



HAVANA RIGHTS

The street scene was entertaining, as always. Promenading down the colonial walkway known as the Prado was a cross-section of the city's humanity; a respectable old couple walking arm in arm, a bored-looking policeman smoking a Soy Popular, two young lovers holding hands with eyes only for each other, a Lycra-clad girl with eyes only for tourists, and a teenage boy with a big grin selling fake branded cigars: "Where you from, my friend? I work in the cigar factory. I do you good price."~

And then, to complete the scene, a dozen transvestites came into view, singing: "All we are saying, is give peace a chance." No one batted an eyelid. Not me. Not the old couple. Not even the policeman.

This was Havana in October 2004. But it could have been any major city in socialist Cuba in recent years. After the severe anti-homosexual discrimination of the 1960s and 70s, Cuba's lesbian, gay and transgender community is set to be given something more important than a chance: the right to marry and enjoy full equality under the law.

"We have to abolish any form of discrimination against those persons," Ricardo Alarcon, president of Cuba's national assembly, said recently. "We have to redefine the concept of marriage. Socialism should be a society that does not exclude anybody."

The national assembly is also currently debating a proposal which will give transsexuals the right to have sex change operations. [this has been agreed since this article was first published] Like all medical procedures performed on the island, they will be carried out free of charge by the world class Cuban health service. This official change of heart did not come out of the blue, and neither did the earlier repression. Machista culture has deep roots in all Latin American and Caribbean countries that suffered under slavery and colonialism. In Jamaica, for example, homosexuality is punishable with a prison sentence, and some clubs and bars even display notices reading "Adam and Eve, yes. Adam and Steve, no".

Cuba, being a secular country, avoided the anti-homosexual religious overtones of its neighbours. However, repression of homosexuals continued after the 1959 revolution under the umbrella of a dogmatic interpretation of Marxism. It is a tribute to the humanistic essence of the Cuban Revolution that its leadership was able to face up to its mistakes and change course. Cuba is now set to become the most socially liberal country in the Americas.

In 1979, homosexual relations were legalised. Fourteen years later, a critically acclaimed film, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, was released in Cuba which immediately created waves within society. The film was about the friendship between a gay man and a straight Communist party militant, and included the now famous line: "I'm part of this country, like it or not. And I have the right to work for its future." Since then, openly gay men and lesbians have featured more prominently on TV and the stage, and in literature.

There are also gay rights campaigners in Cuba. The most influential amongst them is Mariella Castro. For years, Ms Castro has used her position as head of the national sex education centre to highlight homophobic discrimination and to work with government departments, universities, mass organisations and the police to change attitudes and practices. She also happens to be the daughter of acting president Raul Castro and the niece of Fidel.



A scene from 1994's ground breaking film *Strawberry and Chocolate* (see overleaf for details of July screenings with guest speakers mariella Castro and Alberto Roque.)

Another set of people who can claim some credit for Cuba's enlightened approach is the international left and solidarity campaigns. While the pressure for equal rights came principally from within Cuban society, there is little doubt that the government also listened to their friends and supporters abroad, those who unconditionally stood by Cuba throughout her struggle against US-sponsored invasion and terrorism, and the 45-year-long economic blockade.

While Havana has a lively and vibrant gay scene (something that would have been unthinkable 30 years ago), the picture is not uniformly rosy. Mariella Castro acknowledges that gays and lesbians still face occasional police harassment, but says that the days of official repression are over: "What remains are social and cultural reactions that must be transformed, the same as in many other countries."

This article by Calvin Tucker originally appeared on the Guardian's Comment is Free site in March 2008.