

Aday del sol Reyes

JANUARY 23-26, Havana's Convention Center hosted the 6th Sexology Congress, focused on the central theme 'Sexual Education Within Processes of Social Change.'

On the occasion of this event, and given the educational work undertaken for years by the National Center for Sex Education, Mariela Castro Espín, director of the institution, agreed to an interview with CubaSí.

With a degree in Educational Psychology and a Master's in Sexuality, Mariela Castro is internationally recognized as an active defender of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual people (LGBTI) in Cuba

Since last November, President Raúl Castro's daughter has been participating in social networks, establishing a twitter account @CastroEspinM and a blog <http://elblogdemarielacastro.blogspot.com> as a means to debunk long-standing prejudices and oppose homophobia.

In an encounter with U.S. university students last November, you said that the Revolution had changed not only the lives of Cubans, but their sexuality as well. How?

The Cuban Revolution meant not only the achievement of our long held desire for national sovereignty, but also the beginning of a lengthy process of creation and implementation of projects seeking to establish justice, social equity and solidarity, which has been constructed and defended over 53 years. This framework has supported debate and dialogue between generations, cultural groups, classes and social strata. Old paradigms of power based on domination and exploitation, inherited from the Spanish colonial system and U.S. neo-colonial relations, were questioned.

Undoubtedly, this process has generated profound and radical changes in our culture, in

prejudices related to sexuality, in the domination asserted by men over women, the reshaping of courtship and relations between couples, in policies which privilege heterosexual relationships and exclude other ways of experiencing loving and erotic relations among human beings, denying certain rights to those who don't fit within these parameters.

Cuban film and other forms of artistic expression have addressed, in a very creative way, the vicissitudes of men and women of different ages in the development of these changes. For example, they have transformed opinions about virginity as a precondition for marriage; the expectation that couples remain together throughout life; the exclusive responsibility of men to provide for families and function as heads of household; the rejection of interracial relationships; myths about menstruation; the discounting of single mothers and single women in general; the rights of women; disapproval of transgender, homosexual or bisexual persons and many other issues.

What progress is being made in the proposed law which would legalize homosexual unions and recognize, in the new Family Code, the personal and property rights implied, in addition to permitting transsexuals to legally change their gender identity?

At this point, the proposed bill to modify the Family Code is being analyzed by specialists in the Ministry of Justice and professionals affiliated with the Cuban National Union of Jurists. According to what the Minister of Justice has said to the national press, its discussion is included in the legislative plan for 2012. I trust that the [Communist] Party Conference will help define an explicit policy against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and, as well, help to dismantle prejudices which serve as obstacles to the law's approval. The purpose of these proposals is to respond to the need to expand recognition and the protection of rights to our entire population. As for facilitating legal changes of identity for transsexuals without the requirement of surgical change (as is currently required), we have introduced through the Federation of Cuban Women a proposed Gender Identity law to the President of the People's Power National Assembly's Commission on Constitutional and Judicial Affairs. We do not, as yet, have information about the progress of that legislative initiative.

The proposal is inclusive in nature for all transsexual persons, identified by a specialized commission within the Ministry of Public Health, since not all can have surgery, be that for health or personal reasons.

On your trip to the Netherlands, you wrote on your twitter account @CastroEspinM, "In

Cuba an explicit policy exists to address not only prostitution, but also transactional sex, which has been invisible." Could you explain?

As for the issue of prostitution, I start from the conviction that the autonomy of all persons over their own bodies must be respected as a right. Nevertheless, the sexual market has not disappeared given the predominance of social systems based on patriarchal and class exploitation among human beings.

Some of these expressions are difficult to visualize, since government efforts are focused on more traditional and explicit interpretations, such as prostitution and human trafficking. In these instances, sex is a transaction, referring to women and men who derive some benefit from the practice of sex, which is not necessarily money. This has always existed, but now we have begun to talk about the phenomenon and in Latin America it is very much related to sex tourism, which has its own logic.

In Cuba, since 1959, the Federation of Cuban Women has led efforts to address the problems generated by prostitution as a form of exploitation, principally of women, who were disadvantaged not only as a result of their gender, but also because of race or social class.

It is known that there were more than 100,000 prostitutes living in very precarious and humiliating conditions, [before 1959] who have publicly testified as to how the Revolution changed their lives, benefiting them and supporting their participation within the great liberation process which contributed to affording them a measure of dignity.

The work undertaken by the Revolution to eliminate prostitution is a matter of national pride. The crisis initiated in 1990 led to its reappearance as a social problem with new characteristics, especially linked to international tourism and the consequent presence of clients who paid for sexual services and generated the market. That is why I praise the Swedish approach of penalizing the client, which has been effective in reducing sexual exploitation.

How many gender reassignment surgeries have been performed in Cuba to date and what are the criteria used for selection?

There have been 15 surgical gender reassignment operations performed. The first was done by Cuban specialists in 1998, but it was not until 2007 that the Ministry of Public Health again offered the procedure.

A National Commission for the Comprehensive Treatment of Transsexual Persons exists, which has received 175 applications from the transsexual population since 1979. They are attended according to standard international parameters. As we disseminate information about these services through the communications media, more people experiencing this conflict and previously unaware that they could receive help, will come forward.

At this point, transsexual persons must go through a two-year period of treatment, during which they receive attention from specialists along with personalized hormonal treatment, while they make the transition to the gender with which they identify. At the end of this process, the Commission identifies individuals who are eligible, appropriate candidates for gender reassignment surgery (known popularly as a sex change operation) and a legal change of identity.

This surgery is not a capricious aesthetic whim, but rather a procedure scientifically accepted on an international level, which significantly improves the well-being of transsexual persons. The surgical procedure contributes to alleviating the anxiety these individuals have continually experienced since early childhood, as a result of prejudices which lead to a lack of understanding and discrimination.

What do you think of the Wikileaks report confirming that the United States government has designated \$300,000 for subversion of Cuba's LGBTI project?

In the first place, this explicit reaction by the United States government shows that the work being done in Cuba supporting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex (LGBTI) persons preoccupies and occupies them, in terms of time and resources. Why? Because it shows the Cuban government's political commitment to confronting homophobia and transphobia as discriminatory practices which are not consistent with the Cuban Revolution's emancipation struggle.

What we are doing is refuting the same timeworn media campaigns attempting to discredit the

spiritual core of our revolutionary project and exposing the resources expended by the United States to lie, defame, demonize and defeat this process of transformation and its leaders. They have devoted themselves to promoting a few commentators entirely lacking in authenticity, repeating their statements in the traditional media, on blogs and social networks, implementing a blatant disinformation campaign with a prefabricated script.

Very clear evidence has been revealed about the orders these mercenaries receive from the United States Interests Section in Havana. Some of this evidence was published by Wikileaks. Many people who have witnessed concrete events, and later read the widely distributed news reports, can testify as to the way in which world opinion is crudely manipulated in the most influential media, such as CNN in Spanish, El País, Der Spiegel, Radio Nederland, among others

Steps have been taken in Cuba to promote respect for the right to free and responsible sexual orientation and gender identity; nevertheless, this has not been sufficient. In your opinion, what is the way forward to reaching the hearts of all Cubans and eradicating homophobia, once and for all, in our country?

The first steps were taken by the Federation of Cuban Women with the creation of the National Sexual Education Work Group in 1972, a precursor to CENESEX. The FMC also took responsibility for promoting public debate about these issues. One event which had an impact was the publication of the book *El hombre y la mujer en la intimidad* (Men and Women in Intimacy) by Sigfred Schnabel in 1979, in which a scientific argument was presented, for the first time in Cuba, as to why homosexuality is not considered an illness.

Many homosexual individuals have told me how welcome this message is, given the burdensome stigma society has imposed on them.

Shortly after evaluating our efforts as insufficient, in 2007, we took up the initiative of French activist Georges Tin to celebrate International Day against Homophobia on May 17, since this is the date the World Health Organization decided to eliminate homosexuality from its manual classifying mental illnesses.

After this experience, in 2008 we began to work on an educational strategy, with the support of

the communications media, promoting respect for free and responsible sexual orientation and gender identity. These activities have been supported by numerous state institutions and civic organizations, with the backing of the Communist Party of Cuba Central Committee's Ideological Department and have contributed to the development of a LGBTIH movement, with the particular characteristic of including heterosexuals who participate actively in the cause.

Why are we choosing an educational communicative strategy? Because we're talking about a process of profound cultural transformation, of offering analyses to refute prejudices established historically to dominate people, their sexuality and their bodies. Changing social consciousness is very complex and takes time, but the political will to facilitate such change must be present, if not we would be reproducing ways of thinking developed in the exploitive societies which preceded us.

How much of Vilma is in Mariela?

Her consistent opposition to all expressions of social injustice. Her commitment to the revolutionary process which emerged from our first responses in search of emancipation and crystallized into the Cuban nation's struggle for definitive independence. Her sincerity, nonconformity, humility and perseverance.

(Taken from CubaSí)