

## **Why Aren't Women Protesting in Cuba?**

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The revolution was supposed to bring equality for women but the reality is very different.

Travel is sometimes the way you get to understand what is happening back home. When I travelled from Cuba to visit Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, I found a city centre filled with women's stories, distributed on flyers and posters. Activism seemed alive here. Dozens of women were camping out at the Congressional Plaza demanding the decriminalisation of abortion.

I saw these protests and my mind went back to Cuba. There, the idea of so many people organising and mobilizing to demand their rights is unimaginable.

"Chiara Páez, 14 and pregnant, beaten to death by her boyfriend," read one poster stuck on the marble wall of a typical French-style building in central Buenos Aires. Her awful story - Chiara's bruised body was found buried, curled in the fetal position - reminded me of that of a Cuban teenager, Leidy Maura Pacheco. In 2015, the 18-year-old from Cienfuegos, mother to a small baby, was raped by three men before being murdered.

But hers was the only story of a woman's brutal murder I can ever recalling reading about in the Cuban state press. Even then, the media did not call the crime by its name: femicide, the **violent death of women based on gender**. This is not an offence that appears in the Cuban Criminal Code, and the official media rarely uses the correct term when telling these stories. Maybe if it's not in the news, it does not exist.

In Cuba, there are no public statistics on femicide or any other gender-based violence. It is impossible to confirm whether Leidy's murder was an aberration. In Argentina, 290 femicides were committed in 2017. Cubans have no way of knowing how close or far we are from the Argentinian context.

The partial results of a national survey by the Women's Studies Institute is the closest we can get to official figures on gender violence in Cuba. According to the study, 39.6 per cent of interviewees claimed to have been attacked by their partner at some point in their life. This number is particularly significant, since there must have been many interviewees unwilling to admit to having suffered domestic abuse.

In Buenos Aires, I walked down the Avenida Rivadavia, which locals boast is the longest street in the world. Protests in Buenos Aires often take place along here, like the dozens of women's marches in recent years calling for an end to gender violence.

Their slogans - #NoEstamosTodas ("We're Not All Here") #NiUnaMenos ("Not One Less") - reflect the toll such violence has had on women's lives.

One poster left on a wall on Avenida de Mayo is intended as an "escrache" - a public unmasking - of a taxi driver from Buenos Aires province who in 2017 was accused of beating so badly she nearly died. His trial is ongoing.

This year's International Women's Day, on March 8, saw 200,000 women marching from Government House to the National Congress calling for equality.

What a contrast to Cuba. As far back as I can remember, March 8 passes more or less unnoticed, apart from the sale of flowery cards exalting women's role in socialist achievements. It was the same this year, apart from a statement or two from the Cuban Bertha Cáceres Equality Space of the Philosophy Institute and the "girl power" initiative, **an exhibition of 15 feminist drawings** to be tattooed on women to declare sovereignty over their own bodies.

It would appear that Cubans have no reason to march. And in theory, at least, we are supposed to be living in a much more enlightened reality.

Since 1959 the revolutionary government has aligned itself with the premise of equality of rights and opportunities for all. Extended maternity and paternity leave were granted. The state also found equitable solutions to disparities in political, labour, sexual, educational, health and land rights. This does not exist anywhere else in Latin America. If we look closely, from Mexico to Brazil from Argentina to Chile where women have recently raised their voices and have gone out in their thousands to protest, they are still struggling to legalise abortion; Cuba stands out as an example of a country where women are free to choose. If only we could really lead the way in defeating machismo.

Yet we live on an island, where as Cuban researcher Ailynn Torres Santana wrote, women are

“underrepresented in the state sector of the economy, which provides the best income; we have the largest working load at home; we have a precarious [health] care infrastructure; and the current transformation process is revealing unequal empowerment between men and women”.

There is global condemnation of the invisibility of the unpaid work women do at home. In Cuba, the double day, as it's often called, is not factored into GDP or any other economic indicator. According to this logic almost half of women of working age in Cuba are not productive.

In Cuba, we are victims of constant harassment on the streets (with no public policies to prevent it). We live in a machista country where female sex workers are sent to prison but male sex workers are not, where victims are still blamed and violence against women is justified or considered natural. You often hear the excuses that “she did something to deserve it” or “he’s not like that, he was just having a bad day”. It is a country that does not recognise equal marriage and will not contemplate the legal existence of any independent feminist association. At the outset of the new order, the Federation of Cuban Women was created to channel all demands. And still, the only organisation that can represent women is run by the state.

The editors of **Alas Tensas**, the only national magazine that defines itself as feminist, are constantly harassed and intimidated, with their ability to travel abroad arbitrarily regulated. Alas Tensas’ only crime is to promulgate a Cuban feminist agenda without the government’s supervision. No transparency is permitted in journalism.

In Cuba, we continue living day to day without anyone marching to say something is wrong. The problem is not that we are worse or “better than the rest of Latin America, the problem is that we do not know what we are. The problem is apathy and silence.

**Location:** Cuba

**Topic:** Women

Women's rights

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