

## Sonja Krivokapić: Why women should forget about Fidel Castro



Before I start elaborating my title, two things should be noted – first, that Castro's Cuba was not specifically misogynistic, that is to say, not more than other countries, and second, that not only women should forget him, but all people as well. Although this article will put an emphasize on the women's issue in Castro's Cuba, the reason why all other people should forget him too will be explained shortly, for it is certainly well connected with the status of women in that country (and any other, for that matter).

### **Women in the revolution**

In the revolutionary stage of making Cuba, Castro has promised a lot of good things, not just for women, but for the future of race relations. Racism is to be ended and misogyny is to be exterminated. „A people whose women fight alongside men – that people are invincible“, he said at the Santiago de Cuba city hall. But not all was delivered on a silver platter. Women have had to prove themselves as well. And they certainly did – the Mariana Grajales Brigade, named after a Cuban fighter for women's struggle and struggle against slavery in Cuba, were especially brave and persistent in their involvement in grassroots

organizing. Celia Sanchez was one of the first women to organize a combat squad, and Haydee Santamaria readily joined the guerilla forces, although she served rough prison time prior to that.

In these times, women and black Cubans, for example, were not only welcomed by the revolutionary vanguard but also readily volunteered, feeling accepted and appreciated. Perhaps some cynic would remark that these turbulent times don't leave enough space and time for gender inequality issues to surface. It is certainly more important, however, how women and people of other races are treated after the revolution, because a revolution is not a goal in itself, but rather a means to achieve a future society. And in this aspect, Cuban society, of rather, Cuban elite, couldn't deserve a prize for being consistent.

### **Women after the revolution**

This is the part where „it's not worse than other places“ comes in. Cuban's new political party created laws that favoured women; they pulled out women from homes, which was their only destiny before the revolution, it allowed secure and free abortion, it achieved massive progress in combating illiteracy, also among women, and they raised employment drastically; for example, from 17% in 1956 to 46% in 2011. Women were allowed to enter universities, pursue all kinds of careers and give their children to free childcare services, which were provided by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), a huge non-governmental organization that numbered almost 4 million women. It had an advisory role in Cuban government on the issues of women's rights and their enforcement, including bettering women's working conditions, preventing domestic violence and so on.

Women were also allowed into the party elite. Already mentioned Celia Sanchez, for example, achieved this, and she was canonized by the party as a revolutionary; and so was Haydee Santamaria. But, as many Cuban women reported, focusing on working class women, life in Cuba in general for them was a nice frame with picture missing inside it. Even though they enjoyed certain rights, they felt as if they were decided for them, and not structured from the bottom up, as it should be, at least if we are talking about a communist kind of society. Even women in power, which undoubtedly were better off than working class women, faced gender discrimination from their male colleagues every day. At the end of the day, Castro's macho role as a womanizer certainly did not help escape patriarchally structured roles.

What women in general, and especially working women, find the most difficult is the pressure to work both on the job and at home. Although generally women's rights improved and women changed, men did not. So, no one taught men how to divide up the work with women at home. Also, laws requiring the equal division of household chores were not enforced. What makes the performing of household chores especially difficult for women is the fact that Cuba didn't sell modern household products. Women often had to do work without washing machines, dryers, dishwashers and such, which prolonged their work and left even less time for themselves. Working women's life was divided into two – they were workers and they were cleaners.

Domestic violence wasn't seen as a distinct type of crime in Cuba until 1997., when Federation of Cuban women set up a platform for studying and opting for legal change, gaining rights for victims to file claims against their abusers and receive appropriate therapy constructed specially for women who are domestic violence survivors. Despite this, women still suffer from domestic violence greatly.

The Cuban government has a tendency not to keep statistics about bad things that happen in Cuba, and the media, who is controlled by the government, is reluctant to talk about these issues.

### **Why did gender inequality persist?**

Because many people assume that the Cuban revolution was a genuine one, meaning that it really practiced what it had preached in relation to the meaning of the word „communism“ or „socialism“, they think that Cuba somehow inherited the old capitalist gender roles, letting them „slip“ into the new Cuban society. This logic is reasonable if we assume that the premise is correct, but it isn't. Cuba, although Castro opposed the Soviet Union at first, came to structure itself upon this quasi- socialist giant, that is, to

become state capitalist. The whole society was still capitalist in its roots, but it reshaped itself with nationalization instead of privatization. The working class still existed, and so did petite bourgeoisie, as did mothers who gave births to future working class people, thus maintaining a patriarchal role as a mother as still a primary role of their whole being.

And if the economy doesn't prove that Cuba was a state capitalist society, and it certainly does, because in communism there would be no private ownership, not the one owned by a private person nor the state, then its political power structures definitely prove it. That is something anyone could see, whether they justified it or not. Fidel Castro was undoubtedly dictatorial, repressing all political and ideological freedom that didn't suit him, including some leftist ideological movements that were supposed to be close to his communist views. The fact of the matter is that Cuba perpetuated these roles because it enforced a structure that it allowed its perpetuation, and failed to organize a society whose core would break with such practices, prejudices and the creation of such roles within society.

### **Conclusion**

Although it's hard to think about communism and women with all these pretty much negative examples of society which existed and some exist on (SSSR, Cuba, China, Cambodia, Yugoslavia and so on), we shouldn't give up on the idea of communism precisely because in its idea, the liberation of women should be executed in its totality. When all people participate in the creation of their own lives, and not just „on paper“, but for real, then such an equality should follow that some even speak of a total change of gender roles as we see them today. Putting that debate aside, women should forget about Fidel Castro, because he didn't, despite changes to the better, along with them, and not for them, participated in their full emancipation as he promised. That does not mean we should lose hope; maybe some day, better opportunity for its achievement will come. Until then, forget the past and learn about the present.