



Women's Work: Cuba's Advances in Gender Equity

The following is excerpted from a report, commissioned and edited by the Platform for Innovation and Dialogue with Cuba, and prepared by Teresa Lara Junco, to update the 2013 report on Gender Equality in Cuba and the Role of Women Building Cuba's Future from the Center for Democracy in the Americas. For information on the full-length Spanish-language report, please contact platform@cupaplatform.org

PROLOGUE

The global COVID-19 pandemic has made it clearer than ever that women's work is not only urgent and essential, but also severely undervalued. Women not only make up a large part of the essential services and healthcare workforces, but also carry out the majority of at-home care work that keeps the economy and society running.

Even before the crisis, a new wave was building in the movement for gender equality, calling attention not only to the discrimination women face, but also to the enormous value of work that is often "invisible." As a [report](#) by OXFAM International points out, the invisibility of this work leads to an increase in economic inequality, with women of color, poor women and women in developing countries experiencing the most intense impacts. The imbalance grows increasingly urgent in the context of climate change, political instability, and a global pandemic.

As the world asks, "How can we emerge from the pandemic in a better place than where we were before?" the question of gender equity looms large. Will women be recognized for their contributions to the battle against COVID-19? How much ground will they have lost in the workforce while staying home to care for their families? And how can we build societies that recognize the value of *care*, and equitably distribute the burdens and the joys of providing it?

Eight years ago, the Center for Democracy in the Americas published *Women's Work*, a report led by Sarah Stephens to analyze Cuba's progress toward gender equality since the 1950s, and to examine whether that progress could be sustained moving forward.

Cuba is an important case study for the global women's movement and the struggle for gender equality. As outlined in *Women's Work*, early efforts by revolutionary leaders to incorporate women's rights as a key part of the political and social project have placed Cuba ahead in international analysis of indicators that include mother and child well-being, the representation of women in the professional and political sphere, and access to education and health. In many ways, the island nation is seen as a beacon in the region for women's sustainable development. And yet, as the report points out, the cultural legacy of *machismo* looms large, and Cuban women, like women from other countries around the world, are still working "the second shift" at home.

The 2013 report ends with a quote from a Cuban woman reflecting on her hopes for the coming decade. She said: "I want to see women relaxing. Women are constantly working, and thinking about home and jobs. Women work twice. And, we have extended families, spaces and family grouping that women attend to.

Women are peacemakers and mediators in households. They are always ‘on.’ Now it is possible to buy cars and houses. The change in our economy will oxygenate the life of women. We can think of having our own room, maybe even a house.”

In this 2021 update (research carried out in 2020), which is intended to be read as a companion to the original, we look at Cuban women in the new decade. The struggles that Cuban women face are in many ways like those we experience in other countries, but the Cuban context is politically, socially and culturally unique. Women in Cuba take advantage of the opportunities that their Cuban citizenship affords them, while continually seeking creative solutions to the challenges they still face: from efforts to end domestic violence, to popular anti-racism education, and new working groups on the care economy. Cuban women are important visionaries not only for the future of Cuba, but also for the transformation of global societies.

Our report begins with a section on **Cuba in the Global Context**, which presents a brief synopsis of the main changes Cuba underwent between 2013, the year that Women’s Work was originally published, and mid-2020. This section illustrates Cuban women’s inspirational commitment to continue advancing toward well-being for themselves and their families. Picking up where the 2013 report left off, we share the stories of Cuban women who are struggling to achieve a fuller life, even in the midst of economic structures that perpetuate patriarchy, despite the political will for transformation and a variety of initiatives and regulations associated with gender equity.

This section highlights the most significant event for Cuba in the past nine years in terms of international politics: U.S. President Barack Obama’s intent to change U.S. policy toward Cuba during his second term. By making a convincing argument that the old politics of isolation had failed, and offering guidelines for a historical evolution of policy, the Obama administration began to ease tensions for Cuba. However, this endeavor stopped short when former President Donald Trump assumed power in 2017, reversing course on policy towards Cuba and unleashing an aggressive approach, including financial persecution and intensification of economic sanctions, towards the island nation.

This section also looks at the post-pandemic regional context and its impact on the economic and social development of Latin America, the Caribbean and Cuba. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Latin America and the Caribbean at a time of economic weakness and macroeconomic vulnerability; the period 2014-2019 had already reported the lowest growth in regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the 1950s (0.4%). The health crisis has now intensified the region’s biggest economic and social crisis in decades, with strong negative effects on employment, the fight against poverty and the reduction of inequality.

In this context of economic crisis, pandemic and harsh sanctions, Cuba stands out for its success reducing the number of Covid-19 cases and deaths. Although the island is experiencing a dramatic increase in cases at the time of publishing (April 2021), the country has suffered fewer per capita illnesses and deaths than most of its neighbors. Cuban institutions have developed five vaccine candidates, two of which are in the final stage of clinical trials and have already been administered to segments of the population on an emergency basis. The country expects to vaccinate all of the population by the end of 2021. Cuba has also provided medical support to twenty-six countries, including several Caribbean islands, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Mexico, Argentina and Peru. Nonetheless, the crisis has been felt acutely by Cuban citizens who are struggling to maintain functioning daily lives and feed themselves during lockdown—a burden which is largely assumed by women.

The next section, **Expanding the Commitment to Gender Equality**, updates the information on progress in gender equity in six key areas detailed in the original Women’s Work report. Specifically, we review the situation of women before the Revolution and after, in terms of rights to education, health, employment, social protection and political participation.

This section also highlights the new legislative efforts related to inclusion and social justice endorsed in the Magna Carta of the Republic of Cuba, which was revised and approved in 2019. We also look at pathways for further change that have been created through a national debate – marked by unprecedented levels of public critique – between government institutions, academics, civil society and activists on issues such as gender-based violence, racism, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

In the section **New Risks and Current Challenges**, we describe the very complex current moment and consider how the risks to women’s continued progress toward equality, as raised in the original report, have played out. Economic scarcity continues to present a major challenge to the island’s efforts to become more prosperous and sustainable, with factors including low economic productivity, external debt, high dependence on food imports, droughts, hurricanes and the deepening U.S. economic embargo. These make improvements in Cuban women’s well-being a constant challenge, and necessitate huge efforts to overcome economic and cultural barriers and achieve new opportunities.

As the section discusses, Cuban women participate in all economic activities in the state and non-state sectors, in household activities, and in care work. Their actions are critical, although not fully recognized. This report includes analysis of the status of women in some sectors of society, their participation and presence, according to employment, area of residence, age groups and skin color.

A decrease in female employment in the state sector reveals that increasing women’s participation in the professional workforce is not sufficient to achieve well-being. Many women, despite having the same rights, training, and legal social protection as men, do not have the same opportunities. They are forced to make decisions about their lives and careers that factor in the domestic roles that they are expected to fulfill, a burden created for them by both cultural norms and a lack of services or resources for family care. This point is demonstrated by a statistic showing that 36.4% of Cuban women of working age are dedicated to domestic work, a figure similar to that of the greater Latin American region, despite Cuba having overall higher indicators and legal protections for women’s equality.

The section looks at the factors that negatively affect Cuban women today. One ongoing challenge is that many Cuban women still do not possess their own economic resources and so are unable to develop their own ventures. As more Cuban men and women move toward self-employment and the small business sector in order to make ends meet, women face specific pros and cons. For instance, while self-employment can offer higher income, state employment offers social security and the promise of paid leave in the case of illness, childbirth or even pandemic. Race and educational level also factor into professional opportunities. There is a sense that women are still walking the path toward gender equity – and that many objectives are yet to be achieved.

Therefore, in the section titled **Women Leading the Way Forward**, we share interviews with Cuban women of various ages who reflect on the LGBTQ movement, Afro-Cuban identity, and the challenges of making time for both family and professional life. A focus on intersectionality makes visible the most significant life differences for Cuban women according to age, sexual orientation, skin color, and territoriality.

We also look at the new Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, recently approved in a popular referendum, which explicitly recognizes all people’s rights. We consider the legal mechanisms currently under development for guaranteeing the exercise of the rights and duties of all citizens, with equality, inclusion and social justice, expressed in access to opportunities and confronting all forms of discrimination based on skin color, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, territorial origin, religious belief, age and any other distinction. These mechanisms will become part of the government’s official plans for the development of the nation through 2030.

The changes will be borne out in the Family Code, which is intended to cover the duties and rights of families. The section also discusses the basis for the creation of the law against gender-based violence and other legislative actions to protect the rights of all people, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

We are issuing this report now in order to address the current realities and the challenges, and to spark new dialogue on the advancement of gender equality in Cuba. It comes at a time when there are still unmet needs, lags in moving beyond outdated gender stereotypes, and inequalities in responsibility for domestic and care work between the State, the family, and society as well as between women and men.

We hope the report will engage readers in an evidence-based, conceptual and practical debate around the most important ways to analyze gender equality in a changing world and inspire new thinking on how to close the gender opportunity gap.

TESTIMONIES

The following testimonies are excerpted from the full report. Based on interviews with the author, they provide a look into women's professional and personal expectations and challenges, in their own words.

Addaynis Fernández García

Addaynis is a young professional woman employed in the state sector. In this profile, she reflects on the economic and time challenges that becoming an institutional professional in Cuba entails, and how it has impacted her plans to become a mother.

Since the beginning of her training, Addaynis Fernández García has had a clear objective: to grow professionally and achieve financial independence. Now, at the age of 29, she is a Commercial Specialist at ENERGOIMPORT, a Cuban import-export energy company that is part of the state sector. Currently, her work as a specialist in foreign trade is professionally rewarding; it has allowed her to develop communications and relationship building skills and is a vitally important occupation in the country's electricity sector. Nevertheless, it does not fully meet her economic needs.

Her Life Projects

Addaynis accepted her job at Energoimport simply because she needed work, rather than because she knew much about foreign trade. Her interest in the work grew little by little, and before long, she fell in love with it.

She has continued to work in the same company, where she is motivated by the professional challenges and growth opportunities afforded her. Through her job, she has attended several postgraduate courses on foreign trade and languages, and has also learned skills in management and problem solving.

"I truly see working in the foreign trade area as a life project. It is something that motivates me to improve myself every day and to learn new things. In life, everything is a sacrifice, since the first thing we sacrifice as human beings when we decide to improve ourselves is time," she explains, adding, "A lot of study time and effort must be invested to achieve our goals, whatever they may be. Maintaining a position will always require time and constant improvement. There are always new things to learn and things to innovate."

Her Challenges

For Addaynis, one of the biggest challenges was her training as an engineer at the Technological University of Havana José Antonio Echeverría, known as CUJAE, every Saturday for six long years. While wonderful in many ways, the course required tremendous effort on the part of Addaynis and her family. After graduating, Addaynis says she felt an enormous emptiness, and realized that she would always live with a need for constant improvement. Now, one of her goals is to get a master's degree.

The Future

"In the future, I hope to be a mother and get a master's degree that allows me to improve my work status, with fair economic gains that differ from my current ones."

Addaynis expresses that her biggest limitation is income, since, despite being a professional and continuing to work hard every day, she does not feel that her level of compensation as a worker in the state sector is fair.

Her situation is not unique; in Cuban society there is no certainty that a even very successful and busy professional life will allow a person to become financially independent. As she describes it, "The pyramid is inverted, in a society where knowing is not power." In other words, professional jobs requiring intense educational training are often less well paid than independent work that does not require a particular academic background.

According to Addaynis:

Women spend most of their time carrying out tasks that are not for them, only. This is because, generally, although the Cuban woman works outside the home, she is also responsible for the house and is the one in charge of cooking, attending to the elderly, taking care of children, cleaning the house and so on. In my particular case, I am a lucky woman since I have a man who shares the household chores with me, and that allows for the time that we spend doing our own chores to be minimal. Our society has advanced, and I hope it will continue to advance in this area where men and women have the same rights.

Addaynis has always thought that she will wait until turning 30 to have children, so that she could fulfill her professional goals before becoming a mother. She reflects, "Children are an immense responsibility. No book can teach us how to raise a child or how it feels to be a mother. It is a unique reality for each woman and I want to live that reality in the not too distant future."

Anonymous

The 32-year-old woman featured in this profile, who asked to remain anonymous, is an industrial engineer and entrepreneur. Like many other Cuban women and men, she has transitioned to the non-state sector in hopes of more flexibility and income potential, and she is passionate about using entrepreneurship to achieve positive social and economic development outcomes.

"Maria" is a 32-year-old woman from Havana who identifies professionally as a marketing specialist. She positions herself in the field of entrepreneurship, and is interesting in supporting the undertakings of other people in this growing Cuban sector. Maria explains, "I am passionate not only about starting a business, but also supporting economic and social development through entrepreneurship with purpose. While I develop my own ideas, I also receive a stable income from my employer, thus creating some economic balance during a time of crisis, like we are in now."

"My life project is to promote responsible entrepreneurship and develop an entrepreneurial ecosystem. No matter what project I am working on at a given time, I will always be contributing to this bigger life project."

She has found her main challenge to be her country's regulations for the non-state sector: "... because the Cuban regulatory framework is very restrictive, little innovation is made in the Cuban entrepreneurial ecosystem. Entrepreneurs pay very high taxes that do not allow for the risk of economic loss."

This young woman has managed to bring together her passion and work that pays. "I decided to enter the private sector in 2013, because I had family financial support and low income as a worker in a state company. I began my first project in that year, which lasted until 2017. After taking a one-year break for health reasons, I began to work in an institution where I support other entrepreneurs while also undertaking my second independent project... The sacrifice has been the time invested in developing the projects and living with low personal income in order to get this off the ground. Although I do not feel that it has been a sacrifice, really, because I have done it with the awareness that it is worth it and I enjoy it."

Maria's start-up is limited to operation in Cuba only. Her aspiration is to "continue in another country, and start a family."

Saray Watson Milanés

Saray works in the state center. In this short testimony, she reflects on her identities as Afro-Cuban, a manager and a head of household.

"I am proud of my race. I work in a state work center, in the foreign trade sector. For me, feeling Black is the essence of my being and I have adopted it as a flag by showing my Black features with confidence. I also try to heal my soul and stay in shape by exercising daily with walks through the streets of my city.

"The work I do is gratifying on a professional level because I have gained knowledge and I feel useful in performing my role. A job change in 2002 led me to work with the CEO of my current company, to whom I previously served as secretary at another office. When he left that position, he asked me to continue working with him, but now as a manager. I can confirm that I like what I do, despite decreases in external motivations, which, in my opinion, are less and less.

"I am the head of my household, and bear all the responsibility for distributing tasks among the members of my household. In this way, I focus on my main challenges, which are the care and education of my son and our economic support, having to satisfy all my needs with the salary I earn."

Reina Estrella Herrera Acosta

Reina is a 70-year-old woman with two university degrees. She is satisfied with the academic career that she built coming of age in Revolution Cuba, and now continues to work, both for passion and economic sustenance.

Many publications have predicted that the Cuban population will shift to an older demographic only when it has reached certain benchmarks that would allow this scenario to play out successfully. However, Cuba has already become one of the oldest populations in the hemisphere, and the population over 60 is facing many challenges, including economic ones. In Reina's case, she has been able to resolve them by continuing to work in her chosen field.

Reina Estrella Herrera Acosta, 70, who has two university degrees under her belt and many achievements, tells us:

"When I graduated from my first degree, in Library Sciences, I was initially placed to work in the library of Casa de las Americas (an institution designed to carry out sociocultural relationships with other Latin American countries). But then Casa management told me 'the teachers are Fidel's' (editor's note: this meant that it was at Fidel Castro's discretion to place teachers in the positions where they were needed) and that I should present myself for work at the University of Havana (UH). In 1973, I started as a professor in Technical Scientific Information and Library Studies and became director of a department.

"I completed my postgraduate studies in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), and I was the 2nd doctor in Library and Information Sciences in the country. I have helped to write several study plans, authored textbooks, taught undergraduate and graduate courses, and managed scientific degree processes as part of faculty and university commissions, and as a member of the national degree commission."

Reina Estrella is retired, but has returned to work full time because, "I like what I do, I still have the capacity, recognition and support of the workforce." She tells us, without trying, everything she has dedicated her professional life to is has turned into her life project, which, in her opinion, is very good.

Her Life

Born in the center of Havana to a Black family, the second daughter of a carpenter father and a stay-at-home mother, Reina was surrounded by the affection of two sisters, a brother, a grandmother and aunts. Between conversations about furniture, books, plants, internet and Tai Chi, the tenured professor and consultant at the University of Havana, Faculty of Communication reflects on her work.

"Professionally, it is very rewarding--teaching is beautiful. It is a great joy to find graduates who remind me with affection and gratitude of forgotten anecdotes from more than 50 years ago. Between salary and retirement income, I earn about 3,000 pesos a month, which has been enough to live modestly so far. The future is uncertain. Due to the current global economic conditions, I do not think that in the near future I will be able to maintain the job and, therefore, the economic level."

Challenges

Many are the challenges that women and men in Cuba face, personally, professionally and socially. For Reina Estrella, the challenges are in "the day to day to day; each new academic year or task has been a challenge; in

the personal aspect, the loss of the elderly and the distancing of the young." With her age, she aspires to "achieve an adequate level of physical, mental and economic health." She did not think about having children, "at least in this lifetime," as she said.

Her household consists of herself and her older sister, and she says that they share responsibilities and live together harmoniously. She appreciates having full discretion over her income.

She has done with her life what she wanted, and does not consider it to have been a sacrifice. She is satisfied with the results of a life dedicated to her profession and academics.

Raiza Hernández Baguer

Raiza is a doctor and professor, who continues to work and enjoy working despite reaching retirement age. She has benefitted by serving abroad, via Cuban state medical contracts, but also reflects on economic limitations of her current work.

Raiza Hernández Baguer, a Cuban public health worker, has already fulfilled her duties and could now opt for retirement. However, she continues to work – not out of obligation, but by choice. A specialist physician and professor at the University of Medical Sciences, Raiza spends much of her time studying in order to maintain the categories of achievement she has reached with much effort and dedication.

She has dedicated her entire working life to a hospital, which – like all Cuban medical facilities – is part of the state system. She followed her calling to study medicine, without ever even considering other pathways, and then also ended up in the world of teaching. She says that she has been pleased to teach, as well, although she does not believe she is fairly compensated for it. When she reflects on the limitations and benefits of her occupation, she speaks positively of the benefits she enjoyed via the opportunity to serve abroad, under the conditions set by the state. On the other hand, she says that restrictions against employment with multiple workplaces and a lack of payment for seniority are limiting.

Raiza is gratified by her profession, and proud of the contribution she makes to the development and well-being of her society. Still, she also regrets that she does not receive what she feels to be fair financial compensation for all the tasks she performs. As she explains, her motivations for continuing are only "moral and social."

Her hopes

Raiza built her life project around her work. She is also married with two daughters. As the matriarch of her home, this Afro-Cuban woman holds decision-making power over the use of her income. She recalls facing various bureaucratic challenges over the course of her career, including around finding an advancement path that would allow her to continue growing as a doctor without taking on administrative positions she did not aspire to. Her primary goal now is to obtain the highest academic category within the University of Medical Sciences, and to this end she still spends a lot of her time studying.

Invisible sacrifices

For her, the biggest sacrifices have been the hours spent away from her family and children, whom she says are "to be enjoyed and give continuity in life." First there was the time she spent studying and obtaining her degrees, and then there was the time at work she spent picking up "other people's tasks."

Annia Duany Navarro

Annia is a medical psychiatrist who is rewarded by her work, but faces the struggle of balancing it with her home life.

Annia Duany Navarro begins by sharing her feelings about her race and her body: "I am Black. I feel good about myself, my color and my physique." Annia is a medical specialist in psychiatry, who in addition to delivering psychiatric services, works as head of the teaching department of the hospital where she works.

She describes her pride and enjoyment in her career: "I always wanted to study medicine, and I feel motivated and professionally gratified, because psychiatry is the medical specialty that works the most with the interior of the human being. Everything related to the human mind and human behavior is very interesting to me. In my personal career, all I have done is study to scale each professional level reached and do the best work I can."

"Although I have financial limitations, I feel I have benefitted from my career from a spiritual point of view, by being able to see people improve their lives, and also from teaching: seeing other professionals grow and knowing that, in one way or another, my work is part of that growth.

"In my family nucleus, I have the responsibility to guide and educate my two children and cooperate with my parents. I have all the power over my income, but no chance to increase it.

"At present, I dedicate 10-12 hours a day to my job, 2-3 hours to domestic work, plus more on weekends, and only 2 hours a week to free activities. I only rest when I sleep, at maximum 6 hours.

"My greatest challenges are to balance my personal and professional life and get to see my children achieve their goals."

Aracely Rodríguez Malagón

Aracely is a lawyer as well as a Black feminist activist and advocate. In this testimony she describes her consciousness and daily work around intersectional issues facing Black women.

Holding a degree in Legal Sciences from the University of Havana and a Masters in Humanistic Studies from the Caribbean University of Havana, Aracely defines identifies herself as a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of Cuba; an Activist and militant for the rights of all people; a member of the Cátedra del Caribe; and founder of HORMIGAS, the feminist arm of EL CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ (a club that promotes positive Black Cuban identities and collaborations between artists and academics).

She reflects on her identity and daily practice of activism: "I put my consciousness into practice as a daily exercise and extension from the society in which I live. That is, I don't carry around a suitcase of anti-racism, and spread it out like a circus tent for certain audiences. I bring it into my daily life, as part of my personal, social, family and professional existence. And I am not only focused on antiracism, but on the learning process of all my life experiences.

"The 'her-stories' of all Black women are very important because none, although they have points in common, exactly resembles another.

"In addition to being a Black woman, I was born with a disability, and because of this, I am subject to other forms of discrimination as well. Perhaps it is the way in which I was able to become more aware of other forms of oppression, including gender, class and sexuality.

"My anti-racist consciousness is formed from the social denial of what I am as a Black woman. That creates many questions, but it also forges a foundation that supports a structure for resistance, a thought where other forms of discrimination converge. It is not enough to have racial awareness. Being Black does not necessarily mean that you recognize yourself as such, or that you have racial consciousness. In fact, there are many Black people without it, and therefore this awareness doesn't live within possession of a certain skin color alone. There are also white people who are able to attain a high racial consciousness.

"The true anti-discrimination exercise encompasses raising awareness of the entire spectrum of the different forms of discrimination. If you are anti-racist and homophobic or feminist and homophobic, in some way you turn from oppressed to oppressor in the rejection of other groups.

"Defining myself as a feminist from the general point of view and in particular as a Black feminist allows me to identify, make visible and denounce the problems of Black women, which for me is of utmost importance. Black women are among the most invisible groups and those with the greatest historical vulnerability and it is toward them that my work has been most focused.

"I connect with activism from where I operate. I nurture and strengthen myself with the knowledge and experiences of women's daily life that allow me to develop critical thinking from Black feminism and I put it into practice in EL CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ and HORMIGAS, building anti-discrimination collective consciousness valuing what Black women and men are facing today in a society like ours. As a researcher, I claim the knowledge of prominent Black figures of our history to make visible, rescue and give continuity to Cuban Black feminist thought.

Inserting myself into the field of communications has been a way to help me deconstruct stereotypes of what Black women are, including a social image that pushes us to understand ourselves as hypersexual, marginal, and measured against the bar of Eurocentrism, both in visual and written discourse. This is how I expose the subtle way racism is portrayed in the media. Collaboration with SEMLac Cuba (editor's note: SEMLac is non-profit international network of programs focused on gender equity and communications in Latin America) has been a way to bring to light the ways in which the existential identity of being a Black woman is marked by gender-based violence.

"The isolation of doing this work has pushed me to use these networks more. It has been a challenge as a way to denounce, learn and unlearn. It has often given me the opportunity to participate in debates, some of which have been very enriching, and others of which have shown that there is still much work to be done in the battle around racial discrimination. The networks have also been ways to share and disseminated articles that analyze and reflect on the problems facing Black women.

"Communication during the pandemic, far from isolating me, has kept me in close dialogue with these women I am connected to (salaried and non-salaried domestic employees, hairdressers, disabled, elderly, professionals and entrepreneurs). I have been able to call attention to certain discriminatory acts, and am still trying to show that Black women before and after Covid-19 are not the barley seed for the fermentation of social problems."