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S.O.S. CUBAN WOMEN

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Photos by Yanela Durán

EDITORIAL

S.O.S. CUBAN WOMEN

Despite how much we hear about political and social situation in Cuba and changes which have been taking place in recent years, little or almost no attention is paid to the situation of women living in the country. Women's rights are often overshadowed by a struggle for democracy which seems to be intended only for men. We know that Ladies in White march on the streets every Sunday in order to claim their civil rights, but why they never protest against violence and discrimination they have to face just because they are women?

Unlike other countries in the region such as Nicaragua, where feminist movement has become strong enough to be a fundamental factor in the struggle for human rights, the potential of Cuban women is constantly being ignored. As women in Cuba are trapped by traditional patriarchal society, feminism does not form a part of their democratic activism for human and civil rights. In Cuba there is still too little awareness of the fact, that real changes require strengthening of the women position in the society. Women represent at least a half of the population and only if they have a sufficient space for self-fulfillment, a truly free society will be achieved.

There is no need for detailed investigation in order to understand that a lot of women in Cuba are victims of male violence. It is manifested by street harassment, openly paternalistic and possessive attitude towards women and hidden domestic violence which the government does not register at all. There is a serious reason to believe that if the number of women annually killed in Cuba was revealed, it would be very alarming.

The gender-based violence is undoubtedly the most disturbing manifestation of the situation of women in Cuba. This magazine dedicates two articles to this topic. The third one tells a story of an elderly lady relying only on her creativity. Beyond the grim reality these stories reveal, these articles and photos, all made by Cuban women, show a collective strength that has much to say.

Agnes Koleman

MILAGRITO

Ileana Álvarez

Cuban society is so ideologically masculinized that even Cuban women accept gender violence as part of life

Married to Cheo, “the handsome guy”, Milagrito represented joy for the children from our neighbourhood. She lived two houses away from ours, a short run from our patio, there was no need to jump over any fence; in Chinchá Coja, a suburb where I was born, all patios were shared. I used to go to her patio where they had the sweetest plumps and skinips in the world which she would give away in handfuls to all children.

My girlfriends and I would think of the pretty mulata Milagrito as the perfect mom that allowed us anything we wanted. She made us laugh so much, with her heavenly blue eyes, with her muddle stories about witches riding naked on peacocks mocking the gossiping neighbours. No matter how much our parents prohibited us seeing the “easy woman” Milagrito, we wouldn’t obey because her joyfulness was contagious and made us forget the problems and hardships of our own home.

But Milagrito’s face wasn’t always radiating with happiness. Many times we found her covered in bruises, with a split and swollen lip. The beatings given to her by Cheo were as famous in our part of the world as her beauty. “One day he will kill her,” neighbours would say, but I had never seen anyone to stop the furious man from coming home drunk and take her smile away. “One day he will kill

her,” terrified my friends and I would cry out to Rosita, a fat woman with glasses, the head of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) of our quarter. “Look,” she responded to us untterrified, “don’t you know that no one should interfere in the husband and wife matters? Besides, she provokes him...”. “But he will kill her,” we repeated only to be sent home.

As expected, he killed her shortly afterwards, with a machete. Submerged in sorrow, we were furious overhearing our neighbours’ commentaries saying “She asked for it.” The handsome guy from our quarter served just a few years of imprisonment for committing a “crime of passion” – doesn’t this legal term sound almost beautiful or novel-like?

Unfortunately, the story of Milagrito was not the only case I have got to know throughout my life. In my quarter, for instance, Sergito slit the throat of his wife when she refused to come back and live with him; to make it even more horrifying he committed the crime in front of her daughter.

Never too much time passes before a new “crime of passion” becomes the word of mouth here. Under the accomplicising silence of the media, domestic violence occurs on daily basis, femicides (murders of women committed by men out

of hatred, contempt, pleasure or possessiveness) are committed more often than we can even imagine and we don’t have

I become so angry every time I hear the following comment made by men and women alike: “She asked for it.”

access to the statistics. The law condemns these crimes under the euphemistic term “crime of passion” which conceals the atrocity of a barbarian act as well as the essence of a macho and misogynous mentality and psychology that produces such crimes. Women and girls are the most common victims of domestic violence.

The femicides occur more often than we think and we even don't have access to reliable statistics

Subjugation and marginalization of women occur on regular basis and form a normal part of the daily lives of Cubans. They range from psychological and physical mistreatment and abuse, body subjugation and rape, to various more subtle types of liberty restrictions, and even to homicide. To eliminate them, sporadic campaigns or projects organized by some official institutions are not sufficient. The Federation of Cuban Women, a government institution that should safeguard women's rights has – similarly to the majority of institutions in our society – been swamped with the red tape, lost credibility and public support. Groups that would fight against gender-based violence and in favour of women's equality and empowerment, that would resemble a real civil society, do not exist, at least in the inland of the country. When they manage to be heard, they become suspected of “subversion” and “destabilization”. In reality, a woman subjected to a systematic abuse or gender-based violence has no one to turn to, as there are no institutions that would secure direct support or sustainable and effective assistance. The biggest achievement of an institution would be to turn victims into activists, as agents of change, but this spontaneous and conscious evolution process, characteristic of an authentic civil society, is very limited in Cuba as it is supposed to be taken care of by the state.

Laws that would foster gender equality and women's dignity do not represent

sufficient support for Cuban women. The fight for women's equality and emancipation – even more in inland towns and villages, as well as on their peripheries, where patriarchal mentality thrives almost in anonymity – still has a long and difficult way to go. Women must start to become aware and start to identify their subordination, and any type of violence or discrimination they face. They have to find their feminine identity that breaks the established ways of thinking and traditional roles to which they have been submitted for generations by the patriarchal society.

Similar objectives cannot be achieved by simple and ephemeral government campaigns and publicity slogans. It is necessary to create a favourable environment to build a real civil society that would include the foundation of centres of resistance, associations that would raise the awareness, eradicate the patriarchal power and provide the necessary tools to reach a new consciousness that empowers women not only in the professional and social life but also at home.

The work to eradicate gender-based violence must inevitably include speaking transparently, without hypocrisy, about the wrongs present in the Cuban society that concern us all. The wrongs that unfortunately even in the truly feminist speech are sometimes full of genuflection, pretense and camouflage. The wrongs fed by the ideological submission of women

The fight for gender equality has a long and tenuous road ahead and women have to build collective awareness on the issue.

in the masculinised society in which we have been living. This can be perceived when we hear people say in front of an assassinated woman “she asked for it”, or when we allow women -white or black, young or old, that express their ideas in a peaceful way by attending Sunday masses with gladiolus in their hands- to be harassed and hit in the streets of our country.

ISMARY

María Matienzo

The (societal) power structures enable the gender violence

Tragedies that occur in Havana number in thousands even though there are no statistics provided by the Cuban government. Ismary Leonor Brizuela Fonseca represents one of 938 cases that were handled by the Cubalex group of independent lawyers in 2015.

While Ismary's son suffers from a serious illness, her ex-husband is a dangerous man. Her son, despite his motor and cognitive limitations – he suffers from severe Dawn and West syndromes – does not cause her as much stress as her husband that has threatened her many times, including with a gun.

In 1999, when Ismary Leonor married Norbel Luis Pérez Perdomo, an official of the Technical Department of Investigations (DTI), it would have never occurred to her that five years later a tragedy would unleash in which she would resist to play the role of a victim imposed to her by the Cuban society and judicial system.

In 2004, as a consequence of the disease of their newborn son and based upon the decision of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), the couple was offered to lease an apartment in the capital's city centre, La Habana Vieja. As Ismary was hospitalized with her son, the contract was signed by her husband. The couple was also assigned a plot in the Playa municipality so that they

could build a house under the “self-help” system. Norbel decided to donate the plot to one of his sisters which meant that Ismary had no access to this property.

Five years ago the apartment became the source of conflict. In the routine of everyday life Ismary and Norbel's marriage fell apart. Norbel believes that Ismary should leave the apartment even though she has nowhere to go. Since then, in order to achieve his goal, he has been exercising all his power over her and her vulnerable situation. And he has not been using just the physical violence. Prior to turning to the Cubalex Centre of Legal Consultancy, Ismary Leonor resorted to all legal recourses possible in the search of a solution to her problem. All the answers resulted in favour of her ex-husband and those that didn't were evasive.

She started filing claims in 2011. The Cuban Parliament, the National Assembly of People's Power, sent her complaint to the Citizens Advice Service of the Interior Ministry appointing it as “the competent body” for delivering an impartial judgement. Three months later Ismary received a response from the Ministry of the

Interior which confirmed her ex-husband as the “owner” of the apartment in La Habana Vieja and Ismary as the “owner” of the property in the Playa municipality, to which she had never had any access. Ismary disagreed with the decision and

There are thousands of tragedies caused by “machismo” in Cuba even though the government does not gather the statistics on this issue

appealed to the Havana's Historian Office (Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana) that is in charge of the housing fund. As a response, however, she received a mere description of the facts and a suggestion what should happen from the legal point of view: Norbel should exchange the apartment for two and provide one to Ismary, while securing minimum life conditions for his ex-wife and their son.

In 2012, the Administrative and Civil Chamber of the Supreme People's Court dismissed the claim filed by Ismary against her ex-husband and despite the fact it recognized Ismary's right to the apartment, it referred the case to the Ministry of the Interior.

In 2013, Ismary received the same response from the Department of the Public Service of the Council of State and Council of Ministers of Cuba.

In 2014, she wrote to the Citizens Advice Service of the National Revolutionary Policy (PNR) which was expected to be the

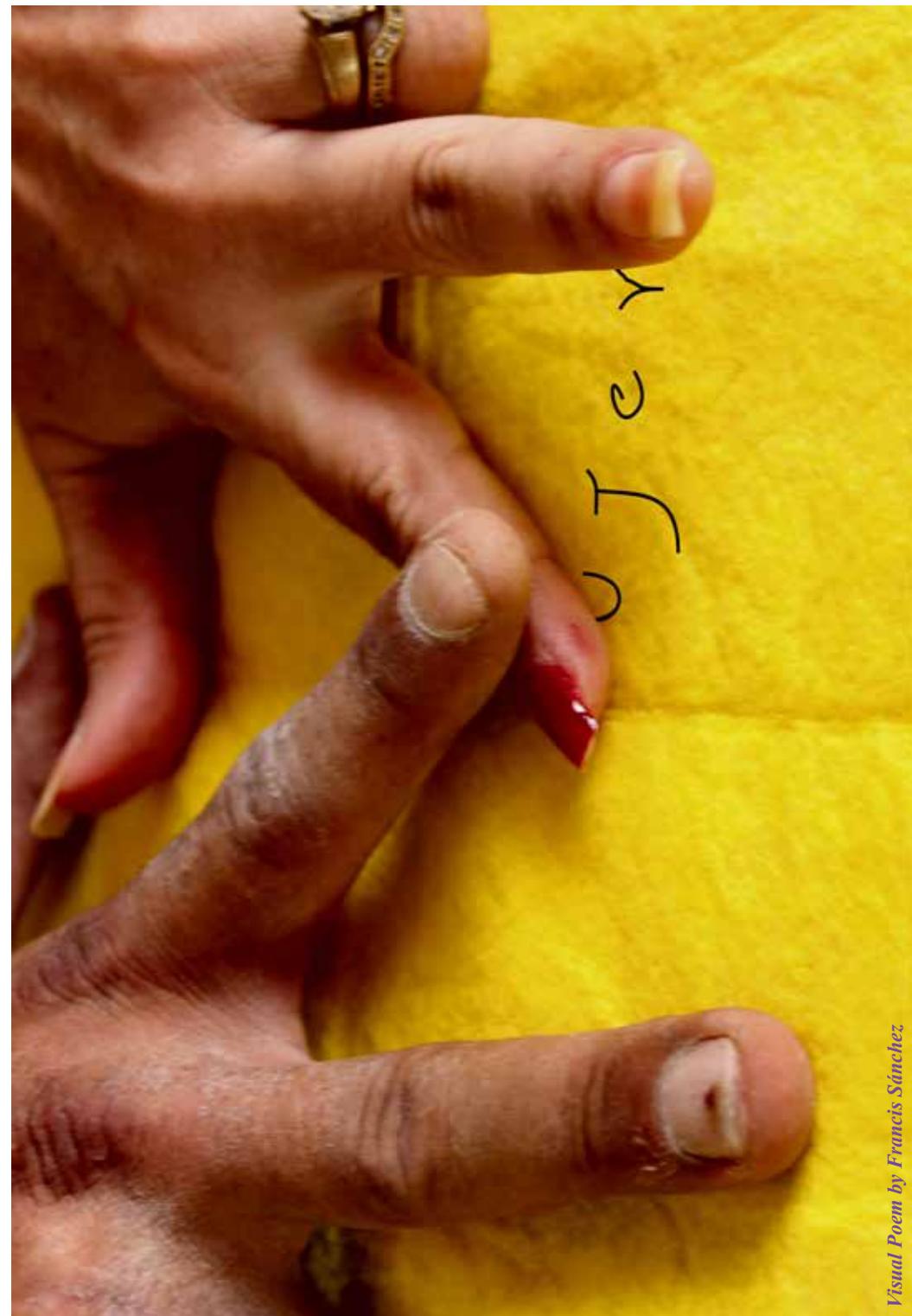
Kitchen utensils, an achievement of Cuban feminism?

department that would try the acts of violence committed against her by the father of her son, yet nothing was resolved.

In addition, she wrote to the Public Prosecutor of the Republic of Cuba, the Municipal Housing Department and the Council of the Public Administration, both residing in the La Habana Vieja city centre, and to all authorities that should protect Cuban citizens in the absence of an organization that would protect Cuban women and girls.

The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) is an organization that is supposedly responsible for supporting Ismary; since its foundation, however, it has reinforced powers that postpone or spoil the fight for women's equality. Its main achievement in the support of feminism in Cuba in the 21st century has been the distribution of kitchen utensils.

The last act of extreme violence performed by Norbel was a forceful redesign of the apartment where he pulled down the walls and closed up the doors "confining me and my son to a room without any independent exit", says Ismary. The strategy that Cubalex suggests to her is to start attributing the responsibility for complicity in her case to the institutions that should protect her but they don't. Machismo and violence cannot survive on their own unless there are structures of power that enable them to persist.



Visual Poem by Francis Sánchez

CARIDAD

Iris Mariño

A woman on margins of society
whose only consolation is to
paint

Caridad Hernández Carlos is an elderly woman who has lived in the Campo Santo Street in the city of Camagüey for over sixty years. Known as Cachita by her friends, Caridad is a plastic artist, a graduate of the San Alejandro Academy in Havana. Facial deformity since early childhood, old dilapidated house with grey walls decorated with realistic paintings depicting suffering made her retire into her own shell.

In her imagination, Caridad keeps inventing stories related to love and dreamless passion, expressing the pain of her experiences and pushing it beyond the limit in

her paintings. Nicolás Abrasnabi is a fictive character with whom she has a sentimental relationship that overwhelms her, provokes false joy and happiness that all of a sudden disappear. Caridad is a woman that by mixing hallucinations with her personal stories creates paintings with a figurative and conceptual force that deeply affects anyone who looks at them. The personal world of this woman is figurative, hurled from the corners of her extreme alienation and pain accumulated by vices, poverty and virtues.

In her paintings, Caridad uses materials such as tempera, acrylic paint, shoe paint, excrements, mud, blood. She paints on





walls, canvases, cartons and wooden planks. Loneliness and abandonment overtake the bearable part of this woman's life, the misery exceeds the believable and leaves a surreal trace. Each pictorial piece painted by a Caridad's finger or brush is a bite that she gives to herself, a kind of anthropophagy that rips out the pain and oblivion.

Her obsession to paint rests in the necessity to express herself, it is the mutilation of a word, the impossibility to be listened to through her voice. A misfortune that has been rooted in the Cuban reality for long. The Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), a government body that looks

after the Cuban artists, facilitates her a monthly wage of 625 Cuban pesos that provides food for one person only for a fortnight. Apart from that, her life is marked by silence, indifference.

For Caridad, it is impossible to understand the real world outside of her brain. Imprisoned by the abandonment of her husband and son, inability to understand the logic of her surroundings, scarcity of almost everything, ideologization, missing values and rights, make Caridad an "obsolete" being in this ferocious Cuban context. Caridad is a kind of a timeless traveller that is on the border of the exterior but remains inside of her own per-

sonal and magical universe. The political reality of our country is void of any sense and comprehension in her point of view. Her day-to-day reality is composed of her ideas linked to her personal history and paintings.

Similarly to many other Cuban women, Caridad's creative impulse has been restricted and suffocated by an invisible limit imposed by a brutal, schematic and apathetic reality, that has no future.



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