

In the new Cuban Constitution, Fidel lives

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Second from right, Mariela Castro Espín, director of the Cuban National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) in Havana and an activist for LGBTQ+ rights. Photo: Bill Hackwell

On Nov. 25, 2016, Fidel Castro, the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, died at age 90.

Around the world and especially on the island he helped free from capitalist exploitation, organizations and individuals celebrated his life and contributions on the second anniversary of his death. These remembrances coincided with the final stages of wide public discussion both in Cuba and its diaspora to update the Cuban Constitution — a document that guarantees socialist development and the right to universal free health care and education as well as access to culture and sports.

Of the many proposed constitutional updates, one of the most discussed and noted is Article 68, which deletes references to gender in defining marriage. The proposed new Cuban Constitution defines marriage as between two people instead of between a man and a woman, opening the door for same-sex marriage.

In his first interview, Cuba's recently-elected President Miguel Diaz-Canel supported equal marriage rights. He told TeleSUR on Sept. 17 that recognizing marriage as between two people without limitations is part of eliminating all forms of discrimination in society.

How is it that Cuba leapfrogs forward?

On Nov. 29, Mariela Castro Espín, director of the Cuban National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) in Havana and an activist for LGBTQ+ rights, explained why Cuba was ready for same-sex marriage in a video interview with the BBC. She said through a translator:

“This change is important because it is the political will of the Cuban government to advance a human rights agenda and to extend it to as many areas as possible.

“It is time that the people of Cuba understand the need to recognize and protect the rights of everyone without excluding people by their sexuality, their gender identity,

disability or race. ...

“Cuban society is showing it is continuing as a society in revolution. It is in an experimental stage of a socio-economic and political system in a socialist democracy, not a social-democratic one. This means we can have the mechanisms for a fair society.

“Cuba is far more advanced in comparison with other Latin American countries because the people have managed to take power and they are backed by the Communist Party.”

And this is also why Fidel Castro’s memory and life still give struggling people so many lessons. On May 1, 2000, he said:

“Revolution is having a sense of the historic moment; it is changing everything that must be changed; it is full equality and freedom; it is being treated and treating others like human beings; it is emancipating ourselves on our own and through our own efforts; it is challenging powerful dominant forces in and beyond the social and national arena; it is defending the values in which we believe at the price of any sacrifice; it is modesty, selflessness, altruism, solidarity, and heroism; it is fighting with courage, intelligence and realism; it is never lying or violating ethical principles; it is a profound conviction that there is no power in the world that can crush the power of truth and ideas.

“Revolution is unity; it is independence, it is struggling for our dreams of justice for Cuba and for the world, which is the foundation of our patriotism, our socialism, and our internationalism.”

Challenging class-based gender roles

Cuban women have been integral to the struggle for independence from colonialism. Carlota Lucumí, an enslaved Cuban woman of Yoruba origin, lost her life leading an

1843-1844 slave rebellion at the Triunvirato sugar mill in Matanzas. Cuba gave the name “Operation Carlota” to its international military support that, alongside Angola’s MPLA national liberation front, defeated the racist apartheid South African regime at Cuito Cuanavale in 1988.

Cuban independence fighters Mariana Grajales and Ana Betancourt are remembered for their early roles. After the July 26, 1953, attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago, Haydée Santamaría and Melba Hernández were imprisoned. In the Sierra Maestra mountains, Celia Sánchez and Vilma Espín (mother of Mariela Castro and founder of the Federation of Cuban Women) were leaders and organizers.

Fidel Castro formed, armed and trained the Mariana Grajales women’s platoon. Brigadier General Teté Puebla is the highest-ranking woman in Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces.

“How can we give rifles to women when there are so many men who are unarmed?” asked some of the men. Fidel answered, “Because they are better soldiers than you are. More disciplined.”

Cuba’s 1961 Literacy Campaign not only eradicated illiteracy in a year, but opened new horizons, especially for the young women teachers who broke traditions’ chains to build the new socialist revolution. Check out the wonderful movie “Maestra” for more on this transformation.

Following the 2018 elections, 53.2 percent of the Cuban National Assembly delegates are women. They are diplomats, like Ambassador Anayansi Rodríguez Camejo at the United Nations and Josefina Vidal, Cuba’s chief negotiator in the reestablishment of U.S.-Cuba diplomatic relations.

As documented in Leslie Feinberg’s 2009 book, “Rainbow Solidarity in Defense of Cuba,” gender reassignment surgery is available free of charge, and a person’s right

to change their name and sexual identity was acknowledged by Cuban law. (p. 86)

Mariela Castro Espín told the BBC interviewer: "The world is very different from Cuba. It doesn't mean that Cuba is better, but Cuba is fighting to make a different world. If they left us alone, and our project doesn't get sabotaged, it would be wonderful. It would be a wonderful alternative in the world. Why does everything have to be capitalist?"

The vote on the proposed Constitution with amendments from the national consultation is scheduled for Feb. 24, 2019. The consultation included 133,681 meetings with 8,945,521 people attending. Of those, 1,706,872 speakers made 783,174 proposals, including modifications, additions, deletions and clarifications. Cubans living abroad made 2,125 proposals. (Granma, Nov. 27).

