
Reviewed by Eloise Linger

Why care about “women’s work” during Cuba’s Special Period? Why not everybody’s work and survival efforts during the most daunting years for nutrition, family consumption, transportation, even access to simple medicines?

The grand-scale answer assumes that women have been oppressed and isolated from public life over the last five millennia in most societies. Moving to the local and contemporary in Cuba, the revolution of 1959 aimed to build a more equal society. That would entail the destruction of patriarchal and macho cultural norms, economic and political inequalities, and other still-existing forms of privilege, such as those of European-descended over African-descended people.

If more than 30 years later, in the 1990s, Cuban women were still expected to shoulder responsibilities for family care plus other domestic work, then what does that say about the elimination (or not) of patriarchal norms? To what extent had the revolutionary government and the women themselves overcome patriarchal attitudes and structural barriers? Were inequalities brought into sharper focus, perhaps intensified, during economic crisis? Those are important questions for analysing the successes and failures of the Cuban Revolution and its social transformations.

Daliany Jerónimo Kersh shows how the inequalities played out in one small town near Veradero, where tourism was the dominant employing industry and foreign tourists – and one’s neighbours – were a source of extra cash, especially the “hard” currency necessary for survival. Her contribution includes statistical data, background and expert analysis by recognised Cuban scholars and commentators.1 She also provides vivid sociological information from micro-level research into the lives of 30 women the author came to know personally from numerous visits to their town.

The women, when interviewed, ranged in age from their mid-30s to mid-60s. They were married, divorced and single. Twenty-nine had at least one child, and a few helped support and care for grandchildren. Many were born and raised in various areas of the island and moved to be near Veradero’s booming tourist industry. The formal interviews were conducted in December 2013 and October–November 2014, two decades after the worst years of the 1990s.

1 Sociologist Marta Nuñez, journalists Mirta Rodríguez Calderón (*Bohemia*) and Sara Más (*Granma*).
Their experiences reveal a lot to those unfamiliar with Cuban social life and the “doble moral” or “doble conciencia”. Both terms denote the conflict between what society dictates as ethically right and what one is forced to do, however wrong or offensive, in order to survive. Her succinct phrase is “disregarding revolutionary values to get by”.

The interviewees make clear that goals such as caring for an asthmatic child, buying shoes that fit the children or (especially) cooking a meal required a struggle. La lucha could mean many activities – ironing others’ clothes, selling soap, baking cakes or manicuring – to earn cash from tourists or neighbours.

Despite the challenges of oral history interviewing, the author argues for the value of micro-level investigation to discover a truth different from the official narrative of “voluntarily redundant” women returning to their old state jobs once the economy picked up in the mid- to late 1990s. Ania Terrero provides data and critical narrative in a 2021 article in Granma.²

The 1975 Family Code mandating that men do half the domestic work of cooking, childcare, cleaning, etc., has not yet materialised in the majority of Cuban homes.³ And when economic crisis with severe shortages hit in the 1990s, the strain on women was so severe that some had to leave their jobs in order to stand in long lines to get food.

Jerónimo Kersh does not explicitly argue that the work women did during the Special Period revealed that patriarchy is still alive and well in Cuba. She nevertheless presents examples, statistics and background that allow us to arrive at our own conclusions.

Accepting the idea that domestic labour sustains all societies, the author sees the government’s references to women’s heroism as an appeal “to women’s revolutionary consciousness to subtly persuade them to undertake more work” (p. 67). When all family income from regular jobs paid by the state failed to provide enough for basic food, housing, clothing and utilities, it was primarily the woman/mother who did the triple duty of her regular job, family household work, plus finding a way to make extra money. How did she do it?

² Ania Terrero, “Women and employment, where are the gaps?” http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2021/08/01/mujeres-y-empleo-donde-estan-las-brechas/print/ (accessed from cubanews@groups.io, August 3, 2021).
³ Staying in Cuban households over years of the 1990s, I saw that most women worked outside the home and did traditional “women’s work” at home. However, in 1994, renting a room in the apartment of a young couple (both employed technicians), I saw the husband sharing the housework – hanging wet clothing on indoor lines, preparing food, washing dishes, etc. But he was much younger than other men I saw in close proximity in those years.
The author provides a typology of three forms of work, with varying gradations of legality, details missed in many studies of private initiatives in the 1990s. First, she explains *Cuentapropismo*, working for oneself, after its legalisation around 1993. However, few women could afford to get a license to rent out rooms or start a restaurant, or overhaul and operate a 1950s car as a taxi. Many women’s initiatives were small-scale: candle-making, braiding hair, manicuring nails, sewing, making croquettes for neighbours, all activities not officially licensed at the time of the research.4

The second type, *La lucha*, was a broad category. “The struggle” included working from home, offering highly sought-after childcare or laundry services. Sometimes women veered into the shady areas of “bringing home” hotel soaps and toiletries, or making food or other items and illegally selling them. *La lucha* also encompassed much-used words like “searching, inventing, and resolving”, applied to survival efforts outside and inside the home.

Women considered the kitchen as “epicenter of the crisis”, because gas or electricity was often missing and many had to resort to firewood, kerosene or bunsen burners to cook. *La lucha* included “finding” stolen food for meals, and a 2004 survey by *Bohemia* magazine revealed that 81 percent of the population said they had bought stolen goods on the black market at some time (p. 151).

A third type of earning activity, *jineterismo*, various kinds of sex work and companionship, is perhaps better known in English-language books and magazines about Cuba’s Special Period. Jerónimo Kersh seems to have broken from the pattern of other scholars who in the 1990s and 2000s focused on the shocking new phenomenon of *jineterismo* as the only means for women’s (and families’) survival.5 She graciously sees this emphasis stemming from the fact that their research sites were the large cities of Havana and Santiago, rather than more ordinary, working-class areas.

Her research site was about six miles from Veradero, and nearly all the women living there used several earning strategies. Of the 30 women, only four revealed they had resorted to sex work, a highly lucrative but dangerous, difficult and socially unacceptable way of earning. The implication was that few women across the island resorted to sex work, but nearly all, including *jineteras*, combined earning strategies to survive.

4 By 2021, one could get a license to (legally) do manicures and other small, individual services.

5 Sex work, whether obvious on the street or in its more subtle forms, had been virtually eliminated by the revolutionary energies devoted to job training and rehabilitation in the 1960s; hence, the shock at its reappearance alongside the explosion in Cuban tourism.
One may disagree with a few statements that generally are not important. But one over-generalisation is misleading. We cannot question that the women interviewed “did not perceive sustained racial discrimination” but did see patterns of age and body-type prejudice in the tourist industry. Nor can we challenge that some US scholars may not understand the “fundamentally different trajectories of racial equality policies in both countries”. But we must challenge the author’s jump to imply that scholars were incorrect in observing racial discrimination in Cuba’s tourist industry. One does not have to be a scholar of race to observe that “public-facing” personnel in tourist hotels through most of the island, especially fancier, joint-venture hotels and tiendas, do not resemble the range of Cuba’s population. However, disagreement on that point does not negate the value of the book.

Women’s accounts of the details of their needs and how they organised their solutions offers some very interesting reading. The reader who is new to Cuba, or the graduate student seeking in-depth understanding, even seasoned scholars steeped in statistics and policy changes, will learn something about the strains and contradictions of everyday life for women in Cuba. All will benefit from the research reported by Daliany Jerónimo Kersh, and all can judge for themselves how much Cuban women have (or have not) been able to successfully challenge patriarchal norms.