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Evolution

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## *Cuba's National Sexual Education Program: Origins and Evolution*

### **ABSTRACT**

Sexual education in contemporary Cuba is considered by many to be extremely progressive. This article addresses three fundamental questions that have not been addressed in scholarly works. Where did Cuba's sexual education program originate? How did it evolve? And how exactly has it been implemented? From analysis of the early work of the Federation of Cuban Women to the contemporary work of the National Center for Sexual Education, this study found that national debate within a negotiative process framework was crucial to the dramatic evolution of sexual education in Cuba.

### **RESUMEN**

En general la educación sexual en la Cuba contemporánea se considera muy progresista. Este artículo se enfoca en tres preguntas fundamentales que hasta ahora no se han estudiado suficientemente en publicaciones académicas. ¿Cómo se originó el programa de educación sexual? ¿Cómo se desarrolló? Y, ¿cómo ha sido implementado? Desde las publicaciones tempranas de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas hasta el trabajo contemporáneo del Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual, este artículo explica cómo el debate nacional —dentro de un proceso de negociación— ha sido de tremenda importancia en la dramática evolución de la educación sexual en Cuba.

Sexual education in contemporary Cuba is considered by many to be extremely progressive. In 2017, for example, the national program officer of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Marisol Alonso de Armas, explained, "Cuba is one of the countries of Latin America that has progressed the most in implementing a comprehensive sexual education program" (Lotti 2017). Indeed, with a national program that includes themes of sexual diversity (LGBTQ) and sexual violence, and in addition challenges gender stereotypes and promotes equal sexual rights for men and women, sexual education in Cuba has certainly changed dramatically throughout the Revolution. Yet this topic is vastly understudied in scholarly work.

Some studies on sexuality in Cuba have touched on sexual education, and particularly noted the importance of the National Center for Sexual Education (Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual, CENESEX). Lois M. Smith and

Alfred Padula's (1996) study provided an excellent account of the evolution of the role of women in post-1959 Cuba, while including some data on the importance of sexual education and women's involvement in its development. Likewise, Marvin Leiner's (1994) ethnographic study analyzed sexuality in Cuba, similarly noting the sexual education program of the time and its significance. Other scholars whose works have focused on sexual diversity have also noted the importance of sexual education in their studies, including Julio César González Pagés (2010), Carrie Hamilton (2012), and Noel Stout (2014). There has also been some research on sexual education policy itself, although this has focused on the broader themes within sexual education (Castro Espín 2011; Roque Guerra 2011). Nonetheless, while these works provide pertinent data, and clearly state the importance of sexual education, they do not include any specific information on how the national sexual education program developed, nor are any details of the mechanics of the program provided. This article thus addresses three fundamental questions that have not been addressed earlier in scholarly works. Where did Cuba's sexual education program originate? How did it evolve? And how exactly has it been implemented?

Since 1959, sexual education has evolved considerably. While once considered unnecessary and even dangerous, the National Sexual Education Program developed from a small group established by the Federation of Cuban Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, FMC) to become a sweeping national program, supported by the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC) and National Assembly. This study offers some insight into the evolution of a comprehensive sexual education program.

The "negotiative process" framework provides the theoretical basis for this study. This theory maintains that the Cuban Revolution (or post-1959 Cuba) is a complex process of negotiation that continually adapts to challenges and continues to evolve, rather than functioning as a closed political structure (Kapcia 2008, 2016). As Kapcia (2014) asserts, instead of employing a strictly top-down approach, the Revolution must be understood as continually adapting, evolving and utilizing the population to debate problems, as well as implement solutions. A key component of the negotiative process is referred to in Cuba as the "national debate." National debate, or public debate, in this context refers to Cuba's largely informal structure whereby discussions of a given (often contentious) topic are nationwide, instead of a formal structure of debate within the leadership. This can include, for example, discussions between friends and neighbors, meetings of the mass organizations, within the ministries, the PCC, and throughout the National Assembly. That is not to say that it is an easy process of participatory problem solving; nonetheless, it illuminates the complexity of the Revolution and its evolution.

It is worth noting that this understanding of the Revolution as a negotiative process is relatively new within Cuban studies, although has been increasing

in popularity among scholars (Smith 2016; Kirk, Clayfield, and Story 2018; Bain 2018). While earlier studies on post-1959 Cuba have centered on the view of the Revolution as a monolithic structure, led solely by a strict dictatorship (described often as “Castro’s Cuba”), analysis of the nearly six decades of the Revolution illustrate that it is more complex than previously believed. In regard to sexual education, the negotiative process framework is thus useful as it allows for analysis within Cuba’s particular revolutionary structure.

Over the course of three research trips to Cuba between 2011 and 2017, the methodology for this study consisted primarily of archival and interview-based research. The extensive archival research was mainly conducted in Cuba at CENESEX and the José Martí National Library. In particular, CENESEX’s archive was examined in depth, and many materials, including training manuals, reports, journals and books, were analyzed. Interviews were also conducted with several specialists. This included one of the FMC founders, Carolina Aguilar Ayerra;<sup>1</sup> CENESEX director and member of Cuba’s National Assembly, Mariela Castro Espín;<sup>2</sup> and many professionals working at CENESEX. While largely an untold story, the origins and evolution of sexual education in Cuba certainly provide a dynamic approach to developing a comprehensive sexual education program.

### **The Origins of Sexual Education, 1960–1990**

The origins of sexual education in revolutionary Cuba rest with the FMC. Established in 1960 with the principal goal of including women in the revolutionary process, and headed by revolutionary leader Vilma Espín, the FMC can best be understood as a mass organization with comparable power and influence to that of a ministry. Despite appearing inclusive of all women, the organization vehemently supported the socialist ideology of the Revolution and functioned as a means of communicating the views of the leadership nationwide. In short, FMC leaders were active proponents of the Revolution, and sought to include women in the process. Particularly powerful in the first decades of the Revolution, the FMC had representatives throughout the country, from the community to national levels—and within a few decades 80 percent of women over the age of fourteen were members (Castro Espín interview with author, 2013; Randall 1974).

From the 1960s, the FMC worked through a process of debate and discussion—from the community level through to the national representatives. At local community meetings, women would be able to discuss problems and ask questions, which would be passed through the various FMC channels, such as municipal meetings, and national congresses. The exchange of information, views, and requests between various levels were of paramount importance for the structure of the organization, since the diverse levels informed, and were

informed by, one another. Decisions made at the national level were thus based on the process of national debate, in an effort to include the demands of women from across the country (Santana 2013).

Notably, sexual education and sexuality were among the first topics discussed at community meetings. Many women, and particularly mothers, had very little understanding of sexual education or sexuality, including basic reproductive health and anatomy. This was typically either because it was not included in the formal education system, or because they were not able to attend any formal education as a result of underdevelopment and limited educational opportunities in pre-1959 Cuba. Moreover, medical practices played a significant role in this lack of knowledge or understanding. The main problems were that many women could not afford the privatized medical care in pre-revolutionary times, or it was not available in the rural regions in which they lived. In addition, comprehensive sexual health was not common in medical practices at the time. For example, it was noted in FMC meetings that a particular problem was that mothers did not know what to tell their children when they were asked questions about sex and reproduction (Maderos Machado 1994). Young women also demanded improved sexual education, as they had very little, if any, understanding of reproduction and sex. As Carolina Aguilar Ayerra remembered in a 2013 interview with the author, "We were asked if they would become pregnant if they kissed a man."

In 1962, at the FMC's First National Congress, the organization's emphasis on the importance of sexual education was made clear, as education and in particular sexual education were listed among the organization's main aims (FMC 1962). The congress also outlined the Revolution's particular understanding of "education." Rather than providing a focus on the school curricula, the concept of education was presented as the means through which information was communicated to, and absorbed by, all. In other words, education was to be seen as a broad concept that referred to the process through which information was distributed and interpreted (FMC 1962). On the basis of this broad understanding of education, the FMC representatives at the congress sought to develop a comprehensive sexual education program. The final recommendations of the congress suggested that sexual education should be incorporated into the media, research and publications of the FMC, and, importantly, that it should be included as an integral part of the school system (FMC 1962).

The major successes in sexual education included the magazine *Mujeres* (Women). Beginning in 1961, the magazine steadily increased in importance throughout the first decades of the Revolution, as it was a vital means of distributing information to women across the island (Aguilar Ayerra interview with the author, 2013). In many cases, it served as a means of providing education to some of the most rural areas of the country, which at the time had relatively little access to information. The most important aspect of the magazine was

a section called "Debates on Health" (*Debates de salud*), which was specifically created to teach women about their own health and bodies (FMC 1973). This was important as it contributed to the national debate on sexual education, while also providing basic information to women throughout the island. The exact number of the magazines distributed across the island is unknown, although it is clear that the FMC went to great lengths to ensure that as many women as possible had access to the information.

The legalization of abortions also had a significant impact on sexual education and was considered one of the most influential victories of the FMC in its goal of improving gender equity in the first decades of the Revolution. By the early 1960s, it was evident that the illegality of abortions was causing women to undergo very dangerous self-administered abortions.<sup>3</sup> This included the insertion of clothes hangers into the uterus, and the use of sulfuric acid, among other chemicals, as an intrauterine douche (Álvarez Lajonchere 1996). As a result of these significant health-related issues, and given the Revolution's early commitment to improving health outcomes,<sup>4</sup> the FMC argued for the legalization of abortions. Following the efforts of the FMC, free and medically safe abortions were legalized in 1965 (Álvarez Lajonchere 1994). In addition to this success, this example also demonstrated the necessity to dramatically increase sexual education. In particular, it was clear that greater information on reproduction and sexuality were badly needed.

Following the FMC's extensive work in, and commitment to, sexual education, the PCC and the National Assembly formally began supporting sexual education in 1970s, following the First National Congress of Education and Culture. While the congress, held in April 1971 with the participation of some 1,800 delegates from across the island, would later become known as very culturally restrictive and discriminatory against sexual diversity, it was nevertheless paramount to the development of sexual education. Sexual education was a key focus of the congress, which concluded that it was important and should be included in the formal education system. As Leiner (1994, 35) noted, "The official statement of the Declaration of the 1971 First Congress on Education and Culture supported the integration of extensive coeducation and sex education into the general teaching syllabus." Despite the importance placed on sexual education at this groundbreaking Congress, however, it would take several years for a specific plan to materialize.

Following the Congress, the most important and influential development in the evolution of sexual education was the establishment of a commission with the principal aim of contributing positively to the development and protection of the rights of children and women through sexual education. Named the Permanent Commission on the Attention to Infancy, Youth, and the Equality of Rights of Women,<sup>5</sup> the commission's main strategy was to publish works on sexual education, and in particular those published in countries with similar

ideological frameworks. This policy was initially established at the first PCC congress in 1975 and later expanded at the second congress in 1980 (PCC 1980a, 1980b). The importance of the commission was clear, as its name can be found in the first sexual education books published in Cuba, and it was often noted through the recommendations and discussions of the FMC's congresses (FMC 1962, 1984a, 1987).

The organization that carried out the aims of the commission was the National Group for Work on Sexual Education (Grupo Nacional de Trabajo de Educación Sexual, GNTES). Notably, the group was established by the FMC informally (without permission or recognition of the state) in 1972 by Espín and Celestino Álvarez Lajonchere, an obstetrics and gynecology specialist (Castro Espín 2009). Following the FMC's demands for improved sexual education, the group sought to research options for, and information regarding, the provision of sexual education. Espín was very influential in this role: as the president of the FMC, she understood the demands and need for sexual education. Moreover, as a well-known figure and leader of the Revolution, she had a significant level of autonomy (FMC 2008). As a result of GNTES's growing work in the area, it was recognized by the state in 1977 as the official representative group of the Commission on the Attention to Infancy, Youth, and the Equality of Rights of Women. Nonetheless, the group would maintain its close connections with the FMC, and for the most part, it worked independently from the PCC. GNTES slowly grew in personnel and importance, as the need for sexual education became more evident and the FMC continued to pursue the means to develop it. Significantly, GNTES understood sexual education as an important means of human development, and as such as important to the success of the Revolution.

Building on the earlier work on the FMC, GNTES sought to develop a nationwide sexual education program, the National Sexual Education Program (Programa Nacional de Educación Sexual, ProNes) (Castro Espín interview with author, 2013; Castro Espín 2011). The group researched various international sexual education programs and curricula, and invited advice from specialists to determine how to develop and implement a sexual education program in Cuba. A key figure in this process was Monika Krause, a German interpreter and translator for the FMC who discovered a curriculum developed over an eight-year period in the late 1960s and early 1970s by an East German specialist in sexual education, K. R. Bach (Krause-Fuchs 2007). It was believed that the similar ideological framework, rooted in socialism, would be advantageous to Cuba's ProNes. As a result, GNTES began translating the East German sexual education strategies, based on the countries' similar socialist principles of respect and equality.

In 1981, Espín became the president of the Permanent Commission on the Attention to Infancy, Youth, and the Equality of Rights of Women, as the FMC

assumed further influence over the sexual education program and was able to take advantage of greater independence within the revolutionary framework (FMC 2008). The role of GNTES was explained at the third FMC congress in 1980:

In reality [GNTES] is carrying out systematic work that encompasses the basic information and guidance materials, as well as the development of a framework to train specialists in the field of medicine, psychology and education, principally with an eye to the proper preparation of personnel who, in the future, will be responsible for sexual education, as well as the treatment and therapy of sexual problems. (FMC 1984a, 65)

The National Sexual Education Program increased in importance throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and its work included conferences, seminars, debates, roundtables, and presentations. These were also aimed at various groups, including parents, teachers, and students at all levels of the education system, from day-care centers to universities. Courses for professionals (e.g., doctors, psychologists, teachers) on topics of human sexuality were also offered, and programs were produced for national TV and radio. It should be noted, however, that ProNes was, at this time, the comprehensive framework through which sexual education strategies were implemented. While there were some classes and presentations in schools, it would be some time before a specific curriculum was developed and implemented in the school system.

The most significant contribution of GNTES was the publication of what is referred to in Cuba as “popular-science” books (referring to the accessible writing style and popularity) on the topic of sexual education. They were published through collaborative efforts between the FMC, Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, MINED), Ministry of Public Health (Ministerio de Salud Pública, MINSAP), and the Ministry of Culture (Ministerio de Cultura, MINCULT), led by GNTES. The role of MINCULT in publishing these works is notable, as it was a relatively new and rather autonomous ministry. Established in 1976, following the Quinquenio Gris, in an effort to recover from the culturally oppressive 1971–1976 period, MINCULT was committed to supporting the development and dissemination of culture (Story 2018). In this context, this interest resulted in material on sexual education.

Beginning in 1979, these books had a considerable impact on sexual education and became key sources of information for research and the National Sexual Education Program. The authors of the works were largely East German, and most were noted sexologists or medical professionals who wrote popular-science books to increase discussion around the concept of sexuality and contribute to sexual education. The aim was to educate readers by increasing the understanding of sex and sexuality while also emphasizing respect and equality within a socialist framework. One of the first and most popular books



published was Siegfried Schnabl's *Man and Woman in Intimacy* (*El hombre y la mujer en la intimidad*, 1989). Published in Cuba in 1979 (reprinted in 1985 and 1989), it was widely read and sparked public debate on sexual education. The publishing process was complex, as the "technical revisions" were completed by Álvarez Lajonchere and Monika Krause, but it was published by MINCULT, rather than MINED or MINSAP. This book was significant for two reasons. First, it was the first widely read book in Cuba to discuss sexual education and sexual health. Second, it was the first to articulate sexual diversity in a respectful and supportive format, presenting it as normal human behavior, dedicating its final chapter, entitled "Homosexuality in Man and Woman" to the topic. As a result, it sparked national debate and controversy on sexual education and sexuality. Nonetheless, following the success of Schnabl's first book, in 1981 his book *In Defense of Love* (*En defensa del amor*) was also published in Cuba (Schnabl 1981). While it did not focus on sexual diversity in such an overt way as the first, the book continued to focus on the importance of sexual education and sexuality, asserting that sexuality was normal and that education must be increased on the topic.

Another important author was Heinrich Brückner, a pediatrician specializing in human sexuality and sexual health, who wrote three significant books that were translated in Cuba. The first two were *When Your Child Asks You* (*Cuando tu hijo te pregunta*) and *Before a Child Is Born* (*Antes de que nazca un niño*), published in 1979 (and later reprinted the following year) (Brückner 1980a, 1980b). The aim of the books was to provide information for parents, teachers, young people, as well as children. Questions on reproduction, sexuality, and the importance of sexual education were addressed.

Brückner's third and most popular book was *Are You Now Thinking about Love?* (*¿Piensas ya en el amor?*), originally published in Cuba in 1981 (and reprinted in 1982 and 1985). Although similar to the work of Schnabl in terms of seeking to improve understandings of sex and sexuality, Brückner's view of sexual diversity in *Are You Now Thinking about Love?* was very different. He described homosexuality as "scandalous and antisocial behaviour," and the chapter discussing homosexuality and sexual diversity was titled "Sexual Variation and Deviations" ("Variantes y desviaciones sexuales") (Brückner 1981, 210). Despite the author's view of sexual diversity as unacceptable and dangerous, the book was successful overall in its attempt to increase awareness regarding sexuality and the importance of improved sexual education.

These publications were significant not only for their content (in terms of seeking to normalize sexuality and condemning sexual diversity) but also for overcoming the difficulty in publishing such work on sexuality in Cuba at the time. Indeed, the difference in content and publication process between Brückner's and Schnabl's works is illustrative of the ongoing national debate regard-

ing what was considered acceptable in sexual education. Although analysis of Schnabl's work suggests that GNTES did not have any major problems in publishing the content, it is evident that was not the case with the work of Brückner. While the preface in *Man and Woman in Intimacy* thanked GNTES for its efforts, the preface in *Are You Now Thinking about Love?* was notably different. Instead, it noted, that the chapter on homosexuality (chapter 12) underwent "special revision" by a "commission of the Ministry of Education" (the only popular-science book to have reported such revisions) (Brückner 1981). This highlights the ongoing challenges facing sexual education, in addition to clearly illustrating the power dynamics of the FMC and the revolutionary leadership—while powerful and autonomous in its own way, the FMC, and by extension GNTES, could do only so much, so quickly, within the structure of the Revolution.

In addition to her work for GNTES (working as a translator and interpreter, as well as often being viewed as "the face" of the group), Monika Krause also published two books on sexual education. The first, published in 1985, was titled *Some Fundamental Themes in Sexual Education (Algunos temas fundamentales sobre educación sexual)*. A second edition was published in 1987 (and reprinted in 1988), with the addition of two sections on the importance of sexual education (Krause 1987). The second book, published in 1987 (reprinted the following year), was *Sexual Education: Selected Lectures (Educación sexual: Selección de lecturas)* (Krause 1988). It focused on lectures and roundtables from GNTES members who gave advice on sexuality and sexual education. The central themes throughout the work were that respect was crucial for successful relationships, and that sexual education must continue to evolve to meet the needs of a politically and ideologically advancing society such as Cuba. Unlike the work of other international authors, Krause's work was important as it provided internal voices from within Cuba on the subject.

Another popular book among specialists, although not the general population, was Masters and Johnson's (1966) *Human Sexual Response (La sexualidad humana)*. Originally published in 1966 as a groundbreaking study on human sexuality, it was later published in Cuba in 1988 (Masters, Johnson, and Kolodney 1988).<sup>6</sup> Based on a version translated into Spanish and published the previous year, the Cuban version noted that it was the "Revolutionary Edition" of the famous book, which, by the late 1980s, was being used by specialists around the world as a foundational book on sexuality. Notably, the Cuban version appeared virtually identical to the English version, which discussed sexuality as normal human behavior, enjoyed by both men and women, and included little political rhetoric. It also included several chapters and sections on the complexity of sexual diversity, discussing homosexuality, lesbianism, transsexuality, and bisexuality as normal, although less common

than heterosexuality. Similarly to its popular-science counterparts, it presented sexuality as an important component of well-being and, by extension, sexual education as important to a healthy and productive society.

By the 1980s large excerpts of these books could be found in popular magazines, including *Mujeres* (FMC 1984b). Importantly, these books were also used as textbooks in sexual education courses for students, particularly in the fields of medicine and education. In addition, they were significant because they discussed sexuality as normal human behavior (with the exception of Bruckner's views on sexual diversity), dispelling related prejudices and taboos. Beyond the overall normalization of sexual diversity, these works were also crucial for advancing gender equality by illustrating (with both quantitative and qualitative data) that sexuality was essential to well-being—for both men and women. This represents a sharp departure from previous understandings of sexuality being important for men and shameful for women (Kirk 2017). Notably, in 2018, these books were still used by medical and education professionals, and widely read by the public, highlighting their significance within the revolutionary process.

In addition to the large volume of literature produced on sexuality and sexual education, research was carried out to determine the quality, or perceived quality, of sexual education and how it could be improved. A major MINED study, which conducted a comprehensive analysis on the methodology and organization of sexual education, is illustrative of the views held by the general population at the time (MINED 1981). The report, published in 1981, included data compiled from questionnaires completed by students (a total of 232 students between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five), parents (a total of 333 parents), and teachers (a total of 224 teachers) from across the provinces of Pinar del Río, Matanzas, and Havana. Specifically regarding sexual education, the report concluded that approximately 68 percent of students polled believed that their parents should teach them about sexual education and sexuality from a young age and about 78 percent believed that the school system should include sexual education. Notably, 95 percent agreed with the statement “Sexual Education is as important as every other aspect of the development of children and young people.” Of the parents polled, about 65 percent believed that sexual education in the school system should be improved. Teachers overwhelmingly believed that while there was some sexual education in schools, the main problem was that the national school system lacked a formal and a standardized program (MINED 1981).

The MINED report concluded with recommendations to improve sexual education. The two main recommendations were to continue with, and broaden, the FMC's work in the area of sexual education, as well as to “continue to research sexual education and how to teach sexual education, in order to deepen the methodological aspects and the reality that exists in our country” (MINED

1981). This report not only is significant in terms of illustrating the opinions of students, parents, and teachers but also is indicative of the national debate surrounding sexual education and how it had evolved. With data from this extensive MINED study, the opinions and beliefs of members of the populace were seriously considered and recommendations drawn. The views of those polled were carefully analyzed and communicated to those who could contribute to the improvement of sexual education.

Although considerable advances were made in sexual education, they were in some ways overshadowed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which hit Cuba in 1985, when the first Cuban was diagnosed with the infection (Fink 2003). Nonetheless, HIV/AIDS would, in this context, function as a double-edged sword as, despite the negative effects (particularly the increase in discrimination against sexually diverse persons, and criticisms from governments and human rights organization regarding the authoritarian treatment and prevention program, such as forcing patients to live in sanatoriums between 1986 and 1993), it also served to demonstrate the need to continue improving sexual education (Anderson 2009; Kirk 2017). A main issue was the serious lack of understanding of how the infection was transmitted, which resulted in HIV/AIDS almost immediately becoming known as the “gay disease” (Leiner 1994; Guerrero Borrego and García Moreira 2004). Moreover Álvarez Lajonchere noted in an interview in 1988 that the first videos produced on HIV/AIDS implicitly suggested that, if you were not gay, you were probably safe from the infection (Fee 1988). GNTES worked closely with the National AIDS Commission to better withstand the infection. The group also introduced information regarding HIV/AIDS into ProNes for the first time in 1988, including information for teachers on the optimal strategies to inform students on the topic (Álvarez Carril and Álvarez Zapata 1995). As a result of the government’s comprehensive prevention and treatment program for those infected, as well as the country’s preventive health care, HIV/AIDS rates remained comparably low for the region, maintaining a 0.1 percent infection rate (World Bank 2018; *Informe de Cuba en virtud de lo establecido en la resolución 60/224 Titulado* 2006). Nonetheless, by the late 1980s, the HIV/AIDS crisis served as a significant indication that improved sexual education, including further research, was needed.

As a result of the evident need for increased efforts, in 1988 the minister of health signed a resolution to change GNTES into the National Center of Sexual Education (CENESEX), and it was officially founded as a MINSAP center in 1989 (Castro Espín interview with author, 2013). Based largely on the earlier work of the FMC, the government believed that sexual education was integral to Cuba’s human development and thus reestablished GNTES as an official national center dedicated specifically to the provision and research of sexual education. While it would no longer be officially under the leadership of the FMC, the mass organization would remain a fundamental partner of CENESEX. By

1989, sexual education was not understood as important solely by the FMC, but rather was seen by the general population and the government as essential, while the national debate on how best to implement it continued.

### **CENESEX and the National Sexual Education Program**

By the mid-1990s, CENESEX had fully developed its identity as an influential national center. Like its predecessor, GNTES, it was still responsible for instituting the National Assembly's Permanent Commission on the Attention to Infancy, Youth, and the Equality of Rights of Women, and continued to do so through education, emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach. The organizational structure through which the center implemented its sexual education program was complex. Known as the "line of work" (*línea de trabajo*), the structure consisted of several levels, each with specific responsibilities, from the National Assembly down to the level of local leaders and individuals whom the center believed had a significant capacity to carry out its work. The center, working below the National Assembly and officially as an element of MINSAP, maintained the Council of Representatives, made up of professionals from MINED, MINSAP, FMC, and other political and student organizations, such as the Federation of University Students (Flórez Madan 1994). The Council of Representatives had a reciprocal relationship, as CENESEX would distribute advice regarding sexual education practices and receive suggestions for the efficacy of its own programs. CENESEX and the members of the council would then implement decisions or programs through the Provincial Commissions on Sexual Education, which would in turn continue to implement them in the Municipal Commissions on Sexual Education. In total, by 1994 there were 169 Municipal Commissions (one in each municipality), which would then introduce the necessary instructions or information at the community level.

Responsibility for the information would pass to what were referred to as the "grassroots agents for change" (Flórez Madan 1994, 24). These grassroots agents could be local FMC leaders, leaders of youth groups, or anyone with a significant role in the community. The process sought to encourage change on an individual level. In particular, the changes and information were directed toward individuals who would have significant impact on others, such as teachers, psychologists, doctors, medical school instructors, social workers, and members of the FMC and youth groups. Each Provincial and Municipal Commission of Sexual Education maintained a multidisciplinary approach, although each focused specifically on the needs of a given area. This could include the question of abortion or rates of sexually transmitted infections that were higher than the national average, or greater rates of teenage pregnancy. If a particular need was noted, each commission would seek to adjust its own

program to meet it. Moreover, the commissions functioned as the local representation of CENESEX, maintaining the latter's presence and influence across the country.

The center sought to implement and develop its responsibilities under the line of work through four main avenues: training, research, increased media and audiovisual presence, and sexual therapy. In terms of training, the center advised on the material that should be included in the curricula at the university level, as well as those in schools and day-care centers. They also organized related workshops, seminars, and courses. The Provincial and Municipal Commissions would facilitate these courses as well, according to the specific needs of a given area. The training stressed the importance of participation and community development, suggesting that people were more likely to learn, and pass on the information, if they felt involved in the process.

The training program was comprehensive, with specific programs or areas of focus for each ministry involved (including MINED, MINSAP and MINCULT, along with the FMC, youth organizations, and the Cuban Institute for Radio and TV). Under MINED, the training program focused on institutes of higher learning; MINED officers; national, provincial, and municipal development specialists; and teachers. In terms of MINSAP, training initiatives focused on medical science faculties; professors specializing in comprehensive general medicine; family doctors; primary health professionals; and sexual orientation and therapy teams. For MINCULT, the training program centered its efforts on the Community Outreach Cultural Program, art instructors, and *casas de cultura* (local cultural centers). For the FMC, the focus was on leaders at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, as well as *casas de orientación a la mujer y la familia* (centers for education and guidance that worked to modify stereotyped views of the role of men, women, and families). The youth organization section focused on national youth leaders at the provincial and municipal levels, recreation areas for young people, training centers for young people, and student centers. Under the Cuban Institute of Radio and TV, efforts were aimed at writers and directors of radio and TV programs, journalists, and consultants (Flórez Madan 1994).

The center also had specific objectives for the other components of the line of work. The research, for example, can be understood as a way of compiling data through various formal and informal means, rather than strictly research projects. The aim was to engage with the population to collect as much information as possible to determine successes of sexual education programs and areas needing improvement. The center sought to understand the reality of sexual education in Cuba at the time, developing a comprehensive socio-demographic understanding. This included compiling data on factors such as births, divorces, marriages, teenage pregnancies, abortions and single mothers,

national health coverage and health indicators, education, and culture. From the data, the center would determine how best to fulfill the needs of a given region (Flórez Madan, Espín, and Mederos Machado 1994; Flórez Madan 1995).

Another area of the line of work was that of audiovisual media. CENESEX, working with the Institute of Radio and TV, sought to increase the country's output of sexual education material on video. The videos were used in workshops, courses, and classes across ProNes, and featured on national TV. The center's view was that presenting the information in an audiovisual format would encourage public debate (Flórez Madan 1994). This form of disseminating sexual education had similar effects to GNTES's publishing of popular-science books on sexual education and sexuality. Because much of the center's work in audiovisual media was broadcast as part of the state-run national programming, it was viewed by a significant percentage of the population, although there are no data to suggest how often it was played or how many people viewed it. Nonetheless, it is clear that the videos were popular and remembered well by those interviewed.

Finally, the last component of the line of work was sexual therapy. The center trained multidisciplinary teams to implement and improve sexual therapy across the island. They worked in the medical field at various locations, from the primary care level (e.g., clinics) to specialized hospitals and research facilities. Individuals in the medical profession were also trained, including psychologists, pediatricians, gynecologists, urologists, and endocrinologists. The aim was to promote sexual therapy in the field of medicine as a valid and important component of health care (Flórez Madan 1994).

The sexual education program, ProNes, which CENESEX developed on the basis of GNTES's earlier version of the program, was thus comprehensive and extensive. Through the line of work, ProNes can be understood as having been implemented through two spheres: formal and informal. The informal sphere was extensive and included the various levels and areas in which sexual education was taught by representatives outside of the formal education system. Information (including courses, workshops, debates, and literature) was provided by the provincial, as well as municipal, sexual education commissions and distributed widely (McPherson Sayú 1995; Rodríguez Lauzurique 1994). The formal sphere focused on educational institutions, including higher education such as medical faculties and teaching institutions. In addition, the formal sphere included the implementation of the ProNes curricula in day-care centers, preschools, as well as primary, secondary, and high schools and polytechnic institutions. While the ProNes curricula were not consistent across levels, they were similar and based on the needs of specific regions.

Despite there being some lectures and seminars in the formal education system, it was not until 1996 that a standardized national sexual education system was developed and implemented (Castro Espín interview with author,



2013; Vázquez Sejjido, interview with author, 2013). As Castro Espín (2011, 29) noted, “One of the most significant achievements during this stage, however, was the gradual creation and implementation of the National Sex Education Program throughout all levels of the national education system as of 1996.” While ProNes refers to the comprehensive (formal and informal) sexual education program, the name is also used to discuss the official curriculum in schools. Studies have given no clues as to what was included in this curriculum, and little is known about its structure. However, an unpublished CENESEX report from the early to mid-1990s suggests that it was a very comprehensive and detailed program.<sup>7</sup> The report, *National Center of Sexual Education, Sexual Education Program for Schools of Art (Programa de educación sexual para las escuelas de arte)*, included a thorough, detailed curriculum for junior high schools and high schools. The material covered included what was referred to in the report as general objectives, thematic plan, analytic plan, methodological recommendations, and audiovisual materials (CENESEX, n.d.).

Specifically, the sexual education program for junior high schools included two-hour classes conducted monthly. These classes included workshops with quizzes, presentations by lecturers and students, writing exercises, group work, role-playing, skits, and true-or-false questionnaires. A detailed pedagogic plan was outlined for each class, including instructions for teachers, course material, and suggested time limits for each topic. The topics included in the junior high program were identifying sexual anatomy, functional and dysfunctional conversations with family, the difference between sex and sexuality, the importance of respect, how to talk to your partner about your sexuality, gender differences, text analysis (stories, situations, case studies), values and morals, poetry analysis, sexually transmitted diseases, and myths (CENESEX, n.d.).

The program for high school students was similar but included more detailed information. The primary difference of the more advanced sexual education was the inclusion of information about diverse sexual orientations (including bisexual, homosexual, and heterosexual) as well as a discussion of sexual dysfunction. It was evident throughout the sexual education process of each level that the aim was to have students think critically about sex and sexuality. While the contemporary curricula have changed somewhat from this version, it nevertheless provides a clear indication of the in-depth information covered, the detailed pedagogic plans, and the emphasis placed on respect and equality (CENESEX, n.d.).

More recent studies have indicated that Cuban children and young people believe that they have a good sexual education program in the school system. One study found that 82 percent of junior high school students and 83 percent of high school students felt that they were receiving a good sexual education. The same study also suggested that 74 percent of junior high school students and 78 percent of high school students talked to their parents about sex and



related issues (Ravelo 2005, 175–176). These data indicate clearly the improvement perceived by students regarding their sexual education. This is also indicative of the importance of national debate and the government's response over several decades to demands of improved sexual education.

ProNes can best be understood as an evolving structure, working to improve sexual education (CENESEX 2001). Its curricula have continued to evolve, as the respective needs of the educational program have developed. In 2012 CENESEX, along with various ministries, including MINED and MINSAP, began developing the next stage in the sexual education program, the National Program of Sexual Education and Sexual Health (Programa Nacional de Educación y Salud Sexual, or ProNess). It was believed that, given changes in the center's research aims (including sexual diversity and sexual violence) and the needs of contemporary Cuba, changes throughout the entire curricula were also needed (Vázquez Sejjido interview with author, 2013; Alfonso Rodríguez 2007; Aguilera Ribeaux 2001). In particular, the new ProNess, implemented between 2013 and 2014, incorporated information on sexual diversity and gender identities.

While CENESEX has been a leader in sexual education, it is not alone in its efforts to improve sexual education in Cuba. In particular, significant efforts have been made by the Óscar Arnulfo Romero Center (Centro Óscar Arnulfo Romero, OAR) to improve awareness and understanding of sexual violence and gender equity. The OAR is a Christian-based organization, recognized by the state, which develops and leads gender-based humanitarian programs. Working with other organizations, such as CENESEX and the FMC, the OAR has led numerous endeavors to improve gender equality in Cuba, including workshops, training programs, campaigns, therapy, and research. Of particular note, it has had a major role in efforts to decrease gender-based violence through research and consciousness raising (OAR 2018).

In 2018, sexual education goes beyond ProNess and must be understood as working in both the formal and the informal education spheres. One such example is the celebrations for International Day against Homophobia (May 17), which in 2017 and 2018 focused on making schools safe for sexually diverse students. For three weeks in May, the PCC, MINSAP, MINED, MINCULT, FMC, as well as CENESEX, among other participants, ran various activities and events throughout the island to promote safe schools and antibullying.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the origins and evolution of sexual education in Cuba since 1959. The island's now-lauded sexual education program has developed over nearly six decades and involved some of the most significant leaders of the Revolution, as well as multiple organizations and the PCC. While origi-

nally established and developed by the FMC, without formal recognition of the government, the importance of sexual education soon became clear to the leadership. By 1975, the government fully supported sexual education efforts and engaged in a national debate on how to implement and improve the national sexual education program—a debate that continues in 2018.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the Cuban case. First, the National Sexual Education Program (ProNes), now the National Sexual Education and Sexual Health Program (ProNess), has developed dramatically since its origins in the initial FMC meetings. ProNes was never a static, standardized program throughout the country and over the years. It consistently evolved to address the given needs of the general population, on the basis of requests for information and the suggestions of specialists. Indeed, the program, in both the formal and the informal spheres, continued to change and adapt to contemporary needs. This was clear, for example, from the early studies conducted by MINED, which concluded that improved sexual education was urgently required. Following comprehensive analysis, greater attention was paid to sexual education. In particular, CENESEX and its “line of work” illustrate the numerous ministries, organizations, groups, and professions involved in the development and implementation of the program, as well as the complexity of the system and the relationship between its stakeholders. Moreover, this is most recently evidenced by the incorporation of the topics of sexual diversity as and sexual violence within ProNess. It is thus important to consider that sexual education, and by extension the national sexual education program, must constantly seek to adapt to the changing needs and demands of a given population. Sexual education must evolve to fit contemporary needs.

Second, the Cuban case study demonstrates the importance of national debate in sexual education. In other words, analysis illustrates that, in the Cuban context, ongoing debate was crucial to meeting sexual education needs. ProNes was established specifically as a result of the FMC's work in the area, in response to the national debate and demands of women throughout the island. The program continued to develop based on a complex negotiative process. This process involved collaboration between GNTES (and later CENESEX), the PCC, the National Assembly, organizations (including the FMC), and professionals in the fields of medicine, education, the media, and others. The comprehensive sexual education program was not simply determined by the government and instituted through a top-down approach; rather, the process was significantly more complex and participatory, albeit contentious at times. It can also be argued that this process of national debate and participation has been effective because those involved in the process (in this case a large number of the general population, organizations, and government officials) felt more responsible for its success, and so were more willing to continue to work toward its ongoing improvement. Negotiation and debate were key to the development

and implementation of sexual education, and they will continue to play a significant role in the evolutionary process of sexual education throughout Cuba.

Despite significant data on the sexual education program collected for this study, it is clear that more research is required. For example, some data on ProNess are still missing. Specifically, it is unclear which information has been included or excluded from the new curricula on sexual diversity and sexual violence. Exams, quizzes, lesson plans, and exercises have not been assessed to determine the change in content. Moreover, comprehensive data outlining the effectiveness of the sexual education program (including STI rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion rates) have not yet been found.<sup>8</sup> While studies on sexuality have noted that these rates have improved since the 1970s, there is little information on the specifics of these claims.

Nonetheless, it is evident that significant advances have been made. While this form of sexual education, as well as its evolutionary process, is unique to Cuba, and as such cannot be generalized easily, it does offer strategies from which lessons may be learned, including the importance of evolving and meeting contemporary needs, as well as the efficacy of national debate. Undoubtedly, Cuba, and especially CENESEX, will continue to carry out programs dealing with the sexual education needs of this Caribbean island.

## NOTES

1. Carolina Aguilar Ayerra is one of the initial founders of the FMC, working closely with Yolanda Ferrer and Vilma Espín, among others. As a trained journalist, she worked for the FMC in publishing, editing dozens of books and hundreds of magazines, and remains heavily involved in the organization.

2. Mariela Castro Espín is a trained child psychologist, with a Masters in Sexology and a PhD in Sociology. She is the director of CENESEX, as well as a member of the National Assembly, and is involved with various national and international organizations that focus on themes regarding gender, sexuality, sexual education and sexual health.

3. Under the Social Defense Code (amended in 1938), Article 443 stated that abortions were only legal if it was necessary to save the life of the mother or to avoid serious damage to her health; pregnancy as a result of rape and/or intercourse with a minor; or in order to avoid the transmission of a serious hereditary or contagious disease (Álvarez Lajonchere 1994).

4. For more information on Cuba's healthcare system see Emily J. Kirk, "Cuban Healthcare: What is Different about Health in Cuba?" in *Cuba's Gay Revolution* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017); Linda M. Whiteford and Laurence G. Branch, *Primary Health Care In Cuba: The Other Revolution* (Plymouth: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Cristina Pérez, *Caring For Them From Birth to Death* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

5. Referred to in Spanish as either la "Comisión Permanente de la Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular Sobre la atención a la infancia y la igualdad de derechos de la mujer," or the "Comisión Permanente para la Atención a la Infancia, la Juventud, y la Igualdad de Derechos de la Mujer."

6. While earlier versions of the book may have existed in Cuba (as it was originally translated in Spanish in the late 1960s), this study used the Cuban version, which is describes as the

"Revolutionary Edition," developed from a Spanish translation from 1987, and published in Cuba the following year.

7. Despite the report being undated and unpublished, the content (including the use of the CENESEX name, as well as specific information regarding HIV/AIDS) suggests that it was written in the early to mid-1990s.

8. There is very little information on the numbers of abortions, although the available data suggests that the prevalence of abortions has remained high. One study concluded that, between 1968 and 1992, some 2.9 million abortions were performed, while 4.7 million live births were registered (Alfonso Fraga 1994). Another study, published in 1996, determined that rates continued to increase until 1986, at which point the abortion rate was 50.6 abortions per 1,000 women (Peláez and Rodríguez 1996). Contemporary studies have similarly suggested that abortion rates have continued to decrease. For example, "a total of 67,277 pregnancies were terminated in 2004 in the health system's hospitals, 93,694 fewer than in 1986" (Acosta 2006). Nonetheless, the rates are considered high by many Cuban healthcare and sexual education professionals.

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