

Queer and feminist organizing under pressure in Cuba

written by Lisbeth Moya González | September 17, 2024



Pencil crayon drawing of feminists and queer activists surrounded by shadowy officers by Citlali Potamu for Ojalá.

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It would have been near impossible for a gay man or a lesbian woman born in 1960s Cuba to have imagined parading down Havana's main avenue shouting slogans as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. But beginning in 2008, with the annual celebration of Cuba's pride march—which is also known as La Conga—this became reality.

Queerness wasn't on the radar at the time of the Cuban revolution. On several occasions Fidel Castro made statements to the press referring to homosexuality as pathological behavior. Even so, thanks to the hard work of activists on the island, the National Center for Sex Education (Cenesex) was created in 1989. Under the leadership of Mariela Castro, Fidel's niece, it is now dedicated to gender education and research.

But the existence of Cenesex did not create the possibility for activists to develop independent initiatives outside of the institution. There has long been tension between the state and civil society over the monopoly of gender discourse. A delicate balance that fluctuated between compliance with Cenesex guidelines and criminalization was reached.

This tension reached its peak in 2019, when the aforementioned march against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia was arbitrarily suspended. Cenesex justified the cancellation by claiming the march was not relevant due to the country's economic situation.

Faced with a government ban, part of the LGBTIQ+ community held an independent march in 2019. As a result, several activists were beaten and detained by police. May 11 went down in history as the first act of massive, public repression of queer activists in Cuba.

"The cancellation of the 2019 Conga, held every year by Cenesex as part of the activities of the

Cuban Day against homophobia and transphobia, was a government action to placate anti-rights groups,” wrote activist Angela Lakshmi in an article published in *Q de Cuir*. In the years following the 2019 repression, the Conga took place normally.

The cancellation and repression of the 2019 march took place as the Cuban government was in the process of updating the Family Code. Three years later, a new Family Code was approved, recognizing the rights of queer people, including equal marriage and adoption.

The Code was a government proposal that went to referendum. This decision was widely criticized by members of civil society, as other laws such as the Penal Code were not approved by the population. Feminist and LGBTIQ+ collectives campaigned for the passage of the law, and faced intense opposition from fundamentalist churches on the island. Activists believe the referendum was held in order to offset protests on the part of fundamentalist groups.

But even with the recognition of some rights, the criminalization of gender focussed and queer activism in Cuba continues. And in this context, feminist organizing in Cuba continues.

Understanding of Cuban feminism

The ecosystem of independent feminist spaces in Cuba is made up in large part by independent media outlets. Among them are *Subalternas*, *Alas Tensas*, *Afrocubanas*, *La Potajera*, and *Muy Marika*, and others, all of which were preceded by media outlets that no longer exist, including *Q de cuir* and *Tremenda Nota*.

There are also organizations like Yo Sí Te Creo en Cuba (I believe you Cuba - YSTCC), Alianza Afrocubana, Red Femenina de Cuba, Casa Palanca, Grupo Translúcidos and others. These groups weave their actions and demands around feminist organizing. They call out femicides, engage in Black feminist struggles, seek to protect women’s right to dissent, organize against the criminalization of independent journalism and raise awareness of issues faced by transgendered people.

Then there is Cenesex and the Transcuba network, both which are part of the government. There is also the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which has operated since August 1960 as a mass organization that aims to represent all women in the country.

In 1993, a group of Cuban women journalists founded Magín, the first independent feminist collective in post-1959 Cuba. Three years later, after unsuccessfully trying to register Magín as an association, its members were called in by the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The co-optation was immediate.

“They were told that they had to deactivate immediately, since a feminist organization could be used to try to penetrate the revolution,” explained Alina Bárbara López in a text in the magazine *La Joven Cuba*.



Pencil crayon portrait of the members of Magín drawn by Citlali Potamu for Ojalá.

Being a feminist and organizing in Cuba is a challenge. Beyond ideological affiliation, the level of organization or the kind of feminism practiced, Cuban feminist activists and organizations—both on and off the island—have long had a conflictive relationship with the state. This relationship stems in part from the lack of legislation on freedom of association allowing for the existence of independent organizations, as well as from the systematic criminalization of activism.

This year, independent activists and organizations did not march on March 8 as they did in the rest of the continent. Many women who are members of feminist organizations, as well as human rights defenders and independent journalists have had to leave the island due to the political persecution.

This March 8th, a discussion about the rising rate of femicides and political violence against women was desperately needed inside Cuba. Instead of marching, the diaspora organized a virtual march, as took place the year previous.

The Cuban state vs. feminism

Laura Vargas' case illustrates the Cuban government's fear of feminism. Vargas is a feminist activist who has been persecuted by state security forces since 2021 because of her participation in various Cuban feminist organizations such as Red Femenina de Cuba, Casa Palanca and the independent media outlets *Alas Tensas* and *Subalternas*.

Vargas tells *Ojalá* that the first time she was hauled into a police station and interrogated was in October 2021. Her interrogation took place after the July 11, 2021 uprising in Cuba and as the persecution of independent journalism began to amp up. At the time Vargas was a regular

contributor to a media outlet called *El Toque*. “State security began to subpoena all women journalists,” she said in an interview.

“They became very interested in me because of my feminist activism and because, together with my colleagues from *Subalternas* magazine, we were planning a dinner for trans women at the end of 2022,” said Vargas. The dinner was independently organized by civil society activists. Several of its organizers were interrogated.

In 2019, the I Believe You Cuba (YSTCC) platform was launched when six Cuban feminists agreed to work together in support of singer Dianelys Alfonso, the Goddess of Cuba, who accused the late singer José Luis Cortés of gender violence.

“What began as a specific act of support grew: we opened social networks to do education and raise awareness about gender violence, then began to carry out political advocacy in support of the passage of a Comprehensive Law against Gender Violence in Cuba in November 2019,” YSTCC members explained to *Ojalá* via email. For security reasons, members of YSTCC do not give interviews by audio or video, or use their real names.



Pencil crayon drawing of feminists being followed by police by Citlali Potamu for *Ojalá*.

“In March 2020, we created the Support Line for People in Situations of Gender Violence as part of our response to the isolation imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and in November of the same year, the Observatory of Femicides in Cuba was launched,” they wrote. At the end of 2023, the Alas Tensas Gender Observatory and Yo Sí Te Creo en Cuba found 73 femicides had been committed that year. “That figure is double the 36 [femicides] in 2022, and is the highest reported number since record keeping began,” according to their official website.

In Cuba, femicide is still not typified as a crime in the Penal Code and there is no Comprehensive Law against gender violence. Despite efforts by independent organizations pushing for the recognition of feminicide and the creation of a Gender Law, the government does not dialogue with independent feminist organizations or activists. Rather, it represses them and accuses them of being enemies or counterrevolutionaries.

Mayde and Yeniset were victims of femicides in Cuba. As a tribute to them, YSTCC established alerts that are activated when girls or women disappear, in order to prevent femicide, or so that it does not go unpunished. "Our platform supported the publication of alerts related to the disappearances of children since 2020, and in 2023 established the Mayde (for children and adolescents) and Yeniset (for women) alerts in a collaborative effort," according to YSTCC members.

The Cuban state's intolerance towards activism stems from its view that any civil society group that does not emerge from the mass organizations overseen by the government are an enemy of the state. A year ago, YSTCC denounced an escalation of repression against women activists, which has impacted some of its members.

"Several of our members have been persecuted and followed in the street, they have had police surveillance in front of their homes and suffered cuts to Internet and telephone service," wrote members of the platform. "The most difficult consequence has been that we cannot provide one-on-one support as we did when we first launched the Support Line".