

Encouraging Signs for LGBT Rights in Cuba

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When our organization embarked on a study of women and gender equality in Cuba, we interviewed dozens of women across the island. After speaking to them, we became convinced that Cuba's evolution on issues relating to equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people had to be a part of the story.

Before coming to power, the Cuban revolution made a strong commitment to for the rights of women and girls that has improved their life chances over the decades.

Cuba's policies have resulted in a tripling of the number of women at work; a reduction in the rate of infant mortality to levels **below** the U.S., Canada, and Mexico; more women with graduate degrees in the workplace than men; a sharp increase in life expectancy and more.

But, Cuba took far longer to recognize the humanity and rights of its LGBT citizens.

In 1963, just four years after coming to power, Fidel Castro said in a speech at the University of Havana, "[t]he socialist society cannot permit that kind of degeneration. Youths who aspire to that sort of thing? No! For trees that grow twisted, the remedy is no longer so easy."

In the 1970s, LGBT Cubans faced severe discrimination and many were sent to "rehabilitation and reeducation" camps. Cubans diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s were also isolated from the rest of society.

But 2013 is a different story. While full equality for LGBT Cubans is still not a reality (nor is it in the U.S. or elsewhere), progress has been made in many noteworthy ways.

While many heroes, named and anonymous, played a part in this effort, Vilma Espín, the wife of (current) President Raúl Castro, sister-in-law of Fidel, deserves special mention. Beyond serving as the head of the Cuban Federation of Women, which fought for women's education, daycare, legal rights, and much more, she was an advocate for sex education in schools as early as 1962.

Later, she proposed the creation of a national sex education working group that eventually became institutionalized as the National Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX) program.

CENESEX, now led by Mariela Castro, Vilma's daughter, has the mission to contribute to "the development of a culture of sexuality that is full, pleasurable and responsible, as well as to promote the full exercise of sexual rights."

While CENESEX runs a highly effective prevention program for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, much of its work is in advocacy, working to change attitudes and

perceptions of the LGBT community among Cuba's citizens and, ultimately, its leaders through a mixture of public events and less visible but effective education and support.

Each May 17, the anniversary of the World Health Organization's removal of homosexuality from its list of psychiatric diseases, CENESEX observes a National Day Against Homophobia, an opportunity to engage the Cuban people on issues of discrimination against LGBT citizens.

CENESEX provides training and education to Cuban police to improve understanding of the LGBT community and to help them better respond to crimes against LGBT people such as domestic violence, hate crimes and violence committed by family members.

It also works with the Ministry of Education to ensure that all Cubans are taught in school about sexual health and human sexuality. While compiling our report, we spoke with psychologist Ana María Cana who told us:

“Sexual education is mainstreamed into all education; it is a cross-cutting issue. Teachers receive training on these issues as well. Today if a teacher is lesbian, she can say so. We do not have problems with religion here. Homosexuality is not seen as a sin.”

At the same time, CENESEX supports LGBT affinity groups, such as Las Isabelas, Cuba's first organization for lesbians and bisexual women, whose slogan is: “Homosexuality is not a crime, homophobia IS.”

Perhaps its most startling achievement to date is the 2008 passage of a law that provides free gender reassignment surgery and hormone therapy through Cuba's national health system. Transgender Cubans are also granted new legal identification documents with their changed gender.

Now, there is certainly much work still to be done for LGBT rights in Cuba. While laws against homosexuality have been repealed, there are not formal legal protections for LGBT Cubans. There is no legal recognition of same-sex relationships. And the traditional *macho* Cuban culture remains a barrier to LGBT equality.

However, it is clear that Cuba is openly discussing the need for equal treatment for its LGBT citizens. That discussion is changing the broader culture, opening spaces for tolerance and equality, which in turn is making a difference for all Cubans.

Sarah Stephens is the executive director of the Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA). You can learn more about CENESEX and the past, present and future of gender equality in Cuba, by visiting CDA's [website](#) and reading its report: “Women's Work: Gender Equality in Cuba and the Role of Women Building Cuba's Future.”

[Op-ed: Cuba Finds Its Footing on LGBT Rights \(Advocate.com, 3/13/13\)](#)