

Empowering Cuban Women

Marta Núñez MS PhD

Sociologist & Consulting Professor, University of Havana

Conner Gorry MA

After nearly 60 years of universal education and health, coupled with national policies supporting women's rights and advancement, the results are in: according to recent data, more than half of Cuban scientists and almost 60% of all professionals in Cuba are women. Moreover, women's representation in government is rising, including at the highest levels such as parliament, where they constitute 53.2% of members.

Digging deeper, we find a story richer than national statistics or political representation. It's the story of the collective achievements of female professionals on the island. For example, the clinical research team responsible for developing CIMAvax-EGF, Cuba's novel biotech therapy for non-small cell lung cancer, was headed by a woman. Likewise, the lead scientist of the Cuban team that developed the world's first effective meningitis B vaccine is a woman. And the cofounder of the country's clinical trials coordinating center and registry is a woman, as is the founder of the National Center for Agricultural Animal Health. Yet, as in any country, there is more to be done to achieve true gender parity and release the full potential of women.



E. Añe

To begin our series profiling outstanding Cuban women professionals, *MEDICC Review* spoke with sociologist Dr Marta Núñez, who has devoted decades to research on gender relations and the role of women in Cuba. She provides an overview and framework for contextualizing the advancement of Cuban women—including the challenges still to overcome.

MEDICC Review: Gender equality doesn't happen by chance or overnight. Can you discuss specific policies supporting the advancement of women in Cuba?

Marta Núñez: In my mind, it began in 1961 with the literacy campaign and subsequent policy declaring all levels of education universal and free. I call this moment the 'feminization of education' in Cuba.

Of the more than 260,000 volunteers who fanned out across the country to teach every citizen to read and write, 70% were women—the majority of them young women [Cuba was declared illiteracy free following the one-year campaign—Eds.]. I was one of them. I was 14 years old and it was the first time I saw real poverty. This experience showed many women for the first time, especially in the countryside, the importance of education. In turn, they passed this appreciation for education on to their children, encouraging them to go to school when universal education was implemented that year. This gave women and girls—no matter their location or financial possibilities—the opportunity to pursue professional goals. All international studies show that if girls (regardless of context, whether in the developed or developing world) successfully enroll and stay in school, they perform better academically than boys and we began to see this in Cuba.

With this culture of education came the expectation that girls excel scholastically—but due to our patriarchal society and traditional gender ideology, girls are also expected to attend to domestic chores and be 'feminine.' While boys are given time to play and ride their bikes after school and finishing their homework, girls are helping mom clean or cook. This gender construct can become problematic once a woman enters the workplace and starts her own family.

Universal health care, which came shortly after universal education, has also contributed greatly to the advancement of women in Cuba. This meant free services, including all antenatal checkups, more than two dozen well-baby and maternal consults during the baby's first year of life, effective family planning and safe, accessible abortion. A national network of nursery schools—at very low cost—was also established in 1961, allowing working women to leave their children in a positive, educational setting with qualified caregivers during their work week. Such policies support mothers and children and create a culture of health and wellbeing that permeates our society. Of course, equal pay for equal work is another national policy supporting women's progress.

In short, there are various reasons why so many professionals in Cuba are women. By 1978, there were more women professionals than men, and the proportion has climbed slowly ever since.

MEDICC Review: You mentioned traditional gender roles being a potential area of conflict for working women. Can you elaborate?

Marta Núñez: Gender norms in Cuba hold that girls do housework and caregiving, while boys are typically not called on to share these duties. So a professional woman, who needs a nutritious diet and a good night's rest to be able to perform at her job, comes home and her husband or male partner expects her to assume these tasks as well; usually the women in his life (grandmother, mother, sisters, aunts) have always done the cooking, cleaning, child rearing and caretaking of elders.

The latter is especially pressing now, since over 20% of our population is 60 years old or more, and Cuba has a culture of aging at home, rather than placing seniors in nursing homes. Sooner or later, working women get worn down and exhausted by this 'double shift.' Further exacerbating this problem is our economic context: salaries are too low, food procurement can be difficult and Cuban women in general have few home appliances, making all housework that much harder. I think lack of resources, financial and material, together with macho gender roles are the greatest obstacles to further advancement of Cuban women.

MEDICC Review: How can Cuba—or any country for that matter—transform this traditional gender paradigm to further empower women?

Marta Núñez: There are many components and strategies, but further gains for Cuban women depend on creating synergy between government policies and grassroots initiatives. I call this top-down/bottom-up: if you have a viable grassroots movement but don't have the support of policy makers, it's not going to result in substantive change. Likewise, top-down policies without popular support or taking into account public opinion can only be so effective. Decision-makers have to consult with, listen to, observe and respond to what the public wants and needs. They have to work together to forge solutions.

Maternity leave in Cuba is a great example. In 1974, three months' maternity leave became national policy. In 1993, it was increased to six months and now it's one year. Most recently, maternity leave was extended to grandparents or another family member to provide even more flexibility for the family to decide as a unit how best to balance child care with work and other responsibilities. This was a top-down (governmental) response to what policy makers were hearing from their base and is an example of the two working together towards women's advancement. Paternity leave is also an option, but since it was instituted in 2002, only 104 families around the country have chosen this alternative.

Culturally, machismo is very much a reality here and I've spent a lot of time analyzing the images of women portrayed in music, on TV and in the media. In 2017, this line of research prompted me to initiate a dialogue with five of Cuba's top band leaders—musicians who are among the most popular today. I wanted to get their opinions on racist, sexist, homophobic and other discriminatory content in music videos and lyrics. It was a fascinating conversation and I was pleased to learn that not a single one of them wants to use this type of language or imagery. Unfortunately, they told me, it's what the public wants and what the market demands. Lo and behold, a few weeks later, one of

the participants in this conversation, who spoke very eloquently and intelligently about incorporating a gender perspective and not using sexist or racist language in his music, premiered a new video—which was shown on Cuban TV—that was one of the most sexist, racist, and consumerist music videos I've seen. So the private dialogue might be towards rights and respect but the product being sold can be completely the opposite.

I'm continuing these dialogues (my next one is with a hip-hop musician) to see how we might progress towards lyrics and imagery that fight against misogyny, gender violence and the like, rather than promoting this kind of bias. And program directors can be more discriminating about what they show on television, which influences trends and tastes around the country.

MEDICC Review: You noted low salaries as a roadblock to further progress for women. How so?

Marta Núñez: Cuban women are excelling—more than half our scientists are women for example and 8 of the 15 provinces in the country are led by women—but we need to resolve practical problems so working women have a chance to get their heads above water and aren't in this constant, day-to-day struggle to provide for their families. Low salaries, poor public transportation, the housing crisis—all of these are stressors that can even affect life expectancy and incidence of chronic disease. Cuba just held its national labor union congress and the issue discussed in every meeting around the country was low salaries. We need to forge sustainable solutions to these problems, especially in the public sector, or young women are going to leave our public institutions or leave the country altogether. [Cuba's public sector includes all workers in public administration, major industries, state companies, health, education, utilities and research institutes, as well as most in public transportation, the environment, tourism, communications and culture, among others.—Eds.]

MEDICC Review: Brain drain—whether from the public to state sector or through emigration—is particularly topical as Cuba undergoes an historic social and economic transformation. Can you expand on how this looks through a gender lens?

Marta Núñez: Consider that 85% of Cuba's export revenue—the funds used for all national programs and subsidies—comes from the public sector. And who are the majority working in the public sector? Women. And when they can't make ends meet with their public-sector salaries, what do they do? They migrate to the private sector. Or they leave Cuba altogether. Both are happening quite a bit, and this has the potential to destabilize the country economically and socially. Luckily, several policies were recently introduced to stem this drain. For instance, our new economic model allows people to work in both the public and private sectors at the same time—you can be a researcher at a biotechnology institute, for instance and rent a room in your home. It's not easy—you have to have applicable managerial and administrative skills and renting a room requires a lot of physical and mental strength. But as we say here: though it isn't easy, it *is* possible.

Another policy adjustment under the new economic model allows us to travel internationally more easily, with less bureaucracy. Many young women still pursue careers in the public sector because they know an alternative for supplementing their low

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salaries is to travel abroad—on scholarships, to attend or present at professional congresses or to give classes as visiting professors. This is what I do: I was a visiting professor at Harvard University's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, for example. Health professionals, meanwhile, have the opportunity to serve in medical missions overseas, which is another way to augment their public sector income. Nevertheless, as I've said, public sector salaries are too low, and this has to change.

MEDICC Review: The opening of Cuba's private sector is talked about every day—on the news, in the street, among friends and family. Do you have a sense of women's participation in the emerging private sector economy?

Marta Núñez: In 2014, I published a study on exactly this topic [La cara de género del cuentapropismo habanero, *Revista Temas*. 2014;80:79–87]. While my research was limited to Havana and examined only 3 of the more than 200 activities permissible at that time, it provides a baseline for further investigation. In my sample of 61 owners of small businesses, only 17% were women. Statistics were just published this July stating that 33% of the more than 590,000 workers in the private sector are women. However, these data don't separate owners from contracted workers—an important distinction—nor do they specify in what service or activity women are working. For example, many women work as subcontractors selling cell phone cards for ETECSA, Cuba's telephone/Internet service provider. But this reaps minimal earnings, so even for these workers in the private sector, making ends meet is still very difficult.

My research revealed that where Cuban women excel as small business owners is in renting rooms in their homes. Some of my Cuban colleagues in gender and society research have told me, "Yes, but running a *casa particular* (as room rentals are known here) is women's work after all. It makes sense that they would choose and thrive in this type of private business." I disagree. It takes a wide array of managerial, organizational, marketing, accounting and now technological skills to run a successful room-rental business. But this example illustrates that even within the gender studies field, gender-based perceptions about division of labor persist.

MEDICC Review: Along with the new economic model, Cuba has a new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel. Do you see further advances for women under his leadership?

Marta Núñez: President Díaz-Canel has a different style of governing—different from both Raúl Castro and Fidel Castro. This is logical and implicit when you have a new president, especially when he's only 58. I like that he uses new technologies to obtain information and make decisions efficiently. During Subtropical Storm Alberto last May, for example, he convened regular video conference meetings with the heads of the most affected provinces and directors of different sectors to get constant updates. Then he went to those provinces, met with local authorities and talked to the populace to see and hear for himself about the situation on the ground.

And like the 'feminization of education' that Cuba underwent in the 1960s and 1970s that I mentioned,

we're now experiencing the 'feminization of government.' Cuba has successfully increased—by appointment in ministries and other institutions, by election to the National Assembly and at the regional and local levels—female representation. There are dozens of women vice ministers in different sectors. Also, a number of ministries are headed by women, who are each members of the Council of Ministers (See table). The majority of provinces are headed by women, and in 2012, voters in the Caibarién Municipality (Villa Clara Province) elected a transgender representative to the National Assembly [parliament].

But here we have to take an analytical approach. Just because women are in policy or decision-making positions does not mean they approach their responsibilities with a gender perspective. Perhaps they've experienced sexual harassment in the workplace but haven't spoken out for fear of professional repercussions—something we see in both the private and public sectors incidentally, which are equally obligated to abide by national labor laws. Or maybe they oppose same-sex marriage on moral grounds or because the couples don't procreate.

Right now, sexual harassment and gender identity are in the news and part of national dialogues. But these issues were not raised formally here until 2013 when Mariela Castro, Director of the National Center for Sex Education and a member of parliament, voted against proposed labor law reforms because they didn't include language specific to workplace discrimination based on gender identity and HIV status. Her dissenting vote came after decades of cross-sectoral work with local, regional and national authorities in collaboration with Cuba's LGBTQ community to combat homo- and transphobia and to sensitize Cubans about issues of sexual and gender diversity—something that not everyone here supports at the grassroots level.

So while top-down and bottom-up is the ideal for promoting substantive change—that synergy I mentioned between grassroots opinion and policy making—sometimes policymakers are able to take a longer view on issues of civil rights and justice. And they have the responsibility to broaden those rights, even if not everyone is in agreement.

So, now we're seeing this in action with same-sex marriage. It is coming under this new presidency and leadership, there's no doubt about it. By and large, Cuba has a homophobic culture and

Female Ministers & Presidents of National Institutions, Cuba

Ministry	Minister (year designated)
Labor & Social Security	Margarita González Fernández (2009)
Education	Ena Elsa Velázquez Cobiella (2008)
Science, Technology & the Environment	Elba Rosa Pérez Montoya (2013)
Domestic Trade	Betsy Díaz Velázquez (2018)
Finance & Prices	Lina Olinda Pedraza Rodríguez (2009)
Food Industry	Iris Quiñones Rojas (2018)
Central Bank of Cuba (Minister and President)	Irma Martínez Castrillón (2017)


Note: All are also members of the Council of Ministers. Inés María Chapman Waugh, designated Minister and President of the National Institute of Hydraulic Resources in 2011, was promoted as one of five vice presidents of the Council of Ministers in July, 2018. The complete composition of the current Council is available from <http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2018-07-21/nuevo-consejo-de-ministro-es-aprobado-por-el-parlamento-cubano>

some are protesting against it, but we're going to see a top-down policy change that permits same-sex unions—although it must pass a citizen-wide referendum as well. This will affirm the rights of couples not falling within the traditional 'man-woman' scheme and make for a happier, more peaceful society as a whole—even though there are those who maintain moral, prejudicial or religious arguments against it.

MEDICC Review: Among all these complexities and difficulties, what do you think the future holds for further advancement of Cuban women?

Marta Núñez: Despite the material difficulties and traditional gender constructs, Cuban women are empowered. For instance, some 75% of divorces are initiated by women [Cuba has one of the world's highest divorce rates, with over 60% of all Cuban

unions ending in divorce—Eds.] and women are encouraged to pursue careers in math, science and technology. Male colleagues are accustomed to having women bosses and coworkers and generally experience a spirit of collaboration, rather than competition and discrimination. During my research in the private sector, I've heard several opinions recently from people who were ready to emigrate, but now with more possibilities to improve their standard of living, have decided to stay and raise their families here.

Obviously, women's advancement—and how to continue making strides—isn't a clear-cut issue. It's peppered with grey areas where many doubts and contradictions lurk. Nevertheless, I assure you, Cuban women have it better than women in many other contexts and cultures. And we intend to keep the gender lens trained on our society, to keep making progress. 

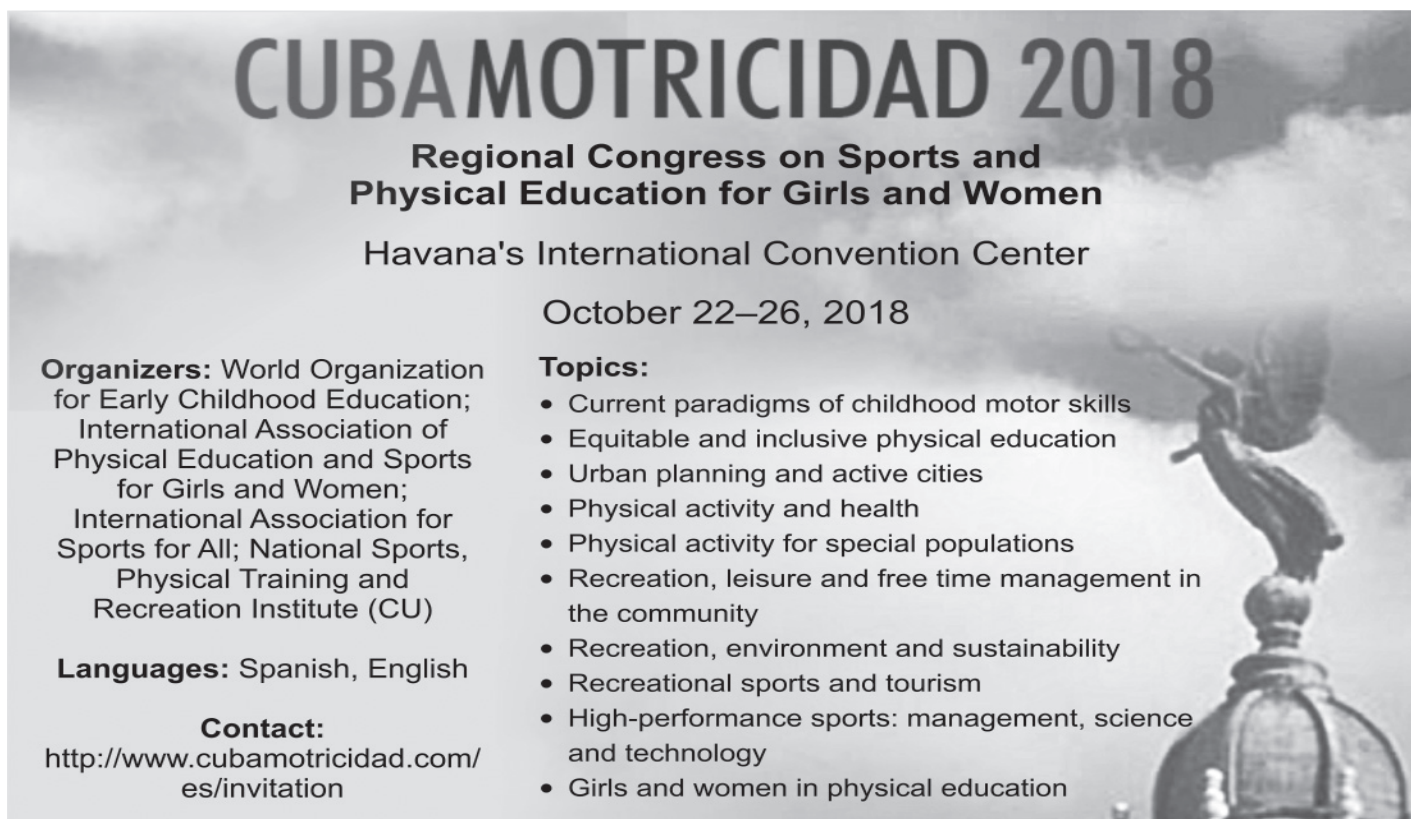
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Chapman HJ, Armas-Pérez LA, Lauzardo M, González-Ochoa ER. Moving Closer to Tuberculosis Elimination through Institutional Scientific Collaboration: Opportunities for Cuba and the USA. MEDICC Rev. 2018;20(2):59–63.

Page 60, Table 1, rows 9 and 10: row labels “New cases (%)” and “Previously treated cases (%)” should be indented, to make clear that they are subsets of MDR-TB cases.

González-Quevedo A, Santiesteban-Freixas R, Eells JT, Lima L Sadun AA. Cuban Epidemic Neuropathy: Insights into the Toxic-Nutritional Hypothesis through International Collaboration. MEDICC Rev. 2018 Apr;20(2):27–31.

Page 30, first complete paragraph, line 7, “Two models were developed independently by Cuban researchers” should read “Two models were developed independently by AAS and AGQ.”



CUBAMOTRICIDAD 2018

Regional Congress on Sports and Physical Education for Girls and Women

Havana's International Convention Center

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- Recreational sports and tourism
- High-performance sports: management, science and technology
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