

Gender & Race in Cuba: An Anthropological Perspective Lourdes Serrano Peralta PhD

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How does a developing island nation, beleaguered by climatic challenges and 60 years of adverse geo-political pressures become a beacon of scientific innovation, medical services and applied research—all on a shoestring budget? What's more, how does such a country, rooted in a traditional patriarchal paradigm, overcome barriers to create a scientific and medical community where the majority of researchers and professionals are women? These are some of the questions that motivated *MEDICC Review* to publish this series on Cuba's women in STEM (science, technology and math).

Spanning a variety of themes and disciplines exploring the history of women and science; the role of female protagonists in the development of Cuba's public health and biopharmaceutical sectors; and results produced by women professionals and their colleagues, these interviews illuminate lessons learned and what strategies might be applicable, adapted and replicable in other contexts. This time, we explore the intersection of gender and race in Cuba, a country with the world's third-highest percentage of female parliamentarians—many of them women of color.

To help us better understand this complex topic, we spoke with Dr Lourdes Serrano, who served as Director of the Cuban Anthropology Institute* (under the aegis of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment and the Cuban Academy of Sciences) from 1991 to 2005.



During her tenure there, Dr Serrano's research focused almost exclusively on gender and race, including the impact of structural and policy changes since 1959; the manifestations of discrimination and bias in contemporary Cuba; and the role of women in economic, cultural and political life. A lifelong scholar and teacher, Dr Serrano is currently professor at the University of Havana in the Cuban History and Caribbean Studies Departments, and also a coordinator of the Afro-Descendant Caribbean Women's program in the University's Caribbean Studies Department.

MEDICC Review: What awakened in you the call to teach?

Lourdes Serrano: More than a call, I'd say it is a passion. I had my first inkling when I went into the countryside as part of Cuba's 1961 literacy campaign. This nationwide initiative saw tens of thousands of young volunteers, mostly women and girls, fanning out in towns across the country to teach every Cuban to read and write. I was just 14 years old and went to live with a family in Remate de Guane, a small, remote town in Pinar del Río Province. Today it makes me wonder: would I let my teenage daughter leave home, move to the countryside in another province, to live with a family of strangers to teach them to read and write! That would be a hard decision.

Nevertheless, my mother—who wasn't an educated woman, who never went to university and wasn't a professional—allowed me to go. The excitement and effervescence of that time infected her, like all of us. It marked our entire generation; we weren't only teachers but social activists. This experience awoke in me the calling to teach and I've been doing it now for over 45 years. I love teaching and will be doing it until my dying day.

Once education became free and universal—another early policy instituted by the [post-1959] revolutionary government—I took advantage of scholarships for women, completing degrees in history and pedagogical sciences at the University of Havana. Afterwards I

obtained my doctorate from the Academy of Sciences in the former Soviet Union. My life as a researcher began when I was promoted to Director of the Cuban Anthropology Institute and became interested in how structural and political changes were transforming the role of women in the country. From there, I began drilling down further, researching how these changes were affecting Cuban women of color. Since then, I've been researching gender and race through an anthropological lens. I began looking at structural changes and their impact and asking what's working? What isn't? Where can we improve and provide better support for Cuban women of color?

See the full series of interviews with Cuba's Women of Science at www.mediccreview.org

MEDICC Review: Given your experience as director of a major research center, do you believe men and women have different management styles?

Lourdes Serrano: I've had a lot of conversations about this because my management style is not based on male models. I'd ask colleagues: why do women in decision-making positions have to adopt traits considered masculine? Women don't have to wear pants or direct and delegate from a position of force to be effective. In my center, the majority of researchers were men, but I led speaking softly, with what might be considered a more feminine style. I believe women can lead any center or group—including a military installation—just like this. Look at Vilma Espín, who founded and directed the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and fought in the Rebel Army [that defeated Fulgencio Batista in 1959—Eds.]. Is there any model of leadership more feminine than hers?

For me, it's about the work, being rigorous and gaining the respect of your team; this transcends gender. We see this in the classroom with professors and students as well—if you earn the respect of your students, the teaching style can be your own, it doesn't have to mimic a man or another professor, because you're teaching from a position of mutual respect.

MEDICC Review: Before jumping into the structural changes, can you describe historical representation, participation and marginalization of women in Cuba?

Lourdes Serrano: There's a tradition of female participation in Cuban politics, activism, even war: *Las Mambisas* were women who fought in Cuba's independence wars, including Mariana Grajales, a mulatta woman and mother of independence hero General Antonio Maceo. This had an impact and by the latter half of the 1800s, Cuban women were fighting for gender equality, emancipation and representation.

In 1923, the First Women's Congress was held in Cuba. Though this was a watershed for Latin America, the Congress was organized by upper-class white women, so neither women of color nor working class women were represented. In 1933, Cuban women won the right to vote. The Constitution of 1940—considered the most progressive in Latin America at the time—prohibited gender-based discrimination; and by 1949, we had the first black, female parliamentarian.

The root of the problem isn't women's membership in parliament, however, it's women's *representation* in parliament and there's a fundamental difference. Women need to be an important share of voting members, but these parliamentarians must also be an *empowered voice*, bringing women's problems, with their optics, to bear on policymaking. We can't just hear from parliamentarians—male or female—who are replicating traditional patriarchal views. Another vital aspect to being represented is integrating more working women, women who wake up every morning to go to work, get their kids to school and make sure they are fed even when food is sometimes hard to find. These women, living the day-to-day reality, who struggle to resolve daily needs despite scarcity, are also transmitting values. All this is very powerful and we need to hear from them.

So this is also why it is important to educate and prepare women to actively contribute to policies with a gender focus. The literacy campaign made sure every woman could read and write, and universal education opened the halls of learning to all Cubans regardless of gender, skin color or financial resources. It's true that women worked before the structural changes instituted by the revolutionary government, but it was typically in traditional "women's" jobs like teaching, nursing or as maids and other domestic service roles. But when higher education became accessible to everyone, women became lawyers, engineers, scientists, and doctors—they were represented in all sectors. Importantly, they also began to be represented at all levels. The current Rector of the University of Havana is a woman of color, for example, and we have many ministers and vice ministers who are women, as well.

Table 1: Status of Women in Cuba, Selected Data

| Variable | Value |
|---|-------------|
| University graduates (%†) | 60.5 |
| Teachers, professors & scientists (%) | 81.9 |
| Health & science sectors (%) | 60.0 |
| Working in paid labor force (%) | 45.1 |
| Self-employed (%) | 34.0 |
| Parliamentarians | 322 (53.2%) |
| Council of State (%) | 48.4 |
| Council of Ministers (%) (Includes Vice President of Council of Ministers & Council of State; 5 Ministers; and President of Central Bank of Cuba) | 26.9 |
| Presidents of Provincial Assemblies (of 15) | 8 |
| Vice Presidents of Provincial Assemblies (of 15) | 8 |
| University Rectors (exclusive of medical sciences universities) University of Havana; Villa Clara; Cienfuegos; Matanzas; Oriente | 5 |
| Maternal mortality (direct and indirect, per 100,000 live births) | 38.3 |
| Life expectancy (in years) | 80.8 |
| Adult women reporting psychological violence by an intimate partner in past 12 months (%) | 25.7 |
| Adult women reporting physical violence by an intimate partner in past 12 months (%) | 2.4 |
| More hours women dedicate to household work as compared to men (per week) | 14 |

†Unless otherwise indicated, % is percent of total.

Sources: *Encuesta Nacional sobre Igualdad de Género, 2016*; *Anuario Estadístico de Salud, 2017*; *Anuario Demográfico de Cuba 2017*



MEDICC Review: What were some of the major structural changes made to combat gender and race-based discrimination after 1959?

Lourdes Serrano: From the first structural changes, like the founding of the FMC in 1960, to the recent new constitution, our government has made it clear that there is no room for discrimination of any kind in our society. But eliminating it doesn't happen overnight and isn't a linear process: sometimes we've swerved from our goal, but the results so far are measurable. And as concepts evolve, these structural changes evolve. We have national programs for early development and learning that focus on new concepts and constructs related to gender and race, for example. If we want to build a society free of sexism, we need to reach kids at a very young age, teaching them that we are all equal. Very simple concepts like pink clothes aren't only for girls and that boys can play with dolls, help break down traditional gender constructs.

The new constitution, approved by a public referendum in February of this year, strengthens articles against discrimination in terms of property ownership, elimination of inequalities, and so forth. Gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ethnic origin, disability and territorial origin have been added to the list of categories of rights protected under the constitution. And women's reproductive and sexual rights are now constitutionally guaranteed as well. Some of this was in place already, but I think needed to be strengthened nonetheless; for example, our 1976 constitution had already codified and put into practice anti-discrimination articles, especially as pertain to skin color.

All these articles are enforceable under complementary laws, including those contained in our criminal code, such as Article 265, which penalizes racial discrimination by imposing fines or even prison sentences. The recent constitutional reform incorporated legal mechanisms for prosecuting gender-based violence as well,

so we're making even more progress towards equality in legal terms.

MEDICC Review: Of course, structural or legal changes aren't enough...

Lourdes Serrano: Right. These structural changes have to be complemented by cultural changes to achieve lasting impact. What's more, breaking down these cultural barriers to gender equality has to be an interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral strategy, as we see with skin color, too. Since 2002, the socio-cultural audiovisual group *Proyecto Palomas* has contributed to educational efforts around gender roles and equity, and decades of work on this issue by the National Sex Education Center (CENESEX) is also producing results. Mariela Castro, who directs CENESEX, takes the approach that any kind of prejudice or discrimination is damaging to health, as was recently quoted in *The Lancet*.^[1]

As pertains to race, *Ser Cubano*, a research project headed by the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), identified a problem with racial representation in the Cuban media, specifically

women of color in Cuban films and television shows. The problem was identified as needing more women of color portrayed in the media. And the classic response was a movie or soap opera about slavery. But *Ser Cubano* concluded that this isn't the answer and doesn't get to the root of the problem! The answer has to be much more profound, nuanced and empowering—with women of color directors and producers and characters that are three dimensional, professionals, career women, as well as mothers and wives.

MEDICC Review: A recent *New York Times* editorial^[2] described real, sustainable empowerment as “transforming gender subordination,” breaking down “other oppressive structures,” and encouraging “collective political mobilization”—as you observe, empowerment goes beyond representation. Can you discuss this in the Cuban context?

Lourdes Serrano: Cuba sprang from a powerful patriarchal tradition that continues today. The barriers to gender and racial equality today aren't structural, they're cultural—and cultural barriers are much harder to deconstruct. We're talking about changing a national identity with deeply embedded roots. This is a process that takes time. But even though it's a slow, hard process—or precisely because it is so slow and difficult—we have to keep fighting and educating and doing everything we can to shift that mentality.

The programs mentioned above and the constitutional reforms are helping move us towards that goal, and our long tradition of co-education plays a role, too. Look, as a professional woman of color, I've had my share of run-ins with this kind of cultural construct. I'd be attending conferences as the Director of the Cuban Anthropology Institute and colleagues would mistake me for the translator/interpreter, the assumption being that a woman of color could only reach so high on the professional ladder and couldn't possibly be the head of a research center.


This kind of racial bias—prejudices based not on how we talk or dress or behave, but strictly on skin color—happens all the time, often unconsciously, which is why it makes it a very difficult change to make, especially society-wide. The media, as I mentioned, plays a role in both context and content, reflecting ordinary people, taking on more of an ombudsman role, and tackling issues in a respectful informed manner that were previously taboo—including sexual diversity and racism.

I believe the younger generation has different optics when it comes to gender and race and we have to incorporate these voices as much as possible. It's also true that sometimes young people replicate learned gender and racial bias, often without knowing it. We have to work to transmit values to break down these patterns of prejudice and provide mentoring and guidance—and give them the space they need to grow into leaders. We older folks have to give up this idea that we are the ultimate authority. We also make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. We have to trust our young people and extend them the same opportunities we had. Experience with a young outlook: this is the ideal combination.

MEDICC Review: What role do—or can—Cuban men play in moving towards greater gender equality?

Lourdes Serrano: I believe many Cuban men have evolved towards understanding what constitutes gender bias and how it

manifests. Thanks to educational efforts about how to combat these cultural patterns of patriarchy and *machismo*, we've seen this evolution. But we want more. Of course we want more!

One thing is certain: to attain true equality, we need participation of the entire population—men and women. And this holds true for whatever sector of the population is fighting for equality—you can't reduce it to 'this is a problem for people of color, this is a problem for women to address, this is a problem for poorer people to address.' This approach divides us; we have to work together, across society and these lines. Nor can true equality be achieved by dictate. You can't just say 'okay, tomorrow we'll have an equal society.' So, we've gained substantial ground with the hard work put in by both men and women. And this process continues, as it must. 

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NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Post-Castro Cuba: New Constitution Expands Health Rights. *Lancet* [Internet]. 2019 Apr 13 [cited 2019 May 8]; 393(10180):1477. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)30812-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30812-8)
2. Zakaria R. The Myth of Women's Empowerment. *The New York Times* [Internet]. 2017 Oct 5 [cited 2019 Feb 11]; Opinion. Available from: www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/opinion/the-myth-of-womens-empowerment.html