

Women in the Cuban Literacy Campaign

by **Joanne C. Elvy**

In Ciudad Libertad, an educational complex in the Playa district of Havana, is a small museum that commemorates Cuba's Literacy Campaign, an initiative that brought together thousands of volunteers in 1961 in Cuba's battle against illiteracy and underdevelopment. This museum

houses a variety of documents—letters, journals, photographs and mementos—that reflect the participation of young and old in their first contribution to the Revolution following its inauguration in 1959. At that time, the targeted illiterate in Cuba would have numbered almost one million—citizens without access to basic schooling due to race, gender and geographic isolation. As a direct outcome of this Literacy Campaign, alongside the Revolutionary government's ongoing commitment to education as a basic human right, Cuba currently celebrates one of the highest literacy rates in the world, ranking first amongst Latin American countries.

"This Campaign was the first major task of the Revolution, one that invited the people to become involved, en masse, to resolve challenges faced by the country.

And for this reason, this Campaign held great value: social value, economic value, political value... Indeed, the formation of our consciousness."

– Mirta, Viñales



Encida,
Santiago de Cuba



Elsa,
Ciego de Avila

Lucy, Viñales



Isabel, Havana

Looking back on this moment in Cuban history, the Literacy Campaign involved 271,000 volunteer “teachers,” many of whom were sent into remote areas of the country for weeks or months at a time. In order to reach its goal of an illiteracy-free Cuba within one year, the Revolutionary government also closed down city schools during 1961 to provide young people with the opportunity to contribute as literacy *brigadistas*. More than 90,000 students between the ages of 10 and 19 with a grade 6 education thus left their homes in urban centres to live with peasant families in the countryside. Armed with teaching manuals and lanterns, the ethical exhilaration amongst the young *brigadistas* ran high with the promise of a better life for all. Integrated into peasant households, they worked alongside their new “families” by day, and then taught them how to read and write by lantern at night. Indeed, the young literacy volunteers learned first-hand of the challenges faced by their fellow Cubans living in underdeveloped conditions.

As an artist-researcher I travelled throughout the country to conduct further studies on those who had been *brigadistas* many years ago. The stories I collected spoke of how the broader value of the Campaign for female volunteers stood apart from that of the males. I noted how over 50 per cent of the volunteer teachers in the Campaign were young women, whereas traditionally there would have been little or no opportunity for females to engage in activities outside the family home. For many women, their contribution to the Literacy Campaign marked the first time they were away from their parents on their own, and the first time they were invited to take on the same tasks as their male counterparts. Prior to this, girls from a “respectable” class simply had not left the family home unescorted, with parents making decisions on behalf of unmarried

Melva, Camagüey

daughters to ensure their future as “good” wives and mothers. It appeared that the Literacy Campaign in Cuba thus initiated a social and cultural shift in the role of women in civic society.

“This Campaign was the first significant Revolutionary event for those of my age. Myself, I was only 13 years old. To participate in such a massive undertaking was a point of departure for me in respect to my personal independence and identity and the responsibilities I took on as a young woman.”

– *Rosa, Havana*

However, more than a coming-of-age event, the participation of young Cuban women as volunteers in the Campaign was pivotal in how they began to re-imagine their place as active contributors in areas of development. Dora described how she became more independent in making her own decisions and deciding her own future: “I became outgoing...conscientious. I wasn’t going to be tied down again!” Even now, Latin American women remain challenged by the ideological framework of family and cultural patterns that reinforce their roles as nurturers at a young age. The Cuban Literacy Campaign raised consciousness of how women can be active participants in the building of a nation, their actions valuable in the realm of social justice.



Moraina, Ciego de Avila



Photos from top to bottom:
Magdelina, Viñales
Bienvenida, Ciego de Avila
Nuria, Santiago de Cuba



In this way, beyond the mechanics of reading and writing, the Cuban Literacy Campaign helped the nation come to realize that the voice and civic engagement of women actually mattered. This underlying force has since become the ethical backdrop of the entire country until present times. "A gesture of humanity, a Revolution itself," concurs former *brigadista* Zeida on the inclusion of women in this massive event. "Those of us who were part of it proved that together we could overcome obstacles, despite all the challenges we would undoubtedly face, socially or economically, in the future...that we women are capable of taking on such tasks." The Cuban Literacy Campaign was thus an example of the merit of women's participating in a nation's development, beyond its immediate value as an educational initiative. ■

Joanne C. Elvy is currently the Program Director for Sault Program for English Language Learning and Adjunct Professor of Photography at Algoma University College, in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. She is working on her PhD through OISE/University of Toronto in the Adult Education Department, where her focus is on meaning making and the development of consciousness in women in relation to the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign.

To learn more about the Cuban literacy campaign:

Fagen, Richard R. (1961). *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Keeble, Alexandra (2001). *In the Spirit of Wandering Teachers: The Cuban Literacy Campaign 1961*. Melbourne: Ocean Press.

Kozol, Jonathan (1978). A new look at the literacy campaign in Cuba. *Harvard Educational Review*, 48, 341-377.

Leiner, Martin (1987). The 1961 national literacy campaign. In R. Arnove & H. Graff (eds.), *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New York: Plenum Press, 173-196.

Mujica, Rene J. (1981). Some Recollections of My Experiences in the Cuban Literacy Campaign. *Journal of Reading*, 25(3), 222-225.