ideal of gender, when the heads of government cannot even acknowledge there is still the presence of sexist ideas ongoing in everyday life? What could be done to ensure that man and women are truly equal?

History and Background

Within Cuba’s socialist government, they take the Marxist idea of the family as the center, and to change the ideas of society, they needed to start at the center. The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) addressed early on the traditional “doble jornada” or the "work by day on the job and work at home taking care of their husband and children". Once the government enacted the Family Code in 1975, which guaranteed equal rights for women in the home, it was reported that gender relations had improved (Sweig, 2009). However, the term "gender relations" in this sense was a vague concept that identified how women and men should participate within

the family atmosphere. The code identified how partners should act if one partner worked and the other stayed at home, and how both partners have the right to practice their profession or skills, while maintaining a balance and fulfillment of obligations within the home life (Luciak, 2007). This Family Code was seen as a progressive act that mandated changes in the private relationship of marriage towards a relationship built on gender equality. Specifically, the code was significant because it truly sought to change gender relations at the core of society—within the family itself. The FMC believed their role in making the Family Code a reality led to progressive changes in women's equality, labor standards, and reproductive health.

On the other hand, the Family Code stressed the importance of gender roles within the family, and slightly minimized, while reaffirming the idea of the father figure. Within the Code, the Constitution stated the code is the state's protection of the family, the motherhood, and matrimony (Hamilton, 2012). This suggested that single, female-headed households are interpreted as negative; presumably because female heads were assumed to not work outside the home at that time. Therefore, the Family Code was in part a response to the increase in female headed households, and consensual unions—instead of the preferred family unit, with its patriarchal traditions and men's authority in the domestic sphere—thereby taking one step forward, and two steps back for gender equality.

Old and New Attitudes

With this initial focus on women and the progressive attitudes towards women's role in society, one would think that feminism would be an idealism the government party would endorse. However, FMC officials were reluctant to embrace the idea of feminism after publishing the Family Code, which is still identified as one of the most progressive legal frameworks in support of women's equality for its time in Cuba. Unfortunately, feminism was

“rejected because it was perceived as representing Western notions of women’s emancipation that were in conflict with the Cuban [political] model” (Luciak, 2007, p. 19). Eradication of capitalist class relations was supposed to eliminate the gender equality in the home and in the culture. Ideally, socialism was supposed to liberate women by putting them to work. Once women emancipated themselves economically, women would be considered free. Therefore, in this view, the "family unit" and the roles associated with it subordinated women, keeping them in the position that kept them in their place—slightly contradicting the Family Code’s values. Later, the idea of feminism became a confrontational topic within the FMC. It appeared to split the group, with some officials supporting the gender concept, with the notions of feminism, publicly, whereas others kept to the traditional views of the Family Code and what it meant (Luciak, 2007). This view, of accepting the ideals of feminism and keeping to the traditions, embodied the notion in what the FMC wanted in the “new man” to believe. This "new man" would believe and accept the new example of women and their roles within society.

When asked cross generationally, the youngest generation perceive the change in gender roles as a natural progression. The young males specifically say they should share in domestic chores since they see women more in terms of workers and students (Gonzales, 2011). Gonzales (2011) went on to state that although this trend is not universal, there is a direction that seems to have arrived in the mindsets that oppose the model represented by the mothers’ of today’s younger generation, viewing the previous generation of women as very liberated and independent, but still enslaved to everything and everyone in regards to the home (Gonzales, 2011). Froines (1993) addressed how even within the FMC, there is a clear generation gap between the older and younger generations of women. According to the FMC’s research, it was implied that the younger generation do not see the need for a women’s organization because they

grew up in an atmosphere of greater equality—including this concept of "gender relations" (Froines, 1993). However, with this increased idea of gender equality, there is still the underlying presence of the oppositional voices of feminism, in a male-dominated, "machista" culture.

Gender, Education, and Economics

The FMC has stressed women's integration into the work force as a worker or a socially useful volunteer, in hopes to pave a path for equality and as a commitment to help develop the country. However, in Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez (2013), we see that women make up 49.9 percent of the total population in Cuba, but we only see 37.5 percent of the total employment rate, for the entire country, is represented by women. Going one step further, within that same Labor Force Differentials, by Gender, breakdown, women are a higher percentage, than men, with a "Higher" Educational level (54.% women, 45.7% men) (Mesa-Lago & Perez-Lopez, 2013). Woman with their degrees in areas that would engage the knowledge they had learned tend to feel uncomfortable, unintentionally inferior, and out of place when they enter the work force with their new knowledge because it is an area that is dominated by primarily male workers. Froines (1993) interviewed women who worked in the field of physics and computer sciences. One woman admitted that she still runs into the feeling that woman have to keep proving themselves in the workforce, and even more so in some scientific fields that are typically harder for women than for men (Froines, 1993). Unfortunately, this interview still shows the gendered differences within the work force, thereby affecting the economic and social development of Cuba's socialist plan. The types of jobs available are also affecting the ability to obtain one as a woman. Factory workers and professionals, who are typically men, face unemployment, and those who can find jobs tend to find them in the tourist industry—which is the only job market that seems to be perpetually growing. In response to the singular industry

expansion, Cuba has attempted to expand trade with other countries in areas such as research, education and publishing to keep those areas of industry, and jobs, alive. However, this trade still directs others in those industries to leave the country. This trade and unemployment additionally connect because since men are the ones holding down the jobs, women are the ones who will get passed over for jobs when openings come up simply because the companies will want to hire men who need a job.

Dr. Anicia Garcia (2014) presented on social developments in Cuba specifically targeting some challenges Cuba currently faces. One of the challenges mentioned was the inequalities that income and gender play within the structure. Dr. Garcia (2014) went into detail explaining how even when the pay should be equal for each individual there were still discrepancies based on your gender, based on the job you went to work in. Typically, there were differences in work because of what was considered “woman’s work” i.e. the jobs that women were typically drawn to—such as child care, working with the elderly, and specifically working in hospitals to assist those who were in remission or recovery. These jobs are typically paid less and were held solely for woman in some instances. Another discrepancy that woman would face was the idea of maternity issues. Maternity roles affect the dynamic of the family, which then affects the monetary gain of the individual and of the family.

In some instances, women did not have the chance to further their education with this trend of dropping out of school due to an early pregnancy. In a country where abortions are free and on demand when needed, Froines (1993) discovered those girls who grew up without the self esteem and the opportunity to identify goals to help them feel motivated to complete their education, they were more likely to have faced the sexual double standard by, shockingly, other women in Cuba. Interestingly, women expressed the strongest prejudice against women about

how premarital sex and infidelity were wrong for women, but these same women articulated how they have the same rights as men—including, shockingly, sexual rights (Froines, 1993). Problems that Hamilton (2012) found when exploring on darker aspects within relationships (such as domestic violence or this sense of inequality) that, when asked, were found to create some reactions of embarrassment from some individuals, mainly women. Hamilton (2012) found that these topics may embarrass a socialist society based on its principle of total social and economic equality. Thereby asking about these potential issues may challenge the moral legitimacy or practical functioning of the regime and, by extension, even the identity of an individual within that regime (Hamilton, 2012).

Additionally, the demands of activism, in terms of work and education, have sometimes necessitated the sacrifice of sexual liaisons and children, thereby closing the door on having equality in some romantic partnerships. Unfortunately, for those woman who did not go the academic or work related route, they may be experiencing other stressors than those who decided to go down an academic or labor related path. So “if a women’s needs for identity, for self-esteem, for achievement, and finally for expression of her unique human individuality are not recognized by herself or others in her culture, she is forced to seek identity and self-esteem in the other channels open to her: the pursuit of sexual fulfillment, motherhood and the possession of material things” (Friedan, 1962, p. 315). Essentially, what Cuban women come to find is that they have an added pressure to become wives and mothers, especially when they are in these work and education areas for a majority of their time. When Cuban women, who may fall into a motherhood and marriage only track, based on their lack of self-esteem or enjoyment in education or other pursuits, they might be more openly accepting of piropo from males.

Sexism In The Streets

Piropo is understood as a “flirtatious remark,” “personal comment,” and “amorous compliment” typically used in Latin American culture. What makes piropo a challenge within the socialist society is that it is targeted towards women and typically used by the men who subscribe to “old masculinities”. Moore (1996) studied piropo, and even thought it was understood and described as "sexist comments" in textbooks, teachers and other community members continue to be teach that idea since it is seen as part of Hispanic culture. In the study, it was shown, by the Spanish speaking participants interviewed, that the custom of giving piropo is not only seen as a "safe" outlet for men's feelings, it was also accepted by society (Moore, 1996). Moore (1996) went on to explain the damage a woman may feel if she is not a recipient of piropo. All native speakers said that some piropos were made in public for others to hear and approve (Moore, 1996). Of the 52 women interviewed, 28 female native speakers said they received piropo on the streets, in restaurants, in university classrooms, in public and in private settings (Moore, 1996). Of those 52 women interviewed, only six had never received piropo, however they had heard piropo in both public and private settings (Moore, 1996). Going back to Moore's original point of how must those six women feel? They have not received this typical compliment, that is based on appearance, in a culture that embraces it. Males and females have a defined idea of what beauty is, and when someone does not embody those ideals in a public sphere, what does it do to a person's self-esteem?

Hamilton (2012) offered insight to research conducted in the early twenty-first century that suggested many Cuban men identified masculinity measured in part by the number of sexual partners and by having a woman “in the home”. The performance of machismo is found when a male may boast about his sexual exploits and partners as part of his construction of a “mujeriego” or womanizing persona. This type of male typically does not want to be tied down,

or for his partner to know where he is, or to be jealous. At the same time, he expects that his partner will take care of things for him even if she is not living with him, and he wants to have children in order to pass on his last name. Therefore, this type of man perpetuated the double standard which emphasizes the ideal of male sexuality—or that men are brought up to be sexually active—remains in the mindset of the family unit—where Marxist perspective and Cuban traditions would have us to understand as the basic unit of society. In essence, “just as women’s narratives of love, marriage, and missing men provide clues to a both dominant values of masculinity and the diversity of men’s expectation and experiences, so too male narrators’ stories about their female partners point to ways of thinking about changing Cuban femininities” (Hamilton, 2012, p. 112).

Concluding Thoughts

Sadly, with all the progress the FMC made early on, there has been an overemphasis on the legal achievements of recognizing the needs for challenging the traditional thinking, in order to move towards a productive and substantial gender equality. However, that is not to say their progress did not stand the test of time. With the clear differences in opinion from younger generations in regards to gender equality, we know there have been some strides made. Therefore, it is the utmost importance to focus attention on eradicating the machismo mentality, or at the very least educating women of their worth and well being, so they can feel confidence with their independence within society. The problem is that until the government party and FMC leadership acknowledge an issue, little will change. Additionally, the simple addressing of problems that are perceived as taboo in contemporary Cuba pose a problem. Therefore, if we can not even ask questions to see where we stand, how will we know where to make strides forward to actually address a problem?

As Jose Marti said, “No nation can be happy if it does not have equilibrium of feminine and the masculine in equality of conditions” (Luciak, 2007, p. 110). Therefore, it is up to the people to keep progression moving, to keep women held at such high esteem, and to identify how each woman should be treated within the country. No woman should feel as if she needs to resort to accepting sexist comments, and kept within the home because that is what her culture says she should do. Only when all women stand up and say they will not accept this type of behavior any longer, will the lasting effects of the equality truly be made.

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