# IF THEY DON'T MENTION US, WE DON'T EXIST: LESBOPHOBIA IN CUBA





Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights

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International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights **MUSEOV** 

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There is very little information about lesbian women in Cuba. In fact, speaking with María Matienzo for the drafting of this report, we discussed the lack of data, visibility, and stories that depict the reality of lesbian women in Cuba. This prompted an investigation that traces back to the 20th century, where campaigns of "cleansing" and hate speech against LGBTI+ individuals were present in Cuban society. With the triumph of the revolution, there was an attempt to eliminate LGBTI+ individuals through the UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production) camps and exile. Even in 2023, LGBTI+ individuals still resort to exile as a form of resistance. There is a historical debt that will not be addressed until all LGBTI+ individuals on the island are accepted, included, and structural discrimination against them is eliminated.

From another perspective, this report shows how the bonds that are created, the chosen families that are formed, and the stories of resistance are part of everyday life that seeks to erase and make invisible the existence and resistance of Cuban lesbians. The report begins with a line that should alert us: "many women in Cuba fear being identified as lesbians." Gender stereotypes continue to permeate the idea of who and how one is a "woman" and what is the "correct sexual orientation or gender identity." We hope that this report breaks down these stereotypes and contributes to understanding that we all have the same human rights and we all deserve to live a life free of violence and discrimination, a life that allows us to fully develop and have our own life projects.

Zuleika Rivera Senior LGBTI Program Officer, Race and Equality

## INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

Many women in Cuba fear being identified as lesbians. Some did not attend the interviews for this report out of fear of being seen or identified as lesbians. They know that being a lesbian implies exclusion and social stigma. 78.2% of the respondents have felt rejected to some extent, and 54.5% have been challenged by a man on the street due to their sexual orientation or non-conforming appearance.

To understand the nature of homophobia, lesbophobia, and transphobia, it is essential to provide a brief historical overview from the early 20th century to the present day, highlighting the endorsement of openly lesbophobic feminist figures and discourses. Both Mariblanca Sabas Alomá (1901-1983) and Camila Henríquez Ureña (1894-1973) in their writings compared lesbianism to the supposed aspiration to "emulate men without abandoning the frivolity of alcohol consumption or sex,"<sup>1</sup> or classified lesbians as "dissolute young women who imitated masculine behaviors."<sup>2</sup> They are praised without any critical examination of their work or their exclusionary assumptions.

In 1928, a "hygienic campaign" against "pepillismo" and "garzonismo"<sup>3</sup> began in Cuba, euphemisms used to refer to male and female homosexuality. What started in the weekly magazine La Semana through the journalist and politician Sergio Carbó (1892-1971)<sup>4</sup>, would echo in the magazine Carteles by three of the most progressive minds of their time, who ridiculed and judged both "pepillos" and "garzonas. Massaguer (1889-1965), a prominent caricaturist, would be in charge of the graphics, while Mariblanca Sabas Alomá, "the champion of feminism,"<sup>5</sup> and Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring (1889-1964), a historian of the city of Havana, were tasked in 1935 with writing articles that disparagingly described gay men and lesbians.

But the desire for "cleansing" society did not become state policy until the revolutionary process began in 1959, mobilizing the state machinery to segregate all gender non-conforming individuals.

<sup>1</sup> Capote Cruz, Zaida, "Women and Culture: Distant Voices, Still Alive": https://www.redsemlac-cuba.net/redsemlac/comunicacion/la-mujer-y-la-cultura-voces-distantes-aun-vivas<sup>1</sup>/.

<sup>2</sup> Capote Cruz, Zaida, "Women and Culture: Distant Voices, Still Alive": https://www.redsemlac-cuba.net/redsemlac/comunicacion/la-mujer-y-la-cultura-voces-distantes-aun-vivas<sup>1</sup>/.

<sup>3</sup> Sierra Madero, Abel: "Theater and Nude: The Bataclan of Paris in Havana": https://www.hypermediamagazine.com/columnistas/fiebre-de-archivo/cuando-el-bataclan-de-paris-estuvo-en-la-habana/

<sup>4</sup> Roig de Leuchsenring, Emilio. "The Pepillotes": http://www.opushabana.cu/index.php/articulos/670-los-pepillotes.html

<sup>5</sup> Hernández, Hortensia. "Mariblanca Sabas Alomá: Cuban Feminist, Journalist, and Poet": www.heroinas.net/2021/02/mariblanca-sabas-aloma-feminista.html.

Over the course of 64 years, lesbians have been incarcerated and subjected to the so-called conversion practices, amidst a social and political complicity that has resulted in their silencing and social isolation. Moreover, for political expediency, their basic rights have been instrumentalized through laws that also fail to directly acknowledge them as rights bearers.

Between November 1965 and July 1968, the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) were established, thereby solidifying the Cuban revolution's stance towards the LGBTI+<sup>6</sup> community and laying the groundwork for a society that excludes those who are different out of fear of the consequences. No journalistic campaign of the first half of the 20th century was as effective against homosexuality and lesbians as the homo-lesbophobic discourses of political leaders and governmental resolutions during the first 20 years of the Cuban revolution.

Writer Abel Sierra Madero corroborates these practices in interviews with those who witnessed them firsthand, in order to undermine information for his research on the socio-political phenomenon generated in Cuba after the officialization of socialist ideology on the island, known as "the new man."<sup>7</sup> In the article "What Happened in the UMAPs Was 'Top Secret' Work: Interview with Dr. María Elena Solé Arrondo"<sup>8</sup>, who was a professor at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana. The interviewee claims to have participated in a team created by the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) for the study and "rehabilitation" of homosexuals detained at the UMAP.

Dr. Arrondo pointed out that "that first job was in May of [19]66, around then, that is, five or six months after the UMAP began (...) The idea was to evaluate these people, that is, homosexuals in particular, because there were other people in the UMAPs who were not homosexuals (...) that work had two components; one aspect was to evaluate these people from a psychological point of view, and the other was to evaluate the pedagogical aspects; I worked on the psychological part [that applied] psychological tests (...) And the result of this evaluation - we are talking about the year 66-67 - [was that] the majority of them had a very low cultural level; [the number of] those with a university degree, as far as I remember, was minimal. (...) I was a little surprised by all of that, something I had not imagined what I was going to hear and what I was going to see"<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the documentation that has been published about the homophobic and lesbophobic policies of that time, the voices of lesbian women - cis or not - and transmasculine people have barely been heard or published. For example, the so-called conversion therapies that were applied to lesbians during the UMAP period or the ways in which they were arrested in the streets or inside their homes, remain undocumented. Many of the stories and methods applied have not been gathered in the materials on this topic and time because they seem unbelievable, and it is hard to believe that the government could implement such measures<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the acronym LGBTI+ is based on its institutional usage, which does not represent the full range of meanings encompassed by the acronym as used by civil society organizations.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Abel Sierra Madero. "The Cuban Essayist Abel Sierra: 'The UMAP were one of the most traumatic events in Cuban history": https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1649341364\_38655.html

<sup>8</sup> Sierra Madero, Abel. The Body Never Forgets: Forced Labor, the New Man, and Memory in Cuba (1959-1980), Rialta. 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Sierra Madero, Abel. The Body Never Forgets: Forced Labor, the New Man, and Memory in Cuba (1959-1980), Rialta. 2022

<sup>10</sup> Sierra Madero, Abel. "Ana María Simo: "Cuba Is Painful. I Try Not to Look at It": https://hypermediamagazine.com/columnistas/fiebre-de-archivo/ana-maria-simo/?expand\_article=1

The female UMAP had other names, but none of the sources consulted mention a specific one. Some testimonies refer to women's prisons and others to psychiatric hospitals. However, no official documentation, if it exists, has been accessed that specifically refers to lesbians during that period.

In an article published in the alternative media outlet Periodismo de Barrio<sup>11</sup>, journalist Annery Rivera Velasco quotes Vicente Báez, head of propaganda for the 26th of July Movement in Havana before 1959 and founding editor of the newspaper Revolución (1959-1961). He refers to at least one concentration camp in the Camagüey region exclusively for women and highlights how, within the presumption before the Cuban authorities...

## «to determine if a woman was a lesbian or not, they considered 'her intellectual tendencies and her financial independence from men.'»<sup>12</sup>

Rivera Velasco, in turn, cites the Cuban-American researcher Lilian Guerra and the case of Anna Veltfort, who was arrested in 1967 while walking with a friend along the Malecón in Havana. In an evidently police-led maneuver, they were accused of being lesbians for "rejecting sexual advances" from men who were harassing them. This led to political trials at the University of Havana and an accusation of public scandal.<sup>13</sup>

Other methods mentioned in Rivera Velasco's text include the meticulous examination of bodies at police stations, searching for masculine clothing as a means to confirm their sexual orientation.

Ana María Simo, playwright, essayist, novelist, and survivor of the wrongly labeled conversion therapies in a Cuban health institution, recounts how in 1964, State Security took her from her home and transported her to the women's prison in Guanabacoa, where she was interrogated for two weeks with the sole purpose of revealing the sexual orientation of her literary group. She was then transferred to a psychiatric hospital and subjected to twelve electroshock sessions over a period of 2 months, with the explicit prohibition of accessing books or paper.

Simo recounts how "the policeman and the psychiatrist accused me not of being a lesbian, but of associating with homosexuals and people of 'low social status',"<sup>15</sup> confesses the playwright, for whom returning to the family home meant house arrest, surveillance by parents and other relatives, risking imprisonment again, and being prohibited from going out at night until she turned 21 and could escape.

- 12 Rivera Velasco. ""For Public Scandal": Being Queer in Times of Revolution."
- 13 Rivera Velasco. ""For Public Scandal": Being Queer in Times of Revolution."
- 14 Sierra Madero. "Ana María Simo: "Cuba Is Painful. I Try Not to Look at It."
- 15 Sierra Madero. "Ana María Simo: "Cuba Is Painful. I Try Not to Look at It"".

<sup>11</sup> Rivera Velasco, Annery. ""For Public Scandal": Being Queer in Times of Revolution": https://periodismodebarrio.org/2023/04/por-escandalo-publico-ser-queer-en-tiempos-de-revolucion/

The testimony of Ana María Simo has been excluded from other narratives on the topic of institutional lesbophobia in Cuba under the pretext of being "unconvincing", which could be one of the many reasons why there are so few testimonies of lesbian women who suffered institutional lesbophobia in the early revolutionary decades.

The State's policy at that time can be summarized with the words of Samuel Feijoo, a Cuban folklorist and writer, who published an article titled "Revolución y vicios" (Revolution and Vices) in the newspaper El Mundo in 1965.<sup>16</sup> "It is not about persecuting homosexuals, but about destroying their positions, their methods, their influence. That's called revolutionary social hygiene. They must be eradicated from their key positions on the front lines of revolutionary art and literature."<sup>17</sup>

"The UMAP officially closed in 1968 with the approval of Law 1129 on Compulsory Military Service, yet the persecution based on sexual orientation and gender identity did not cease."<sup>18</sup>

In the following decade, Fidel Castro, at the Education and Culture Congress of 1971, legitimized and institutionalized exclusion as state policy. The demands for social cleansing by Samuel Feijoo and other intellectuals and officials were met with new persecutions and the annulment of the public and cultural lives of openly homosexual individuals.<sup>19</sup>

In March 1974, Law 1267 was approved, with the signature of President Osvaldo Dorticós and Prime Minister Fidel Castro.<sup>20</sup> Section J directly refers to "ostensible homosexuality and other socially reprehensible behaviors that, when projected publicly, detrimentally impact education, public awareness, and emotions, especially those of children and youth, on the part of individuals engaged in cultural or recreational activities." Through this law, the aim was to continue social cleansing.

A year later, in 1975, the Supreme Court invalidated Resolution number 3 of the Council of Culture, which established the parameters limiting the employment of homosexuals in art and education, and reinstated jobs to dismissed artists and intellectuals. Between Fidel Castro's speech in 1971 and the repeal of the resolution criminalizing any expression of dissident gender in 1975, five years passed, leading historians to dub this period the "Gray Quinquennium," thereby marking a chronological beginning and end to the homophobic policies that extend to the present day.

<sup>16</sup> Garcés Marrero, Roberto. "The Early Years of the Cuban Revolution and the Military Units for Aid to Production (UMAP) by Samuel Feijóo," Historia Crítica (Critical History) n.° 71 (2019): 96: https://doi.org/10.7440/histcrit71.2019.05.

<sup>17</sup> Cino, Luis. "Those Gray Times That We Cubans Must Not Forget": https://www.cubanet.org/destacados/cuba-quinquenio-gris-censura/

<sup>18</sup> Ponte, José Antonio. "What Were the UMAP?": https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1393116891\_7285.html.

<sup>19</sup> Vicent, Mauricio. "The Memory of the 'Gray Quinquennium' Mobilizes Cuban Intellectuals": https://elpais.com/diario/2007/01/13/cultura/1168642801\_850215.html.

<sup>20</sup> Zayas, Manuel. "Map of Homophobia: Chronology of Repression and Censorship against Homosexuals, Transvestites, and Transsexuals on the Island, from 1962 to Present": https://www.cubaencuentro.com/cuba/articulos/mapa-de-la-homofobia-10736.

However, in 1980, while people were being expelled from universities and workplaces and were being massively deported for being considered by the State as individuals with intellectual disabilities, common prisoners, or classified as antisocial, lumpen, and scum, there was also the LGBTI+ community.

During these years, along with the various manifestations of lesbophobia, much more silence ensued than had already been experienced. There are no figures on how many lesbians were forced to leave the country, to drop out of university, or to leave their workplace due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There are also no figures on how many were forced into arranged marriages to evade scrutiny from neighbors, the police, and in many cases, even their own family.

It took another 14 years for the Association of Gays and Lesbians of Cuba to be founded in 1994 by "13 men and 5 women,"<sup>21</sup> but in 1997, it was dissolved under government pressure. No records were found of the women who formed the association or the consequences they faced for founding an organization, even though Cuban laws prohibited freedom of association. Despite renewed methods, the persecution had not ceased. That same year, a police raid at El Periquitón, a clandestine party for the LGBTI+ community, led to the arbitrary arrest of attendees and the imprisonment of the site owners for months without due process.<sup>22</sup>

In historiographical analyses and chronologies aimed at elucidating each of the homophobic events perpetrated by the Cuban revolution over 40 years (1959-1999), lesbians are merely brushed over within the narrative of the gay community. It is essential to highlight these silences to understand the complexities of current lesbophobia in a context characterized by controls imposed by the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX),<sup>23</sup> an institution overseen by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP).

The CENESEX, founded in 1989, has its roots in 1972, when the FMC established the National Working Group on Sexual Education (GNTES), comprised of specialists from the FMC, the Union of Young Communists (UJC), and the ministries of Public Health and Education. These same government bodies were involved in the political trials against lesbians, gay people, and transgender individuals for four decades.

«For almost a hundred years, Cuban society has developed under the precepts that it is necessary to cure society of LGBTI+ individuals and that lesbian women cannot have a voice or vote.».

The lesbian activist groups are centered around CENESEX, while independent activism is carried out in isolated initiatives from equally independent sources.

<sup>21</sup> Zayas. "Map of Homophobia: Chronology of Repression and Censorship against Homosexuals, Transvestites, and Transsexuals on the Island, from 1962 to Present".

<sup>22</sup> Zayas. "Map of Homophobia: Chronology of Repression and Censorship against Homosexuals, Transvestites, and Transsexuals on the Island, from 1962 to Present".

<sup>23</sup> CENESEX. "Who Are We?": https://www.cenesex.org/wp-content/themes/cenesex/quienes-somos/.

Under CENESEX, activism and the state's response to LGBTI+ individuals have been centralized. What is troubling about this institutionalization of the lesbian community is that, on one hand, it seems that the solution to each case of violence or systemic discrimination must be resolved in a personalized manner and solely through the direct and centralized influence of CENESEX. However, the results of the survey conducted reveal alarming levels of discrimination, exposing the lack of structures that include lesbians and the absence of comprehensive public policies aimed at combating discrimination and violence against lesbian women.

On the other hand...

#### «The demonization of independent activism results in institutionalized lesbian groups having very little contact with any initiative that does not adhere to the guidelines of CENESEX.»

...so that public policies can be created with the consensus of the lesbian movement, under the threat of being repressed as happens with independent activism or the Cuban opposition. It doesn't matter if the governmental organization perpetuates some of the structural problems faced by the Cuban lesbian community; "what matters is to experience less violence than we already do."<sup>24</sup>

Providing a brief overview of lesbophobia in Cuba demonstrates that while the Cuban revolution targeted and militarized so-called conversion therapies against gay men or gender non-conforming individuals for the sole purpose of masculinizing Cuban society, the methods employed against lesbians were even darker. Lesbians were pathologized and criminalized, with psychiatric hospitals and prisons being the main centers of torture.

History shows that lesbians in Cuba went from being ridiculed with "garzonismo" to being pathologized and socially, politically, and institutionally invalidated. There is no openly lesbian woman with a significant voice in the Cuban parliament. Engaging in activism or opposition in Cuba as an openly lesbian person implies doubling the effort to be taken into account.

The Cuban context cannot be understood without first taking a historical journey through the lesbophobia of the last 100 years. The keys to understanding why a society persists today in considering lesbian women as "ill" lie within this historical exploration.

<sup>24</sup> 

MLF (initials used because the interviewee has chosen to remain anonymous) interview provided for this report by a former member of the lesbian women's group from the Oremis group affiliated with CENESEX.

## METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND OBJECTIVES

Photo: Myrna Rosa Padrón Dickson and Siria Gónzalez Corujo

# ASPECTOS METODOLÓGICOS Y OBJETIVOS

## 2 METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND OBJECTIVES

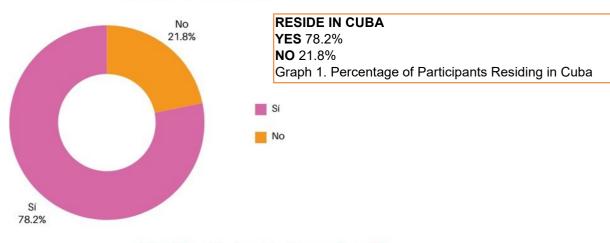
The main objective of this report is to investigate the situation of exclusion of lesbian women in platforms and studies related to official and independent narratives on lesbophobia within Cuba.

This Map of Cuban Lesbophobia aims to:

- a) Identify who have been and are the main perpetrators of violence against lesbians in Cuba.
- b) Raise awareness of intergender violence among lesbian women in Cuba.
- c) Identify exclusions of lesbians in Cuban feminist platforms and in mechanisms for raising awareness of and denouncing gender-based violence.
- d) Examine the extent to which lesbians in Cuba are excluded from the LGBTI+ community.

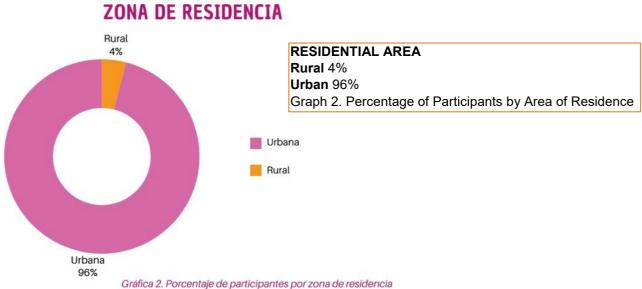
To compile this report, a digital survey was administered to a population sample of 55 lesbian women, spanning various age groups from 15 to 64 years old, with the most represented age bracket falling between 25 and 34 years old.

The survey included lesbians from inside (78%) and outside of Cuba (21%) who had experienced situations of lesbophobia within the island (Graph 1). Respondents living within Cuba are distributed across nine out of the fourteen provinces, with 61% residing in Havana and 96.4% in urban areas (Graph 2). Among them, 70.9% self-identify as White, 25.5% as mixed-race (Mestizo), and only 3.6% as Black or Afrodescendent (Graph 3).

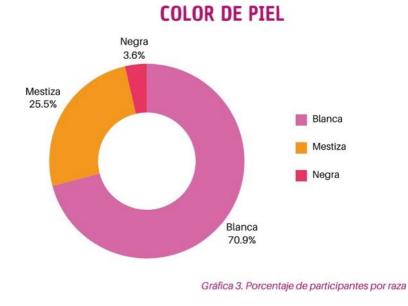


### **RESIDEN EN CUBA**

Gráfica 1. Porcentaje de participantes que reside en Cuba



SKIN COLOR White 70.9% (Mixed-race) Mestizo 25.5% Black 3.6% Graph 3. Percentage of Participants by Race



Additionally, two focus groups were conducted: one in Havana and another in Santiago de Cuba, with the participation of between 10 and 8 women in each session. The insights gathered from the interviewed women support the survey findings.

Six lesbians who were victims of intergender violence and three victims of institutional lesbophobia were interviewed.

Publications on social media that constituted complaints against lesbophobia and reports on the lack of legal structures for protection against the many types of violence suffered by Cuban lesbians were analyzed.

An exhaustive analysis of the available literature on lesbophobia was conducted.

The treatment of language in periodical publications, legal documents, and human rights reports was analyzed.



## WHO IS INTERESTED IN LESBOPHOBIA IN CUBA?

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Assuming that acts against lesbians are part of homophobia and not analyzing how intersectionality impacts the lives of lesbians in a heterosexual world by leaving them at the "last link of subversion to gender mandate". Behind lesbophobia there is misogyny, racism, and machismo, and not analyzing it independently of homophobia would invisibilize part of the violence that lesbians suffer and how it intersects with their other identities.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Center for Research and Promotion for Central America Human Rights (Cipacdh), "lesbophobia operates as a defense mechanism on four interconnected levels: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural."<sup>26</sup>

In the case of Cuba, there is a silent pact between Cuban civil society and lesbians, between the state and its governmental institutions, and lesbians that seems to say, "don't make too much noise and we'll tolerate you." Even though in the last 5 years there appears to have been an opening with the approval of laws and codes that include the LGBTI+ community, lesbians continue to remain in the shadows.

Their life stories were only used to illustrate some cases of good motherhood practices or to headline controversial and biologistic journalistic reports. However, in the laws that have been promoted, there is no direct mention of lesbians, and there is a tendency to continue pathologizing lesbian affection, lesbian-parental couples, and access to assisted reproduction.

<sup>25</sup> Meza Escoza, Tania. "Lesbophobia": https://www.milenio.com/opinion/tania-meza-escorza/meza-de-redaccion/lesbofobia.

<sup>26</sup> Center for Research and Promotion for Human Rights in Central America. "Homophobia-Lesbophobia": http://www.cipacdh.org/cipac\_articulo\_completo.php?art=60

Article 68 of the 2018 constitutional draft,<sup>27</sup> which proposed a non-heteronormative revision of the conception of marriage - changing it from "voluntary union between a man and a woman" to "union between two persons"<sup>28</sup> - was the most controversial reform. According to official spokespeople, it was the subject of debate in 88,066 assemblies, constituting 66% of those held nationwide.<sup>29</sup>

The discussions captured the public's attention, overshadowing other fundamental issues. The lack of transparency and the priority given in the national media to arguments against the need to grant rights to the LGBTI+ community were counterproductive to public opinion. However, no figures were provided on what prevailed within these general data. It is not known from the data who opposed or who approved this amendment in the new constitution.

The official newspaper CubaDebate stated in its summary of citizen participation that "the majority proposed replacing the union agreed upon between two people with one between a man and a woman as it is in the current Constitution."<sup>30</sup> However, the numerical classification "majority" compared to the other figures provided in the same text has a subjective semantic connotation and is imprecise when discussing social processes.

The Constitution was finally drafted with Article 68 referring to other social security rights and Article 82 referring to marriage as a "social and legal institution" and using the term "spouses" to describe individuals without specifying gender identity or sexual orientation yet carrying the historical and heteronormative connotations of that term.<sup>31</sup>

"The arguments put forward during that stage of public consultations were no less pejorative and discriminatory than those used three years later when the Family Code was put to a referendum in 2022." <sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Family Code, Cuba, 2022 https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2022-09/goc- 2022o99.pdf



<sup>27 &</sup>quot;ARTICLE 68. Marriage is the voluntarily agreed union between two persons with the legal capacity to do so, in order to live a shared life. It rests on the absolute equality of the rights and duties of the spouses, who are obliged to support the home and provide comprehensive upbringing of the children through common effort, in a way that is compatible with the development of their social activities.": http://media.cubadebate.cu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018\_07\_25-21\_10-Tabloide-Constitución-sin-precio-BN.pdf

<sup>28</sup> Fernández Torres, Ania. "Article 68: Debate Across Cuba": http://www.ahora.cu/es/articulo-68-debate-por-cuba

<sup>29</sup> Marrero Marquez, Richard. "Constitutional Reform: What Happened to Article 68?": https://romerocuba.org/2019/02/20/%EF%BB%BFreforma-constitucional-que-paso-con-el-articulo-68/

<sup>30</sup> Cuba Debate. "Deputies Presented with Results of Public Consultation on Draft Constitution": http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/12/18/presentan-cambios-en-el-proyecto-de-constitucion-derivados-de-laconsulta-popular/

<sup>31 &</sup>quot;ARTICLE 82. Marriage is a social and legal institution. It is one of the forms of family organization. It is based on free consent and on the equality of rights, obligations, and legal capacity of the spouses."

The independent magazine Tremenda Nota primarily discusses three myths about the LGBTI+ community,<sup>33</sup> which served as arguments for various religious denominations that opposed and acted freely during the campaigns against Article 68 of the Constitution and later against the Family Code project, despite public demonstrations and media campaigns not being permitted by law in Cuba.<sup>34</sup> Some of these arguments regarding the Code coincided with those given by members of the Cuban Communist Party before the People's Assembly. All of them differed from the reasons given by the State.

The myths gathered by Tremenda Nota were: "The majority of the Cuban people are against marriage equality, and they demonstrated this during the constitutional reform process"; "the Cuban people are not ready to accept marriage equality and same-sex families"; "LGBTI+ rights have nothing to do with the traditional values of the Cuban people".<sup>35</sup> Likewise, these are arguments that reinforce discrimination against LGBTI+ individuals and demonstrate a lack of awareness on the part of the State.

However, in the official press, other arguments were presented, such as "the negative effects on birth rates; the transformation of the traditional family model; the issue of adoption and opposition to the laws of God", or the repercussions in primary schools and the supposed wellbeing of the child, "how would a student adopted by a same-sex couple be viewed? What would happen when asking for the names of the father and mother?"<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that all the reports found regarding the issue, which aimed to give it a controversial nuance or to be conciliatory for the readers, started from a homoparental story consisting of two women.

The participation of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) in the two family codes that have been drafted during the 64 years of revolution is a source of pride for official sources.<sup>37</sup> However, during 1975, it led the persecution against lesbians, and in 2022, it maintained a rhetoric linked only to heteronormative couples, disregarding diverse women. Similarly, none of its officials mentioned sexually dissident women.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> González Maimó, Adiel. "Three Myths About LGBTI+ Rights in the Debate on the Family Code: Easy to Dismantle": https://www.tremendanota.com/tres-mitos-sobre-los-derechos-lgbti-que-apareceran- en-el-debate-sobre-el-codigo-de-lasfamilias-y-son-faciles-de-desmontar/

<sup>34</sup> Rojas, Luis Felipe. "Who is Behind the Campaign Against Marriage Equality in Cuba?": https://www.martinoticias. com/a/un-pastor-contra-sus-ovejas-quién-impulsa-la-campaña-contra-el-matrimonio-igualitario-en-cuba-/190403.html

<sup>35</sup> González Maimó. "Three Myths About LGBTI+ Rights That Will Arise in the Debate on the Family Code and Are Easy to Dispel."

<sup>36</sup> Fernández Torres. "Article 68: Debate Across Cuba".

<sup>37</sup> Figueredo Reinaldo, Oscar. "Family Code with a Woman's Imprint": http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2022/03/08/codigo-de-las-familias-con-impronta-de-mujer-video/

<sup>38</sup> CEPAL. Different Publications Located in Chronological Order Where Lesbians Are Openly Excluded in Government Public Spaces: https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/informe\_fmc\_cuba\_para\_mdm\_46.pdf, (2011).

The FMC was founded on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1960, and according to the official encyclopedia EcuRed,<sup>39</sup> its objective for six decades has been to support "beneficial actions for women", including training courses in computer skills, hairdressing, sewing, and makeup, or English language courses. However, it does not have a public policy in place for transgender, bisexual, or lesbian women.

The FMC is the only organization authorized and legalized by the Cuban state to work with the Cuban female population. Its affiliation with the Ministries of Health and Higher Education to address sexual diversity issues speaks to the pathologization of sexual diversity and its academic rather than social perspective on phenomena such as lesbophobia.

The FMC gathers the most pressing social phenomena in Cuban reality into a single paragraph within the National Program for the Advancement of Women (PAM) and continues to view these issues from an academic perspective, as if they were merely case studies. The proposal is to "promote special courses, postgraduate studies, and multidisciplinary master's degrees addressing topics such as race, sexual diversity, gender, gender-based violence, human trafficking, among others, with special emphasis on the Cuban experience in this regard."<sup>40</sup> The main responsibility for implementing the PAM lies with the Ministry of Higher Education, with the participation of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and other government institutions.

In 2021, while planning to hold a referendum on the Family Code the following year,<sup>41</sup> the "Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program with a Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Rights Approach" was approved,<sup>42</sup> which represented an opening to topics related to gender identity and sexual diversity that had remained taboo in Cuban schools until then. However, a few months after it was approved, its implementation was "postponed."<sup>43</sup>

The explanation given by the authorities was that "the tense economic and epidemiological situation present in the national territory has not allowed for the production of textbooks, plans, programs, methodological guidelines, and workbooks for the implementation of the Third Improvement of the National Education System or other educational programs."<sup>44</sup>

With the approval of the Cuban Family Code on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022, marriage equality was enacted, allowing for "the voluntarily agreed union of two persons with the legal capacity to do so,

<sup>39</sup> EcuRed. "Federation of Cuban Women (FMC)": https://www.ecured.cu/Federación\_de\_Mujeres\_Cubanas

<sup>40</sup> FMC. Women's Advancement Program, Cuba, 2023, 37, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-02/ Folleto%20PAM.pdf

<sup>41</sup> CubaDebate. "The Family Code Was Approved by 66.85% of Voters on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022": http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2022/10/04/resultados-del-referendo-del-codigo-de-las-familias/

<sup>42</sup> Resolution No. 1621 Approves Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program with a Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Rights Approach in the National Education System https://ojs.uc.cl/index.php/bjur/article/view/38343/29921, (2021).

<sup>43</sup> Cuban News Agency. "Press Release": http://www.acn.cu/cuba/84711-aplazan-en-cuba-aplicacion-de-programa-deeducacion-con-enfoque-de-genero-y-derechos-sexuales

<sup>44</sup> Cuban News Agency. "Press Release": https://www.mined.gob.cu/el-ministerio-de-educacion-aplaza-la-aplicacionde-la-resolucion-16-del-26-de-febrero-de-2021/

in order to live together, based on mutual affection, love, and respect".<sup>45</sup> However, it remains a Code filled with binary, sexist, and heteronormative language, as can be seen in Articles 62,<sup>46</sup> Paragraph (a), and 96 regarding birth registration.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the fact that same-sex marriages have been taking place since their approval, some testimonials from members of the LGBTI+ community claim that it has been cumbersome to claim marriage certificates because the digitized national civil registry system still does not admit that both spouses are of the same gender.<sup>48</sup> As a result, almost a year after the first marriage, no work has been done to update a system that remains homophobic, lesbophobic, biphobic, and transphobic.

Both Resolution 1151/2022 from the Ministry of Public Health and the Family Code have a sexist and lesbophobic perspective. According to activist Yennys Hernández Molina, "several cis-heterosexist and biologistic biases are observed, as well as a marked gender binarism. The legal text implicitly refers to cis men and women, considering the former as the only carriers of male gametes (sperm) and the latter as the only gestating individuals and carriers of female gametes (eggs)."<sup>49</sup>

In the Family Code, the word 'lesbian' or its plural form does not appear even once, and the term 'homoaffective' appears only once to refer to male couples. This demonstrates how lesbian women, and their issues are completely excluded from public policies.

In Cuba, there are neither openly LGBTI+ police officers nor military personnel. Nonheterosexual individuals seeking to join the Cuban military forces are classified as "sick" and "unfit."<sup>50</sup> Although there are no official data as the government considers them state secrets, life stories speak for themselves.

Both CENESEX and the lesbian groups associated with this institution acknowledge the lack of research into the reality of lesbian women.<sup>51</sup> In 2021, the Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Network was established with the aim of uniting the various groups formed

46 Official Gazette of the Republic of Cuba. Page 2906: https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2022-09/goc-2022-o99.pdf

<sup>45</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Cuba. The Cuban Family Code, Article 201: https://www.parlamentocubano. gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2022-09/goc-2022-099.pdf

<sup>47</sup> Chapter IV, OF BIRTH REGISTRATION, SIXTH SECTION, of Names and Surnames, Article 96, Page 2992: https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2022-09/goc-2022-o99.pdf

<sup>48</sup> Testimony of Yennys Rivera on the podcast "La Escuelita" https://open.spotify.com/episode/0T3oD3mz3Y0YVzVjRisAd4?si=JN9K4Om4TxCFgKELWO\_hRw

<sup>49</sup> Hernández Molina, Yennys. "New Regulations for Assisted Reproduction in Cuba: Possibilities and Limitations": https://qdecuir.com/2022/12/04/nuevo-reglamento-para-la-reproduccion-asistida-en-cuba-posibilidades-y-limitaciones/

<sup>50</sup> Acostarana, Ricardo. "Cuba Needs Lesbian, Gay, and Trans Police Officers, General Álvarez Casas": https://www.washingtonbla de.com/2022/02/01/cuba-necesita-policias-lesbianas-gays-y-trans-general-alvarez-casas/

<sup>51</sup> Fernández González, Teresa De Jesús. "Lesbian and Bisexual Women: Reasons for a Network": https://www.redsemlaccu ba.net/redsemlac/diversidad-sexual/mujeres-lesbianas-y-bisexuales-razones-para-una-red/

throughout the country since the early 2000s. Among its actions are "ensuring our property rights as a couple; the right to assisted reproduction; and conjugal visits for lesbian women in detention."<sup>52</sup> The first two actions of the Network could be realized with the Family Code and the Regulations for assisted reproduction; however, there is still much to be done for their effective implementation.

Within the unwritten rules of this Network is the absence of any solidarity with lesbian women who are opposition members. They neither keep records of non-heterosexual women who are victims of gender-based violence or victims of intergender violence, let alone political prisoners. There are no public statements on any of these issues.

One of the commendable initiatives of the Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Network is the publication of the book "Libres para amar" (Free to Love) by authors Teresa de Jesús Fernández, Sara Más, and Lirians Gordillo Piña, which collects the testimonies of women who have experienced lesbophobia in all possible settings throughout the history of the Cuban revolution.<sup>53</sup>

The book, published by the Caminos<sup>54</sup> and SemLaces publishing companies, is a valuable document but has received little promotion.<sup>55</sup> One of its authors, Teresa de Jesús Fernández, after being expelled from the ranks of the Union of Communist Youth (UJC) and publicly ridiculed in her university studies, diminishes the responsibility of state policies for what she experienced in the 1980s and praises the Cuban revolution.<sup>56</sup>

"The alternative or oppositional landscape within Cuba is not immune to exclusion or lesbophobia."

The alternative or oppositional landscape within Cuba is not exempt from exclusion or lesbophobia. Lesbian-focused activism often occurs on an individual basis, and groups of women centered around the interests of lesbians or bisexuals have little visibility or influence in other sectors of Cuban civil society. Each civic action that has taken place has been reactive and often without a true understanding of the underlying principles of what is being demanded.

<sup>52</sup> Fernández González. "Lesbian and Bisexual Women: Reasons for a Network."

<sup>53</sup> Fernández González, Teresa De Jesús y otras. Free to Love: https://www.redsemlac-cuba.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/LIBRO-Libres-para-amar.pdf

<sup>54</sup> Caminos. Where Can We Meet?: https://www.ecaminos.cu

<sup>55</sup> SemLac. Who Are We?: https://www.redsemlac-cuba.net

<sup>56</sup> Jerez Mustelier, Santiago: "Interview with Teresa de Jesús Fernández: I Want a Kinder Country.": https://medium.com/revista-alma-mater/quiero-un-pa%C3%ADs-más-amable-ed692695bc0f

Some groups within the alternative and independent scene engage with Afro-feminism and with officialdom, either out of conviction or due to the necessity of surviving under a totalitarian and repressive regime. While composed of openly lesbian women, their primary mission or line of work does not involve direct engagement with lesbian women. Their visibility on platforms such as Nosotrxs,<sup>57</sup> Seres,<sup>58</sup> or Afrodiverso<sup>59</sup> makes them noteworthy examples maintaining this profile.

Others, like Casa Tomada MirArte, consider themselves an "artivist" space. Although "it is the home of a lesbian-parental family, and by making our daily lives visible with open doors and engaging with other communities, our rights are validated, respected, and accepted, not only as lesbians but also as Black women, peripheral leaders, professional homemakers,"<sup>60</sup> they recognize their diversity but do not focus directly on the issue.

Another significant presence in the independent Cuban scene with openly lesbian women is the Metropolitan Community Church (ICM) and the "Q de Cuir" (Q as in Queer) magazine, both based in Matanzas.

Q de Cuir, one of the digital magazines that dedicates more articles to the topic of lesbophobia, in its effort to maintain government ties, ends up justifying or weakly denouncing exclusionary acts,<sup>61</sup> or praising the position of the FMC,<sup>62</sup> the main pro-government institution that has led the most lesbophobic processes in the history of the Cuban revolution.

The repressive mechanisms applied by the Cuban State to the opposition in Cuba have had their effect on some communities composed of so-called minority populations. The state response to any attempt at independent thought and action is harassment and police surveillance on designated dates, internet cutoffs, and euphemistically called interrogations, interviews with state security agents, invasion and interference in private matters, cyber-harassment.<sup>63</sup>

The mechanisms that perpetuate lesbian invisibility result in oversights in spaces or initiatives with a high level of civic awareness, such as the 2019 Request for a Comprehensive Law against Violence against Girls and Women, which failed to address the types of violence that lesbian women may experience.<sup>64</sup>

64 Request for Comprehensive Law Against Gender-Based Violence in Cuba: https://asambleafeminista.wordpress.com/2019/11/26/solicitud-de-ley-integral-contra-la-violencia-de-genero-en-cuba/

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<sup>57</sup> Nosotrxs Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063587890177&mibextid=LQQJ4d

<sup>58</sup> Seres Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/normarosaida?comment\_id=Y29tbWVudDo2MTM3NzQ5M DA3NTIxMDFfMTE0ODY4MTUyNTgxNTY1OA%3D%3D

<sup>59</sup> Afrodiverso Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063570312809

<sup>60</sup> Exclusive Interview for this Report.

<sup>61</sup> López Betancourt, Suyen. "Hydrangeas and Violets" at the UCI: The Power of Theater Against Lesbophobia." https://qdecuir. com/2020/11/02/de-hortensias-y-de-violetas-en-la-uci-el-poder-del-teatro-contra-la-lesbofobia-qdecuir/

<sup>62</sup> Hernández Martín, Susana. "FMC: +May the Revolution Continue!": https://qdecuir.com/2019/08/23/fmc-que-larevolucion- continue-q-de-cuir/

<sup>63</sup> Cubalex. "Cubalex Presents Report on Cuba to the Committee Against Torture": https://cubalex.org/2022/04/19/cubalexpresenta-informe-sobre-cuba-a-comite-contra-la-tortura/

The childhood experiences of lesbians are often overlooked or omitted because it is not acknowledged that children can identify their sexual orientation and gender identity from an early age. In the case study conducted by Roberto Garcés Marrero, where several adolescents shared their experiences with lesbophobia in educational settings,<sup>65</sup> it became evident that not only do girls who identify as lesbians lack support from their families, but also that the teaching staff, due to their lack of pedagogical tools, contribute to making their sexual orientation a target for bullying and rejection within their social circles.<sup>66</sup>

"The scarce analyses of the diverse forms of violence against lesbian, bisexual, and non-cishetero women also lack an intersectional perspective that considers racism, poverty levels, access to employment, and numerous other forms of violence."

In the Cuban context, both civil society and the State bear responsibility for lesbian invisibility. The silence surrounding the historically experienced violence by lesbians in Cuba constitutes today's most severe form of lesbophobia. Behind this silence lies the pathologization of female sexual diversity through laws written from a heteronormative and cis-hetero perspective, as well as the stigmatization associating lesbianism with what is considered dirty and forbidden.



<sup>65</sup> Garcés Marrero, Roberto. "Homo-Lesbophobic Harassment and Pre-university Education in Cuba: A Case Study": https://revis taumanizales.cinde.org.co/rlcsnj/index.php/Revista-Latinoamericana/article/view/3879

<sup>66</sup> Garcés Marrero. "Homo-Lesbophobic Harassment and Pre-university Education in Cuba: A Case Study."

# IN LESBOPHOBIA IN NUMBERS LA LESBOFOBIA EN CIFRAS

## **V LESBOPHOBIA IN NUMBERS**

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Cuban lesbophobia permeates the everyday lives of lesbians. It starts in childhood when families impose the expectations of a heteropatriarchal society, continues into youth when they hide their sexuality for fear of reprisals, extends to being denied jobs for being 'butch,' and even when they visit the gynecologist and face intrusive questions about their sexual history.

The questionnaires and interviews conducted in the focus groups have been aimed at five areas that define lesbophobia and allow for the measurement of what happens among Cuban women: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. We have added activism as a political expression within the LGBTI+ community.

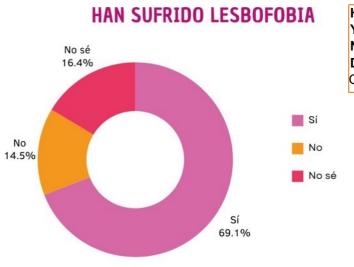
Through some questions, we measure on a personal level how others perceive lesbians in different types of environments, starting from the discriminatory perception, pity, or hatred that Cuban society has been internalizing for years regarding lesbians.

Through interpersonal questions, we measure the relationships of dissident women with family, colleagues, activists, healthcare personnel, and strangers, in work, family, public, and healthcare settings.

Both in the survey and in the meetings, the sexualization of lesbian women is noted as an expression of lesbophobia; silence in public spaces; invisibility in legal documents and in the country's history; insistence on perpetuating stereotypes; denial to name, assuming that the only way to do so is in a derogatory manner.

The last two questions are aimed at the internalization and normalization of lesbophobia even within support spaces such as those of LGBTI+ activism.

From the surveyed population, 69% (Graph 4) reported experiencing lesbophobia, while 14.5% stated they did not, and 16.4% were unsure if they had experienced lesbophobia. Considering that the majority of lesbian women who responded to the survey live in urban areas or in Havana, the capital, the data reveals a country that continues to perpetuate lesbophobia and resists respecting lesbian affection. This illustrates how history has unfolded over the past 100 years and how cities, particularly the capital, are where these forms of violence are most prevalent, despite the presumed greater access to information, diverse spaces, and higher levels of acceptance in large cities.



#### HAVE SUFFERED LESBOPHOBIA

Yes 69.1% No 14.5% Don't Know 16.4% Graph 4. Percentage of Participants Who Have Suffered Lesbophobia

Gráfica 4. Porcentaje de participantes que han sufrido lesbofobia

The fact that 69% of the sample managed to identify lesbophobia in various areas of life may be influenced by the high level of education of those who took the survey. The survey found that 20% have postgraduate studies, 56.4% have university studies, and 23.6% have preuniversity studies, with none having primary or secondary education. However, these figures also reflect who has access to the internet and technological tools, which is one of the limitations of this research.

These inequalities become much more apparent when we conduct an intersectional analysis with variables such as poverty and skin color. For example, Afro-descendant lesbian women comprised a minority of 3.6% and mixed-race women 25.5% of the sample population, in contrast to 70.9% of lesbian women who self-identify as White. The latest poverty studies conducted in Cuba in 2018, despite attempts to gloss over the situation of non-White populations, indicate that only 10.3% of the Black population and 23.6% of the mixed-race population complete higher education, compared to 66.1% of the White population.<sup>67</sup> These figures, with a five-year lag, are reflected in our survey. This leads us to conclude that the underrepresentation of Black lesbian women is partly due to the precarious situation of this sector within the LGBTI+ community, which not only hinders their prioritization of internet access but also limits their access to the technology needed to complete surveys.

"The racial bias observed in this report also includes the apathy of Black and mixed-race (Mestizo) lesbian women who were invited but did not respond to the surveys or interview questionnaires."

67

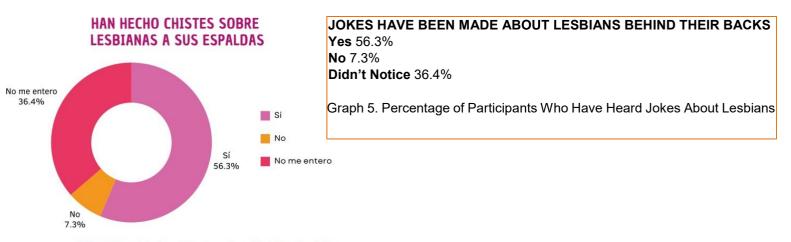
Zabala Arguelles, María del Carmen, Inequalities by Skin Color and Intersectionalities: Analysis of the Cuban Context 2008-2018, page 17: http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/Cuba/flacso-cu/20201103111644/5-Desigualdades-color.pdf

# LESBIANS AT WORK AND SCHOOL LESBIANAS EN EL TRABAJO Y EN LA ESCUELA

## V LESBIANS AT WORK AND SCHOOL

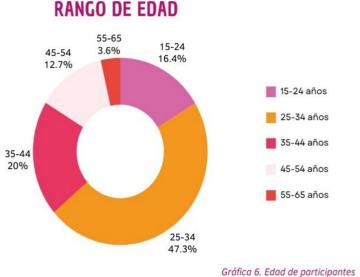


How can one perceive lesbophobia when it is a form of violence that can be exercised through subjectivity or through subtle events or gestures, such as jokes involving the sexual orientation of lesbian women? Of the 55 respondents, 56.4% reported having heard jokes made behind their backs at work or school; 7.3% did not, and 36.4% said they did not notice (Graph 5).



Gráfica 5. Porcentajes de participantes que han oído chistes sobre lesbianas

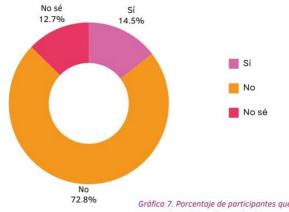
Jokes are perceived as something "normal," and the results do not correspond with other findings derived from situations that could be more exclusionary and defining in the work or educational life of a lesbian woman.



AGE RANGE
<b>15-24</b> 16.4%
<b>25-34</b> 47.3%
<b>35-44</b> 20%
<b>45-54</b> 12.7%
<b>55-65</b> 3.6%
Graph 6. Age of Participants

In 2023, with a population sample primarily between the ages of 25-34 years (47.3%) and 35-44 years (20%), experiences in work or educational settings are quite different from those of women aged 55-64 years (3.6%) who participated in the survey (Graph 6). Only 14.5% believe they were fired or expelled due to their sexual orientation, 12.7% couldn't confirm it, and 72.7% responded no to this question. However, these "no" responses might be related to the lack of union protections that the entire Cuban population suffers from, making it very difficult to discern the reasons for dismissals, which might be solely linked to a lack of ideological reliability (Graph 7).

#### HAN SIDO DESPEDIDAS O LAS HAN **DESPEDIDO POR SU ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL**

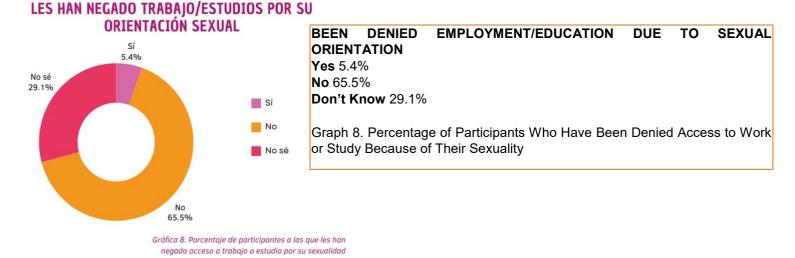


HAVE BEEN LET GO OR DISMISSED BECAUSE OF THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION Yes 14.5% **No** 72.8%

Don't Know 12.7%

Graph 7. Percentage of Participants Who Have Been Let Go or Disapproved of Due to Their Sexuality

Gráfica 7. Porcentaje de participantes que han sido despedida o desaprobado por su sexualidad There's a contrast between the history of lesbian women throughout the 20th century and the present day, with only 5.5% perceiving that they were denied access to work or a place of study because of their sexual orientation, while 65.5% assert that this has not been a reason for exclusion. 29.1% couldn't identify if they had been excluded from work or their studies due to their sexual orientation (Graph 8). These figures may be linked to a change in state policies. The disappearance of the UMAP and other social control resources doesn't necessarily mean that governmental structures have stopped being lesbophobic; it just means they no longer rely on the same tools for discrimination or exclusion.

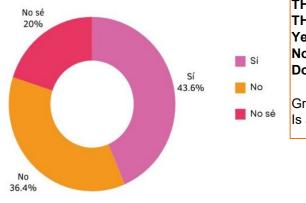


In Havana, eight women were interviewed, none of whom identified as part of an activist group, but they do form a support network among themselves, considering each other friends. This illustrates how, despite not being part of an organized group, lesbian women establish support systems where they look out for each other and seek spaces for socializing. They all agreed that in study and work environments, their peers or colleagues initially assumed they were heterosexual, but they also concurred that they preferred not to have to explain their sexual orientation unless directly questioned.

All of them agree that heterosexual individuals typically don't explain their sexual orientation; rather, it's an assumed element integrated naturally into their daily lives and social interactions. Therefore, they concluded that the orientation of sexual desire is an experience that should be normalized, regardless of its manifestation.

Although this group of women may adopt this attitude, the social projection of lesbianism in the Cuban imaginary has been associated for years with promiscuity and harassment. Part of this demonization is due to the press and its discrediting work. Even today, 36.4% of the surveyed women feel that their coworkers cover up in the face of potential harassment. And while 43.6% don't feel this way and 20% are unaware, these are still high percentages to claim that lesbians are accepted without prejudice (Graph 9).

#### SUS COMPAÑERAS DE ESTUDIO/TRABAJO SE HAN CUBIERTO En su presencia pensando que las puedes acosar



#### THEIR CLASSMATES/COLLEAGUES HAVE COVERED THEMSELVES IN THEIR PRESENCE THINKING THEY MIGHT HARASS THEM Yes 43.6% No 36.4% Don't Know 20%

Graph 9. Percentage of Participants Who Feel That Their Sexual Orientation Is a Factor in Causing a Female Colleague to Cover Up in Their Presence

Gráfica 9. Porcentaje de participantes que siente que su orientación sexual es un factor para que una compañera se cubra en su presencia

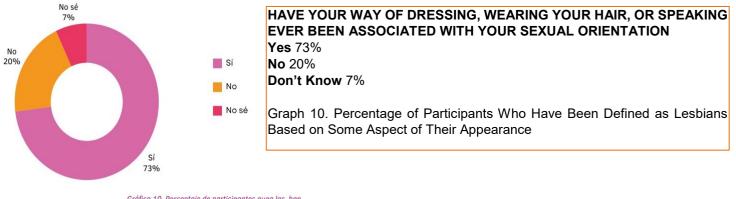
Some participants in Havana reported being taken to psychology or psychiatry consultations due to their sexual orientation and/or gender expression. Almost all of them suffered bullying in their early educational stages from their classmates as well as from teachers and parents. One participant mentioned that as a child and teenager, she had to change her way of walking and speaking. As a result of the contempt and isolation, she attempted suicide.

The same participant explains that she graduated as a primary school teacher. On one occasion, as a teacher, she received a warning from the school's administrators because parents had complained that she was left alone with the students in the classroom. She had recently come out of the closet and was openly lesbian. Her gender expression is androgynous, so she argued that this was a significant factor in applying the sanction against her.

Another participant reported enduring sustained lesbophobia from her teachers, classmates, and her classmates' parents during her years as a student at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts. She was accused of being a drug addict and promoting orgies at her house. Initially, her parents did not support her, but they later sided with her when the Academy's administration attempted to expel her.

She explains that she was not the only one. Almost all students who expressed any nonheteronormative orientation or identity experienced scrutiny, mistreatment, and discrimination, including physical violence from schoolteachers, especially those who taught subjects outside of the artistic specialties. This happened when she was between 14 and 18 years old.

#### ALGUNA VEZ HAN ASOCIADO SU MANERA DE VESTIR, DE Llevar el pelo o de hablar con tu orientación sexual



Gráfica 10. Porcentaje de participantes quea las han definido como lesbianas por algún aspecto de su apariencia

These testimonies reveal how schools, a formative stage for anyone, are centers of discrimination and violence where gender stereotypes are reproduced by both students and teachers. They also show how schools are one of the first places of rejection for lesbians and become unsafe environments.

The same happens with criticism of the way they dress or wear their hair. Not only have 72.7% of participants been criticized, but they have also been defined as lesbians based on their clothing or hairstyles (Graph 10). This reveals a society filled with prejudices that categorize people according to stereotypes that have been perpetuated over 100 years.

The percentages revealed by this survey demonstrate that Cuban government institutions, both educational and professional, are not free from lesbophobia, and what's worse, there are no legal tools to reduce or eliminate it. The testimonies of some of the interviewees show, more than the numbers, that the situation can be worse when there are more vulnerabilities due to age or level of education.



## A HEALTHCARE SYSTEM THAT PERPETUATES STEREOTYPES AGAINST LESBIAN WOMEN

## UN SISTEMA DE SALUD QUE PERPETUA ESTEREOTIPOS CONTRA LAS MUJERES LESBIANAS

## A HEALTHCARE SYSTEM THAT PERPETUATES STEREOTYPES AGAINST LESBIAN WOMEN

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Public healthcare in Cuba is free, but there is a general lack of medical supplies, qualified personnel, and deteriorating hospital infrastructure. Citizens, seeking to improve the quality of service, often pay for medical supplies and bribe medical personnel in order to receive better treatment, thus creating a black market for healthcare that spans from basic services to those requiring technology and state investment.<sup>68</sup>

One of the most sought-after services within this alternative healthcare system by lesbian women is assisted reproduction. This is because Cuban lesbians cannot access this service through official channels. Before the approval of Resolution 1151/2022 by the Ministry of Public Health,<sup>69</sup> Cuban lesbians resorted to domestic fertilization options,<sup>70</sup> utilizing makeshift methods and exposing themselves to the risks associated with using semen not certified by any scientific institution.

Since 2014, CENESEX has been echoing the demand for assisted reproduction, which belonged to the entire LGBTI+ community, and presented it at the VI Regional Conference of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association for Latin America and the Caribbean (ILGALAC).<sup>71</sup> However, its approval in 2022 has also not guaranteed access to the service or the right for lesbian women to enjoy it.

<sup>68</sup> García, Iván. "The Poor Health of Medicine in Cuba": https://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/02/11/cuba/1265900048.html

<sup>69</sup> Resolución 1151/2022 Regulations on Assisted Human Reproduction (GOC-2022-1009-EX67). https://salud.msp.gob.cu/GACETAS/goc-2022-ex67.pdf.

<sup>70</sup> Tremendo Nota. 'Domestic' Fertilizations: The Resource Employed by Lesbian Women to Have Children in Cuba: https://www.washingtonblade.com/2021/03/31/fertilizaciones-domesticas-el-recurso-que-emplean-las-mujeres-lesbianas-paratener-hijos-en-cuba/

<sup>71</sup> Rodríguez Cruz, Francisco. "Exposing Experiences of LGBTI Activism in Cuba": https://www.trabajadores.cu/20140508/ exponen-experiencias-de-activismo-lgbti-en-cuba/

Under the previous legislation, only heterosexual women could access assisted reproduction since they had to demonstrate their inability to conceive. After the resolution was approved, the institution in charge of the issue continued to be called the "Infertile Couple Care Network," and lesbian women, under this new legislation, are excluded from procedures such as surrogacy, with only beneficiaries being "women medically unable to conceive, members of male same-sex couples, and single men."<sup>72</sup>

Another issue that marks a milestone in the evolution of methods for perpetrating lesbophobic violence in Cuba is access to assisted reproduction. 94.5% (Graph 11) believe that accessing this medical service is very difficult, and 90.9% (Graph 12) have never had the opportunity. Among the 5.5% who say it is "somewhat difficult" to access these consultations and the 9.1% who say they have attended, there is a 3.6% who managed to do so despite facing significant difficulties.



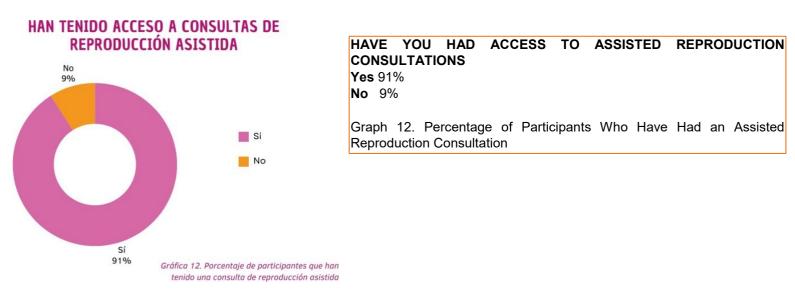
With the new Family Code and the Regulation on Assisted Reproduction, access to various forms of achieving motherhood was supposed to be facilitated, but both documents perpetuate a patriarchal system that excludes lesbian couples from medical procedures such as gestational surrogacy.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore,

72 CHAPTER III, ASSISTED REPRODUCTION TECHNIQUES, Surrogacy, page 1142 https://salud.msp.gob.cu/ GACETAS/goc-2022-ex67.pdf

73 CHAPTER III, ASSISTED REPRODUCTION TECHNIQUES, Surrogacy, page 1142 https://salud.msp.gob.cu/ GACETAS/goc-2022-ex67.pdf



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it completely disregards "shared motherhood" or "receiving eggs from the partner,"<sup>74</sup> which allows for fertilization of eggs from one woman in the couple and implantation into the uterus of the other without requiring a diagnosis of infertility.

For Cuban lesbians, this legal omission in the Assisted Reproduction Regulations or this biased right due to the pathologization, which in turn denies other ways of accessing motherhood, is compounded by the fact that there is no sperm bank available to access safe gestation.<sup>75</sup>

Still today, there is no legislation regulating treatments unrelated to reproduction that protects lesbians from lesbophobic treatment in medical consultations. An article published by the news agency IPS in 2015 highlights discrimination as one of the factors influencing non-heterosexual women to be more frequently affected by cervical cancer.<sup>76</sup>

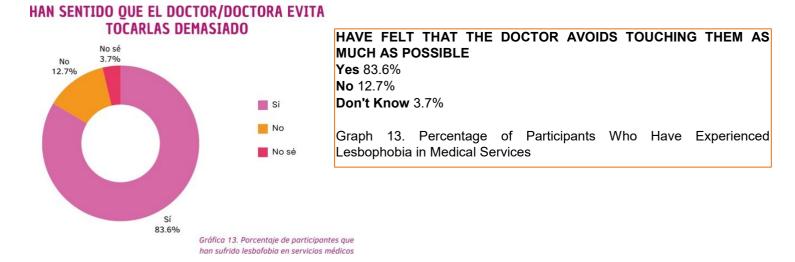
However, when it comes to basic medical services, lesbophobia is less noticeable. 83.6% claim that doctors do not have prejudices when dealing with their bodies, with only 3.6% experiencing rejection (Graph 13). However, in an investigation by IPS, it was found that many lesbian women try to avoid

<sup>74 &</sup>quot;ROPA Method for Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Motherhood": https://www.institutobernabeu.com/es/maternidadlesbica-ro pa-recepcion-de-ovulos-de-la-pareja/

<sup>75</sup> Cuban Sperm Bank: An Option for Male Infertility: https://www.scu.sld.cu/polrlopez/2019/04/22/ban co-de-semen-cubanouna-opcion-para-la-infertilidad-masculina/

<sup>76</sup> González, Ivet. "Healthcare Services in Cuba Do Not Provide Equal Assistance to Lesbians": https://ipsnoticias.net/2015/03/servicios-desalud-en-cuba-no-asisten-igual-a-las-lesbianas/

questions about their sexuality and when they tell the doctor they are lesbians, they encounter lesbophobic comments, and often the questions focus on their sexuality rather than the reason for their visit.<sup>77</sup>



Although there are no figures on how many non-heterosexual Cuban women develop cervical cancer, there is a myth that lesbians are less likely to contract the human papillomavirus (HPV).<sup>78</sup> Lesbophobia is based on erroneous beliefs, which compromise the health access and well-being of lesbians. Additionally, they are sometimes excluded from HIV tests, or it is assumed that there are no risks of transmitting certain sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>79</sup>

It is worth noting that in Cuba, the cytological test or Pap smear is mandatory, and health authorities generally monitor the results at the neighborhood level. However, in the case of surveyed lesbian women, as soon as they reveal their sexual orientation, health workers stop insisting on the test because they believe that lesbians are not at high risk of cervical cancer. Once they declare their sexual orientation, they are no longer encouraged to take the test.

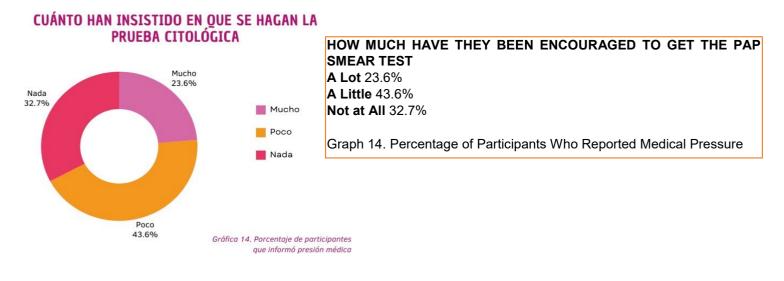
According to our survey, 32.7% of respondents have never been encouraged to attend a PAP smear appointment, 43.6% have been encouraged "lightly," and only 23.6% have felt pressure from health authorities

38

<sup>77</sup> González, Ivet. "Healthcare Services in Cuba Do Not Provide Equal Assistance to Lesbians": https://ipsnoticias.net/2015/03/serviciosde- salud-en-cuba-no-asisten-igual-a-las-lesbianas/

<sup>78</sup> ILGA. "Lesbian Health: Myths and Realities": https://www.cipacdh.org/pdf/salud\_lesbica\_ILGA.pdf

<sup>79</sup> González, Ivet. "Healthcare Services in Cuba Do Not Provide Equal Assistance to Lesbians": https://ipsnoticias.net/2015/03/servicios-de-s alud-en-cuba-no-asisten-igual-a-las-lesbianas/



in their area to attend medical appointments (Graph 14). According to these numbers, more than half of the surveyed women, or over 50%, have not been encouraged to attend a PAP smear appointment.

The interviewees in Santiago de Cuba, mostly composed of activists from the group "Las Isabelas," belonging to the Network of Lesbian and Bisexual Women, affiliated with CENESEX, feel that the major issue in healthcare settings is the presumption of heterosexuality. This means that in cases of abdominal pain, for example, the initial assessment is often to consider pregnancy as a possibility.

They assume that this is mostly due to the poor training of healthcare personnel in these matters and the intrinsic heteronormativity of care protocols. Two of the participants recounted specific episodes where they were compelled to disclose their sexual orientation.

In Havana, they also define the presumption of heterosexuality as a distinctive feature of lesbophobia in healthcare settings. Most of the interviewees acknowledge not having a culture of gynecological care or screening, and in no case did they mention that family doctor personnel were concerned about insisting they undergo cytological testing once they learn they are lesbians. They all agree that access to assisted reproduction techniques is difficult and that, in general, lesbian women neglect their sexual and reproductive health.

Even though access to public healthcare is free, it is permeated by stereotypes that affect the health of lesbian women. The healthcare system is influenced by myths about lesbian women and also reproduces gender stereotypes, as evidenced by the lack of medical protocols and the pathologization of assisted reproduction. These are just two forms of lesbophobia described by the interviewees and survey respondents.

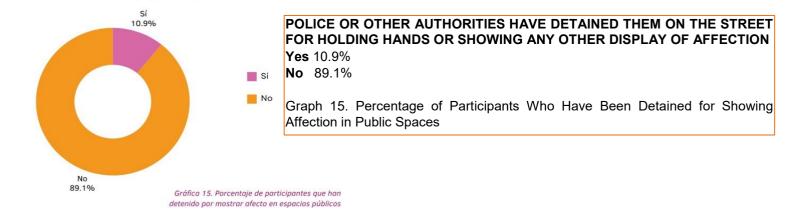
# LESBOPHOBIA IN PUBLIC SPACES LA LESBOFOBIA EN LOS ESPACIOS DÚBLICOS

## LESBOPHOBIA IN PUBLIC SPACES

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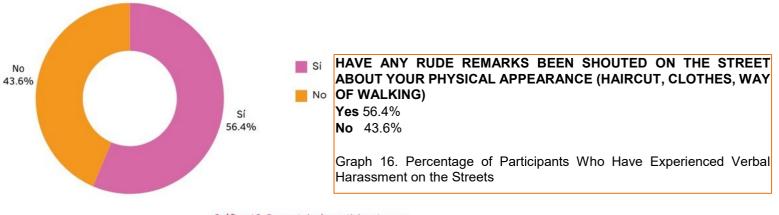
Despite the state policy being lesbo-homophobic for over 50 years, 89.1% of the surveyed women say they have not been detained or accosted by the police for showing affection in public, while 10% have been approached (Graph 15). The majority of those who have been approached by the police for showing affection on the street are young, between 20 and 34 years old, and half of them reside in Havana.

#### LA POLICÍA U OTRA AUTORIDAD LAS HAN DETENIDO EN LA CALLE POR IR de la mano o por haber tenido cualquier otra muestra de Afecto



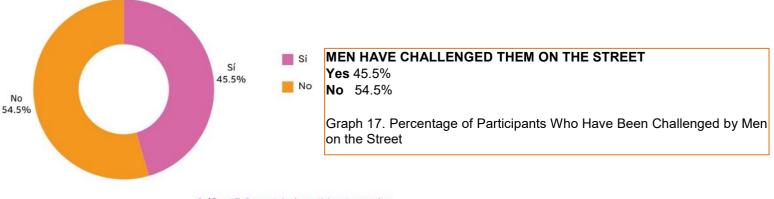
However, there is a tendency to verbally assault gender non-conforming women in public spaces. 56.4% of the respondents have received insults in the street (Graph 16), and 54.5% have been challenged by men who do not consider them women because they are lesbians (Graph 17). 50.9% of the respondents have had to confront the phrase "Do you think you're a man?" (Graph 18), which encapsulates all the violence and could be the boundary between verbal and physical assaults.

#### LES HAN GRITADO EN LA CALLE ALGUNA GROSERÍA REFERENTE A SU ASPECTO FÍSICO(CORTE DE PELO, ROPA, FORMA DE CAMINAR)

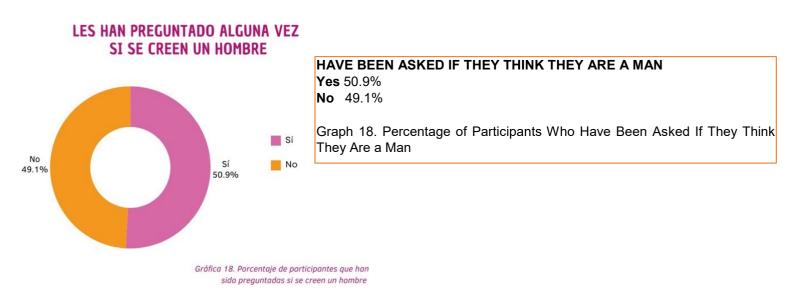


Gráfica 16. Porcentaje de participantes que han sufrido acoso verbal en las calles

#### ALGÚN HOMBRE LAS HA DESAFIADO EN LA CALLE

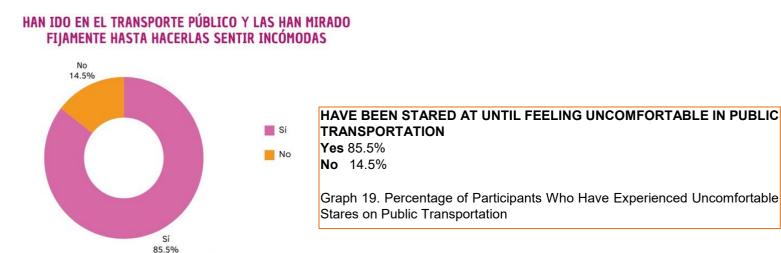


Gráfica 17. Porcentaje de participantes que han sido desafiadas en la calle por un hombre



Our survey highlights a significant contrast between acceptance in relatively safe and moderately regulated spaces, such as workplaces, educational institutions, and healthcare settings, and the more overt violence in public spaces. In the latter, where a culture based on respect for differences is lacking, the deep-rooted social sanitization efforts of past decades become more apparent.

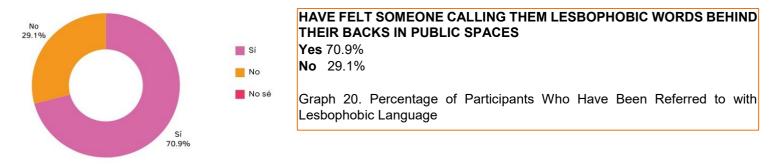
In those same public spaces, 85% of participants have felt harassed by an indiscreet and persistent stare attempting to decipher their sexual orientation in a semi-public setting such as urban transportation (Graph 19). Additionally, 70.9% have heard the word "tortillera" (dyke) whispered behind their backs and have realized that the barely audible conversation was directed at them (Graph 20). Furthermore, 63.6% have witnessed derogatory hand gestures made to refer to their sexual orientation (Graph 21).



Gráfica 19. Porcentaje de participantes que han sufrido miradas incómodas en el transporte público

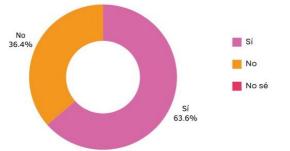
Race and Equality

#### HAN ESTADO EN EL ESPACIO PÚBLICO Y HAN SENTIDO QUE ALGUIEN Les llama con palabras lesbofóbicas a sus espaldas



Gráfica 20. Porcentaje de participantes que han Ilamado con palabras lesbofóbicas

#### LES HAN HECHO GESTOS RELACIONADOS CON SU ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL



#### HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO GESTURES RELATED TO THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION Yes 63.6%

**No** 36.4%

Graph 21. Percentage of Participants Who Have Seen Gestures Related to Their Sexual Orientation

Gráfica 21. Porcentaje de participantes que han visto aestos relacionado a su sexualidad The violence in public spaces ranges from symbolic gestures, such as two hands coming together to refer to sexual activity between two women, to the ruthless and violent shout of a man challenging a lesbian woman, usually accompanied by open arms or clenched fists ready to strike.

If these forms of violence, according to the respondents, occur frequently in Havana, in the focus group conducted in Santiago de Cuba, only two interviewees perceive the risk of harassment as very hostile for visibly lesbian women. The rest of the eight interviewees have a different perception.

A phenomenon that is causing concern among the interviewed lesbians in Santiago de Cuba is the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the region and how the country's economic situation is leading more and more people to join some form of Protestant Christian denomination that actively campaigns against the rights of the LGBTI+ community. One of them has a Christian brother who frequently tries to "convince" her to be heterosexual.

"Public spaces are not safe spaces as a lesbian woman may be subjected to symbolic or physical aggression."

The respondents answered affirmatively, citing instances like hearing whispers behind their backs or experiencing the subtlety of discrimination when looked at disdainfully. Additionally, due to a lack of sensitivity, in some cases, attempts to "correct" their sexuality persist.



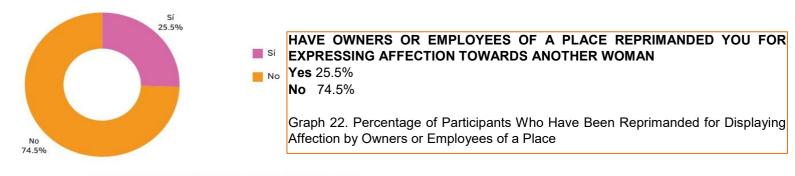
## EXCLUSION IN RECREATIONAL CENTERS EXCLUSIÓN EXCLUSIÓN ENCENTROS ENCENTROS ENCENTROS

## EXCLUSION IN RECREATIONAL CENTERS

Recreational centers are microcosms within the LGBTI+ community but are not exempt from myths about permissiveness when it comes to displaying lesbian affection.

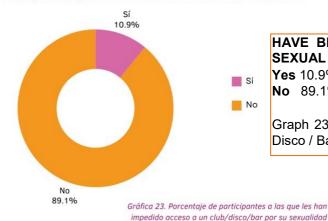
In discotheques, nightclubs, cafes, and bars, 74.5% have not been reprimanded for showing lesbian affection (Graph 22); 89.1% have not been prevented from entering due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Graph 23); and 90.9% have never been expelled from these places for lesbophobic reasons (Graph 24). However, 87.3% have been propositioned for sexual relations by strangers, assuming that because they are lesbians, they might accept (Graph 25).

#### LOS DUEÑOS/DUEÑAS O TRABAJADORES DE ALGÚN LUGAR LES HAN LLAMADO LA ATENCIÓN POR EXPRESAR ALGÚN TIPO DE AFECTO HACIA OTRA MUJER



Gráfica 22. Porcentaje de participantes que han sido objeto de atención por mostrar afecto por parte de los dueños/dueñas o trabajadores de un lugar

#### LES HAN IMPEDIDO EL ACCESO A UN CLUB/DISCO/BAR POR SU ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL

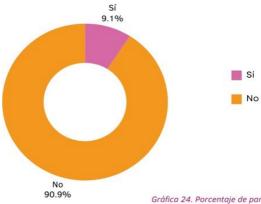


#### HAVE BEEN DENIED ACCESS TO A CLUB / DISCO / BAR BECAUSE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION **Yes** 10.9%



Graph 23. Percentage of Participants Who Have Been Denied Access to a Club / Disco / Bar Due to Their Sexuality

#### LAS HAN SACADO DE UN LUGAR POR SU **ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL**



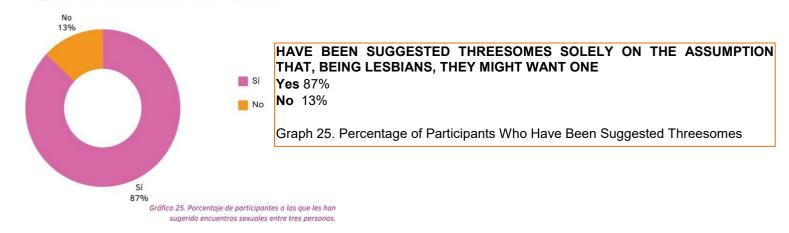
#### HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM A PLACE DUE TO SEXUAL ORIENTATION **Yes** 9.1%

**No** 90.9%

Graph 24. Percentage of Participants Who Have Been Removed from a Place Due to Their Sexuality

Gráfica 24. Porcentaje de participantes que han sacado de un lugar por su sexualidad

#### LES HAN SUGERIDO TRÍOS SOLO POR PRESUPONER QUE COMO LESBIANAS PODRÍAN QUERER



The hypersexualization of lesbianism related to promiscuity is one of the most ingrained inventions in Cuban society. The lesbian imaginary linked to pornography, sexual fantasies, or the acceptance of lesbian love only when it serves male needs seems to be the most common expressions of harassment in recreational spaces, which are not usually exclusive to women.

But who are the 25.5% who have indeed been signaled for showing affection in a recreational venue, the 10.9% who have been prevented from accessing a space due to their gender orientation, or the 9.1% who have been removed from a place?

Lesbians who have been reprimanded by the owners of recreational establishments for displaying lesbian affection or who have been prevented from entering discotheques, clubs, bars, or cafes due to lesbophobic reasons are young adults aged 25 to 34. Additionally, these incidents have occurred in urban areas. These figures, even if only symbolically, indicate that those who have advocated for a more radical break from heteronormativity are young women who have not experienced repression from the UMAP or the Gray Quinquennium, nor have they faced mass expulsions from universities due to sexual orientation or gender expression.

"The Isabelas" in Santiago de Cuba agree that meeting places for the LGBTI+ community have been disappearing in the city. They assert that lesbians seldom go to bars-discotheques where drag shows are presented. They assume that the factor influencing this phenomenon is the economic crisis and the purchasing power of lesbians. Additionally, there are no recreational venues exclusively for lesbians, although there are some for gay men and trans women.

They highlight the fact that there are very few drag kings in the country and that they do not receive much support. The most prominent ones are Argelia Fellove,<sup>80</sup> with her character Alberto, el Salsero, and Glady Palomo, from Camagüey, with her character Jhon Maikol Carbonel.

All agree that...



One of them insists that it is due to internalized lesbophobia and the fear of the hostile environment that awaits them once their sexual orientation becomes visible.



<sup>80</sup> Page of Argelia Fellove: https://www.facebook.com/argelia.fellove.5.

## FAMILY: FIRST PLACE OF REJECTION OR ACCEPTANCE



LA FAMILIA: PRIMER LUGAR DERECHAZO 0 ACEPTACIÓN

## FAMILY: FIRST PLACE OF REJECTION OR ACCEPTANCE

#### . . . . . . . . . .

Families are often the least safe places to freely express homoaffection or any gender expression that deviates from established heteronormative patterns. Homes have proven to be where lesbophobia has some of its deepest roots, and familial rejection can lead to expulsion from the household and a greater risk of exposure to conditions such as depression, anorexia, or others.

In the surveyed sample, the results do not reveal significant contrasts between extreme situations of violence. Among the findings is that 40% have only received mild encouragement regarding motherhood, which may indicate a certain degree of resignation precisely because they only conceive the possibility of gestation in heterosexual relationships. However, 36.4% have been strongly urged about motherhood, and the interviewees stated that families do not accept lesbian parenthood as a life project. The possibility that families refer to ways of conceiving motherhood through assisted reproduction is ruled out because it is a completely new topic for Cuban society.

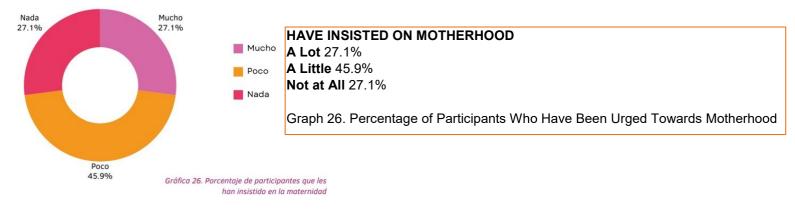
And in between are those to whom motherhood has never been discussed, accounting for 23.6%, either due to their gender expression or openly lesbian attitude. The family has considered it a taboo topic because motherhood is only conceived among heterosexual women (Graph 26).

These results are consistent with the inquiries related to what is conceived as 'feminine' in relation to sexual orientation. 45.5% have been strongly questioned about their gender expression, and 43.6% have been questioned mildly, which does not imply that there have been no inquiries. Only 10.9% have never been questioned about their gender expression (Graph 27).

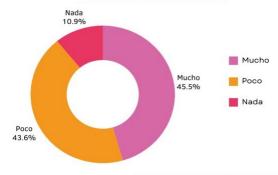


Race and Equality

#### HAN INSISTIDO EN LA MATERNIDAD



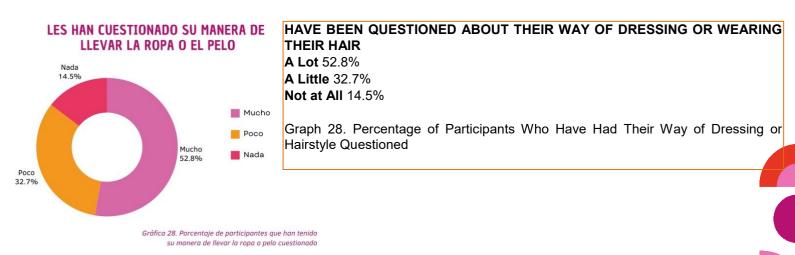
#### LES HAN CUESTIONADO SU "FEMINIDAD" POR SU ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL



#### HAVE HAD "FEMININITY" QUESTIONED BECAUSE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION A Lot 45.5% A Little 43.6% Not at All 10.9%

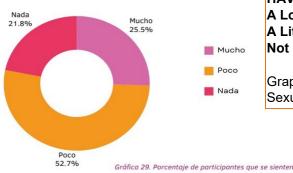
Graph 27. Percentage of Participants Whose Femininity Has Been Questioned Due to Sexuality

Gráfica 27. Porcentaje de participantes que han tenido su feminidad cuestionada porque su sexualidad The family and social scrutiny of gender expression in lesbian women revolves around how they dress, style their hair, and even whether they wear makeup or not. 52.7% have been questioned about the way they dress or style their hair, 32.7% have been questioned to some extent, and 14.5% have never been questioned about their lesbian appearance. This could be because they belong to a family where affections are valued more, and the level of acceptance is very high, or because their appearance is cisgender and does not invite scrutiny. However, as the results show, lesbians are never exempt from family scrutiny, which questions even parameters related to hygiene and is directly connected to societal expectations of what it means to be a woman (Graph 28).



Despite the gender stereotypes that have prevailed in Cuban society for over a century, in the Cuban families of the sample selected for the report, 52.7% have not felt rejected by their family. However, 47.3% have expressed that they have been somewhat or very rejected by their family, which shows that while there is some openness within families to accept sexual orientation, a large sector still does not accept their lesbian relatives (Graph 29).

#### HAN SENTIDO RECHAZO EN SUS FAMILIAS POR SU ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL



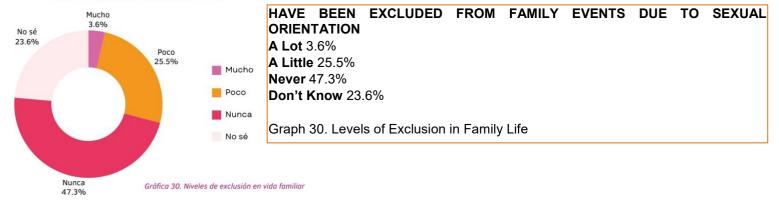
#### HAVE FELT REJECTION IN THEIR FAMILIES DUE TO SEXUAL ORIENTATION A Lot 25.5% A Little 52.7% Not at All 21.8%

Graph 29. Percentage of Participants Who Feel Rejected by Their Family Due to Their Sexuality

#### rechazadas por su familia debido a su sexualidad

Regarding exclusion from family events, 25.5% have felt somewhat rejected, and only 3.6% say they have been excluded from family events. However, it is noteworthy that in the previous sample, a higher percentage reported being rejected within their family (Graph 30). However, 23.60% responded that they do not know if they have been excluded from family events, which could be due to a complete break with the family.

#### HAN SIDO EXCLUIDAS DE EVENTOS FAMILIARES POR SU ORIENTACIÓN SEXUAL



These figures suggest that even within this sample, where 76.4% have completed higher education, indicating a high level of education, there has been an aim for economic independence and intellectual growth. However, this hasn't been enough for families. There remains a lingering suspicion of exclusion, even for those who are unsure whether they have been excluded or not.

The 3.6% who claim to have been excluded are part of the group that has also experienced rejection on several occasions within their family environments. Among those rejected within the family circle are two respondents who have been barred from entry and removed from recreational venues. Both belong to the 25-34 age group, which appears to be the least conforming to heteronormativity. These young women, constituting 64.3% of those rejected, with half residing in Havana and the remainder distributed across various provinces in the central region of the island.

In the focus group conducted in Santiago de Cuba, four of the interviewees reported experiencing greater discrimination and rejection within their families than anywhere else. One of them described how "the topic" is off-limits in her family, while another stated that her mother never accepted it and she had to marry and have a child to alleviate family pressure.

A third interviewee was kicked out of her home when her relationship with another woman was discovered, and even though she has returned to her mother's house, her orientation continues to be rejected by the family.



...and some of the cases described in the historical overview of lesbophobia in Cuba serve as evidence. Surveys and interviews reaffirm that little has changed in the family landscape. Lesbian women continue to face exclusion and discrimination within their own families, ranging from being excluded or expelled from family events or gatherings to enduring constant criticism of their clothing or hairstyle.

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I GUALTAR

## **X LESBIANS IN ACTIVISM AND FEMINIST CIRCLES**

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Regarding LGBTI+ activism, the survey only addresses two issues: representation in collective topics and the reception of opinions in debate forums. The results are not encouraging, as it is assumed that LGBTI+ collectives should also be empowering spaces for lesbian women.

A large percentage, 60% of the sample, thinks that issues related to lesbians do not receive the same attention as those of other groups. 23.6% believe this happens only sometimes, 7.3% are unsure, and 9.1% consider that topics related to the lesbian community are given equal importance as others (Graph 31). This highlights a regional concern in which lesbian women continue to be marginalized both in LGBTI+ and in women's settings.

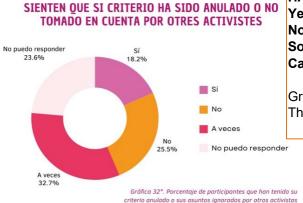


#### SIENTEN QUE LOS TEMAS RELACIONADOS A LAS LESBIANAS NO RECIBEN LA MISMA ATENCIÓN

FEEL THAT ISSUES RELATED TO LESBIANS DO NOT RECEIVE THE SAME ATTENTION AS THOSE OF OTHER GROUPS Yes 60% No 9.1% Sometimes 23.6% Don't Know 7.3%

Graph 31. Percentage of Participants Who Feel Lesbian-Related Issues Receive Less Attention

Gráfica 31. Porcentaje de participantes que sienten que temas relacionados con lesbianas reciben menos atención



#### HAVE FELT THEIR OPINIONS IGNORED OR DISMISSED BY OTHER ACTIVISTS Yes 18.2% No 25.5%

Sometimes 32.7% Cannot Answer 23.6%

Graph 32. Percentage of Participants Who Have Had Their Opinions Dismissed or Their Issues Ignored by Other Activists

On the other hand, only 18.2% have felt that their opinions have been dismissed or ignored in debate settings, while 32.7% have only felt this occasionally. 25.5% do not feel dismissed at all, and 23.6% could not respond to the question (Graph 32).

The perception of the interviewed members of the "Las Isabelas" group confirms the survey findings, indicating that in LGBTI+ and feminist activism spaces, the concerns of lesbian women are often sidelined or rendered invisible unless there is a dedicated panel addressing these issues or a lesbian is invited to speak on the matter.

If there is any support network among them, it's because they have a willingness to be sisters to each other. They have created a network of emotional and financial support, which they are trying to expand not only to other lesbians within their community but also beyond the boundaries of Santiago de Cuba province.

At least one of the interviewees has been invited as a lesbian woman to several panels on feminism. However, in most of them, the topic of rights and specific issues faced by lesbians were discussed only because she brought them up, not because they were part of the agenda.

The interviewees in Havana expressed having experienced several types of discrimination in feminist settings, particularly referring to the exclusion of lesbians on significant dates or activities typically associated with women, especially towards those who display a distinctly masculine gender expression.

The women participating in the focus group in Havana had diverse gender expressions. Those who exhibited a gender expression more aligned with feminine stereotypes acknowledged not having experienced lesbophobic manifestations in this regard because they are not perceived as lesbians. They agreed that openly stating their sexual orientation resulted in people's attitudes changing towards prejudiced treatment.

In LGBTI+ activism spheres, the interviewees from Havana expressed their dissatisfaction with the low visibility of issues related to lesbians. They explained that gay men typically dominate the discussions, and some expressed experiencing disdain from them. Additionally, they agreed that there is a noticeable difference between trans women and trans men, concluding that trans women are the most visible members of the LGBTI+ community, in contrast to trans men, who are the most excluded from the public scene.

#### "According to the women who participated in the study, both LGBTIQ+ activism spaces and feminist spaces exclude or avoid topics related to lesbians."

The involvement of some interviewees in these spaces is largely influenced by the stereotypes that have long perpetuated lesbophobia. This suggests that there is still resistance to acknowledging the diverse identities within lesbian communities, to integrating them into feminist circles, to prioritizing their issues within the LGBTI+ movement, and to recognizing them as rights-bearing individuals in society.



### WHERE DO LESBIAN WOMEN TURN WHO HAVE FACED VIOLENCE?



# ¿A DÓNDE ACUDEN LAS MUJERES LESBIANAS VIOLENTADAS?

## WHERE DO LESBIAN WOMEN TURN WHO HAVE FACED VIOLENCE?

On June 20, 2023, a Facebook user identified as Rosita81,<sup>81</sup> from Ciego de Avila, took to her social media to report how a neighbor, whenever he gets drunk, shouts at her, "filthy dyke", "I'm going to kill you". The Saturday before her public complaint, the insults escalated, including shouting that incited physical violence and threats to stab her until she bled out. The internet user reported him to the police for threats and gender-based violence. While the first offense is defined in the Cuban Penal Code,<sup>82</sup> the latter is not explicitly listed, although it may be considered an aggravating factor in cases of assault.

Supposedly for her protection, but feeling detained, Rosita recounts how she was kept at the police station all day Saturday while her assailant remained on the street. On Sunday, she was forced to sign a document stating that she was leaving at her own risk, even though she did not withdraw the complaint, as she had to return to work the next day.

Although most of the users in the comments recommend that she turn to CENESEX as the only possibility of finding some justice, Rosita expresses her dissatisfaction with Mariela Castro's management at the helm of the Center that centralizes the situation of the LGBTI+ community in Cuba.

In Rosita's case, her only remaining recourse is to make a public complaint, which unfortunately may escalate the violence she faces and put her in danger of death. While she has shown great courage in sharing her story on social media, it is not common for this to happen.

<sup>81</sup> Direct Report. "Police in Cuba Don't Protect Anyone." https://fb.watch/I\_c1KFbq-z/?mibextid=IYQMGx

<sup>82</sup> Cuban Penal Code, 2022: https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2022-09/goc- 2022o93\_0.pdf

"The pact of silence among women in patriarchy is strengthened among lesbians, who often, out of fear of being singled out or mocked, do not speak up and barely report what happens to them."

Some of the interviewees talked about that.

Dismissals, harassment, and situations of rivalry are among the experiences that stand out. Many of them don't want to give their names for fear of being exposed.

MD (50 years old) shared for this report how she ended up working in the Communal Services company, in an office that had nothing to do with her specialization as a physical education teacher in a basic secondary school in Alamar.<sup>83</sup>

"I hadn't said I was a lesbian, but everyone assumed it. I suppose because I wasn't married. I had a co-worker I liked a lot, and it seems she liked me too, but she was liked by the principal, a guy who had no chance of being reciprocated. One day he called me to his office and told me to resign because I was a danger to the teenage girls I worked with, and that I could get into trouble. I didn't resist much. I felt exposed. I resigned, but then every time I tried to get a contract at another school, they made up many excuses. Someone told me that the principal was talking about me. They wouldn't tell me exactly what he was saying."

MD (50 years old) ended up far from the education system. She still doesn't want to give her name because she's not willing to relive what happened to her in 2003. It didn't occur to her to approach CENESEX because it would mean openly declaring herself a lesbian, and she feared rejection from her colleagues who still spoke to her, or mockery from her students, and above all because "I don't believe they would be able to resolve anything for me."

The poet and university professor Gleyvis Coro Montanet recounts, in an interview for this report, as she has also denounced in a Facebook post, how she was removed from the deanship of the University of Medicine where she worked because the Communist Party nucleus decided that a "dyke" could not hold such a high position in any Cuban university.

According to her testimony, her gender expression in 2009 was not her priority, so in an attempt to save her professional career, she declared herself asexual to the party authorities who were firing her, but it was not enough, and she was dismissed. She says she thought about suicide but didn't go through with it and fled the country because she knew she wouldn't find any opportunity for reinstatement in her sector.

Gleyvis Coro's complaint did reach Mariela Castro, who assured her that her intervention would only be symbolic.

<sup>83</sup> Canel Caribe. "Company Dedicated to the Cleaning and Sanitation of the City of Havana": https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=8v1uXZYgIJQ

Only one of the interviewees in the Santiago de Cuba focus group recounted a lesbophobic incident that received a response from the state. A security guard called a lesbian woman "bicho" (a derogatory term) to demean her. They filed a complaint, and the man was fired from his job and had to issue a public apology as punishment.

The concerning aspect of the violence cases we have compiled is that everyone views going through CENESEX via personal efforts as the only possible way to resolve their situations, rather than relying on an existing legal structure that facilitates any type of complaint.

Centralizing complaints in the capital, in a single institution, and relying on the voice or authority of one person puts all lesbian women who experience violence throughout the island in a vulnerable position.

Other forms of violence experienced by the gender-nonconforming women we have interviewed occur within their relationships. Those who suffer same-gender violence also cannot find a place or legislation to turn to.

In Cuba, as in the rest of the world, same-gender violence is described with similar characteristics: "it remains anonymous and unrecorded in statistics; those who suffer from it rarely disclose or acknowledge it; there is a lack of awareness among LGBT individuals to see themselves as victims; social discrimination against LGBT relationships; and the prevalence of various myths about relationships among gays and lesbians."<sup>84</sup>

One of the obstacles they encounter is the romanticization of relationships between women. Just as there is sexualization, there is also the belief that women cannot be violent towards each other, overlooking the fact that the patriarchy is present for anyone who wishes to replicate its patterns.

"The concepts of intragender and intergender violence are just beginning to take shape in the struggles for lesbian women's rights. In Cuba, there is no protocol or methodology for supporting women who suffer violence from their same-sex partners."

In Spain, the first steps are only just beginning to be taken.

Feminist organizations, which have been at the forefront of addressing gender violence in Cuba, do not often receive cases of this particular form of violence. Some of them have never encountered instances of intragender violence. However, after consulting with activist Marta María Ramírez, who possesses ample experience both independently and in collaboration with feminist organizations within independent civil society, we were able to identify certain procedures.



"Resources appear to be solely allocated to cis-hetero women, but that's not the case," Ramirez notes regarding a support approach that begins with one party making a report, where there is no judgment passed. However, in psychological support, it may be possible to determine the extent of exaggeration or falsehoods. In her experience, "the one who files the report first isn't entirely mistaken. They deserve attention. Similar to cis-heterosexual relationships, it may seem that the victim sometimes becomes the aggressor by reacting. Through these reports, we can provide comprehensive support. Our aim isn't to judge who is truthful or not, but to accompany. We work based on demand."

"Women who are experiencing intragender violence are reporting less, and this silence poses a serious problem. That cannot mean it doesn't exist, especially in a country that has just recently approved legislation for marriage equality. There must also be vicarious violence, especially for those who have children from such relationships."<sup>85</sup>

Working on demand does have its risks. Take the case of Bertha, a 24-year-old (not her real name), who sought help from independent aid organizations regarding her ex-partner. The public narrative portrayed her as the aggressor rather than the victim.

"Two weeks after we met, I experienced the first episode of violence. I became aware of the violence a year and a half later," Bertha recounts. "The triggers were anything that challenged her sense of power and comfort, anything that involved a loss of control, from not cleaning the bathroom when she asked me to, to deciding not to have sexual relations with her."

Even she can't quite pinpoint the mechanisms of the psychological violence she endured: "It was really odd, because I was the breadwinner, yet I still had to handle all the household chores. At times, the division of responsibilities seemed collaborative, but never when it came to work—she never held a job in two and a half years. Still, she would accuse me of not wanting to contribute at home just because I was the provider, which led me to do everything. I can recount incidents; I know it was rooted in sexism, but I can't quite explain it."

Bertha sought support from someone her ex-partner ultimately dismissed "as the enemy, closing that door." However, she then turned to the feminist organization Yo Sí Te Creo (I Believe You), and they believed her. "Ultimately, I received help from my current partner and a friend."

"The pressure of having private details of her relationship discussed in public took a toll on Bertha's mental health, leading her to suffer from post-traumatic stress and adopt a constant state of hypervigilance."

<sup>85</sup> Ramírez, Marta María: In an Interview for This Report.

43-year-old Elías Carmona (not her real name) had a three-year relationship with another woman. Often, their economic situation didn't allow Elías to live independently. "We weren't better off because she wouldn't let me work outside of the home. Every person who approached me had to be approved by her. And that rarely happened. One day she promised me she wouldn't leave my life so easily, and she kept that promise." The relationship ended, according to Elías, when the other woman found a new love interest, but that didn't mean the cycle of violence was broken.

"She would seek me out even when we were fighting, just to tell me she couldn't be without me. She would pursue me to check if I had started a new relationship. After three years of violence, during which I didn't know how to leave because I was deeply in love, the violence seemed to be escalating. Some friends told me I must have psychiatric problems because she was narrating a different version of what we were experiencing." Nevertheless, there were reconciliations and promises that ended in a beating in the middle of the street because Elías Carmona didn't meet the other woman's expectations.

Elías didn't even realize she could seek support from any group. It was her first lesbian relationship, and she never imagined it could escalate to such violent levels. Time and migration eventually separated them, but the harassment persisted for up to a year later when Elías Carmona encountered old acquaintances who informed her that the other woman was still sharing details about her sexuality or mental health.

The lesbian violence Zulema experienced was primarily psychological, but it also involved what she perceived as infidelity with a man. "Basically, I couldn't speak, voice my opinion, or say anything that made her uncomfortable because she would become violent," and this could happen in any setting: public or private.

Zulema had no one to turn to because her situation was so precarious at that moment. She had to leave that violent relationship as best as she could, relying solely on her own personal resources.

At 28 years old, Katia Bermúdez (fictional name) had a relationship with a woman 12 years her senior and experienced episodes of disproportionate anger, economic, physical, and psychological violence.

"It was an 8-year relationship during which there were many instances of violence, of almost every kind. I couldn't use my salary for personal expenses without her permission, I couldn't go out without her, except for work, and even then, I couldn't stay out for more than 3 or 4 hours. If I did, she would call my phone. If she got angry about something, it could escalate to physical violence. The psychological and emotional abuse was constant, especially with direct attacks on my self-esteem. She even managed to isolate me socially," recounts Katia Bermúdez.

"The violence became unbearable, and I had started to defend myself from the physical assaults." She didn't seek support from any group. This was another case where distance and migration played a decisive role. She also believes she had very little awareness of the violence she was experiencing. In the interview, she describes her ex-partner as a narcissistic individual with internalized lesbophobia, which prevented her from behaving differently.

Due to the lack of resources and mechanisms to address intragender violence and lesbophobia, women who report such incidents prefer to remain anonymous. Many of those consulted declined the invitation to participate out of fear of being identified because they are not entirely convinced that what they experienced has been shared by other women.

"Sexually dissident lesbian women, when they do not report, do not appear in the statistics —also considered underreporting— of gender violence in Cuba. This also excludes them from the femicide statistics kept by independent civil society in an effort to shed light on other forms of gender violence."

When it comes to addressing both lesbophobic and intragender violence, there is scarce material available and even fewer women willing to disclose their names or share their stories. The pact of silence with the patriarchy, often seen among cis-hetero women, seems prevalent within the lesbian community as well. However, neither intragender violence nor lesbophobia find effective management for resolution in state or civil society settings due to the lack of methodologies specifically designed to address violence experienced by women at the hands of other women.



## CONCLUSIONS

Photo: Myrna Rosa Padrón Dickson and Siria Gónzalez Corujo

## CONCLUSIONES

# CONCLUSIONS

The intention of this report arises from the need to begin telling the story of lesbophobia in Cuba, to understand its consequences in the current Cuban reality, and to shed light on the situation of lesbians.

The strategy of exclusion began in newspapers in the first half of the 20th century and became state policy with conversion therapies that included electroshock, as well as mass expulsions from educational and workplace settings, thereby jeopardizing the lives of Cuban lesbians.

Those methods were applied, while simultaneously, lesbophobia was entrenched in legal resolutions and laws that have been modified today but still do not acknowledge lesbians as another form of exclusion: if you are not recognized as a lesbian woman, you do not legally exist.

This invisibility in history, politics, and Cuban culture has significantly contributed to firmly establishing lesbophobia in Cuban society. Meanwhile, figures within feminist movements with openly lesbophobic stances continue to be celebrated, further isolating lesbians within feminist movements and the LGBTQI+ community.

This leads us to identify that internalized lesbophobia within the LGBTI+ community causes the topics of lesbian women to be relegated to a secondary level of interest.

The invisibility of lesbians has also resulted in their absence from statistics collected by civil society on gender-based violence because they do not report it. Additionally, they are not included in the mechanisms dedicated to monitoring violence.

Women who suffer from intragender violence are in an even worse situation, as there isn't even a methodology for identification and support provided by the organizations responsible for addressing gender-based violence.

In all the documents consulted, the term "diverse" women is used, a term that doesn't necessarily have to be related to gender identity or the sexual orientation of lesbians. Writing the word "lesbian" seems to be taboo in legal or public documents.

"The silence of civil society and state organizations has significantly contributed to deepening lesbophobia in Cuban society and to lesbian women refraining from sharing their stories."

# RECOMMENDATIONS XIII RECOMENDA-CIONES

## RECOMMENDATIONS

#### TO THE STATE AND STATE INSTITUTIONS

- **1.** Recognizing lesbian women in legal and public documents as a means of legal acknowledgment.
- **2.** Reviewing legislation that, while of interest to lesbian women, excludes them through sexist and lesbophobic language.
- **3.** Rectifying the Assisted Reproduction Regulations by removing exclusions to access surrogacy for lesbians, addressing sexist language, discrimination based on age, pathologization of reproduction, and heteronormative language in the document.
- **4.** Accepting the participation of lesbian women in all support networks for lesbian women and not conditioning their participation based on the political party to which they belong.
- **5.** Establishing protocols specifically addressing gender-based violence against lesbian women and intragender violence and including pathways for assistance.
- 6. Raising awareness and implementing comprehensive sexual education programs in schools and workplaces as the main approach to combatting lesbophobia.
- **7.** Establishing protocols or creating bills that allow conjugal visits for incarcerated lesbian women.
- 8. Publicly acknowledging the role of the state and its institutions in the lesbophobic policies they have implemented over the past 64 years.
- **9**. Publicly compensating lesbian women who suffered from lesbophobia during the first 30 years of the revolution, a period that criminalized and marginalized more than one generation of Cuban lesbians.

"Making public the official documents that detail the treatments to which so many women were subjected, either under suspicion of being lesbians or for openly identifying as such."

#### **TO CIVIL SOCIETY**

- 1. Including lesbians in the violence observatories managed by civil society. Incorporating lesbians into the demands for laws from the State and in documents.
- 2. Developing methodologies for reporting and providing support to lesbian women experiencing violence and victims of intragender violence.
- **3.** Encouraging feminist women's collectives to create safe spaces that promote the visibility of intragender violence and lesbophobia.
- **4.** Being more inclusive when discussing sexual diversity and including and making lesbians more visible.
- 5. Promoting the work and visibility of lesbians within LGBTI+ and feminist collectives.

"Not excluding lesbians from support networks or actions for women's rights or the LGBTI+ community due to political or ideological reasons."

6. Encouraging journalistic publications, research, and reports that aid in gathering stories to shape the history of lesbians in Cuba, giving them a place in the nation's narrative.

#### TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- **1.** Establishing dialogues with LGBTI+ civil society organizations and lesbian women to delve deeper into social issues and complaints.
- 2. Having the IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) and the UN include specific recommendations regarding policies for lesbian women in their reports.
- **3.** Urging the Cuban State to include lesbian women in legislation and public policies.
- 4. Encouraging treaty bodies, specifically the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Committee against Torture (CAT), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), and the Human Rights Committee, to recommend the inclusion of an intersectionality axis in their reporting process to address issues faced by lesbian women.

"Calling on the Cuban government to allow visits by Independent Experts and special Rapporteurs to Cuba, enabling them to assess the situation of lesbian women."

- **5.** Encouraging the Cuban government to review the human rights situation of incarcerated lesbian women.
- 6. Urging the Cuban government to resume comprehensive sexual education programs in schools and establish clear and direct regulations against dismissals or bullying in workplaces or schools.





Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights