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Cuba: In the Hands of the Unvalued

Cuba is a beautiful island in the Caribbean Sea filled with sandy beaches, lush palm trees, and need; Cuba has yet to find its independence. The Totalitarian Communist government of Cuba came to power on January 1st, 1959 in the hands of Fidel Castro (U.S. Department of State). Before this, under the hand of Batista, Cuba lived in extreme poverty and was considered a third-world country (Poverty in Cuba). Wanting to make a change, Cuba's new leaders promised an elevation from their current state, trying to bring about reforms in healthcare, poverty, and education. Although one of the main goals of the Communist Party was to eliminate hunger and poverty, the truth is these factors still remain (Pinderhughes, Murphy, and Gonzalez). The Republic of Cuba had many ties with the Soviet Union and when it fell in the 1990's, Cuba lost more than 84% of its trade, its primary source of income. Cuba, currently in great debt, is now reliant upon other countries for support. What Cuba needs is to see that it cannot lie upon the shoulders of Venezuela and China for agricultural and industrial trade (World Bank). This country needs to begin looking towards its future and try to establish solutions for securing enough food and land for all those in need. To secure food for generations to come, the people of Cuba should end gender discrimination and make it possible to acquire land for all those who need it.

In Cuba a typical family consists of a father, a mother, and 1.45 children (CIA). An average Cuban meal consists of rice, beans, and vegetables (Food in Cuba). Although most Cubans have free access to education from the ages of 5-16, many cannot afford to continue on with their education and as a result only 7% of all adults in Cuba have graduated from college (Education in Cuba). Free healthcare is also offered by the Cuban government, but that is not necessarily a blessing. The hospitals are in poor conditions, doctors do not have many tools to work with, and many patients die due to infections because of poor sanitation (Garcia). Amidst all that, many patients do not receive the medications or treatments that they need and unfortunately do not survive (Hanna). Urban Cuban families, especially in Havana, do not own a farm or farms tools. All they have is a simple plot of land that they either inherited or that came with their home, or the roof of their small house where they grow only enough food for their families to survive. They usually plant and grow bananas, beans, rice, and many other vegetables and fruits. The water needed to nourish all these plants comes from rain water that has been collected and stored by the families. Even though facilities, such as Organic Material Centers, sell seeds, organic fertilizers and pest control for the foods grown, many people still do not have access to them. Food grown here rarely sold because there is usually only enough to support the family. Any extra that is sold provides a meager addition towards the family income (Koont).

Cuba's greatest problem for global economic developments lies on its dependence on trade. Cuba's main source of money comes from exporting sugar and nickel (World Bank). The Cuban economy suffers mainly from a lack of productivity and an overdependence on trade and overseas relations. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost 35% of their GDP which laid the groundwork for their present day condition. To lessen the economic crisis the government introduced several market-related reforms in 1993 and 1994. Some of these reforms included opening their island to tourism, allowing some foreign investment, and legalizing the dollar. These decisions that were made resulted in fairly small economic growth. In the years 2000-2009, Cuba experienced severe economic interferences, including lower sugar and nickel prices, hurricanes in 2001, 2004, and 2008, a major drought in the eastern half of the island, increasing external debt, and a decrease in agricultural and industrial productivity. The only thing keeping Cuba afloat is the external help that it receives from Venezuela and China (U.S. Department of State).

One of the greatest barriers in Cuba for securing food for urban families, peasants, and women is access to land. In Cuba's capitol, Havana, there are over 35,000 hectares of land being used for agriculture, but not everyone has access to it. Most of the land is being held by the government and is sold at prices the people cannot afford (Koont). Peasants are considered low, because of their low status and because farming is considered back-toiling work (Koont). Women's rights are constitutional, but not expressed formally. Strict societal and traditional roles often prevent women from owning, selling and operating on land; all of which are legal (Gender Equality in Cuba). To put an end to Cuba's problem we first recognize its presence. There is gender discrimination in Cuba and the poor do not have a gateway to the land that they require in order to provide for their families.

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopts the Universal declaration of Human Rights. Many countries follow its lead and adopt the Declaration, including Cuba. As stated in the very first Article "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood," (United Nations). The people of Cuba have not been promoted this right and this fact is seen in the differences in treatment of the Cuban women.

In the 1976 Constitution of Cuba, along with several amendments made in 1992, equality between men and women is acknowledged and discrimination of gender is prohibited. Despite the addition of these amendments, Cuban women are victims of poverty and social exclusion in the country. These women suffer not only from gender biased minds in society, but also from the weight of tradition, which imposes particular tasks on women such as household chores and the care of the children. Women are allowed to own land, but many times are refused the opportunity to buy land. Gradually, the number of women owning land has gone up but mostly due to inheritance. Women who attain land this way become farmers and plant fruits and vegetables which help them and their children survive. As a result some people are accepting women as equal, but many still look down upon them (Gender Equality in Cuba).

Many times children are raised and taught to believe that the woman should be in the house tending to children and chores, and that the man should be outside the home working to provide for his family. This kind of thinking is passed down through generations, leaving the females in such families and societies more like outcasts than members. This sort of thinking originated from Catholic beliefs where women were to only be mothers and to teach the children and is extremely strong in Hispanic cultures (Lopez). Traditionally the Church taught that women were not made with the same degree of perfection as men. They also believe because Christ's disciples were all men that they were of greater importance (Stewart). As a result of these beliefs being passed on, women are at a disadvantage for acquiring jobs, homes, and lands (Gonzalez). Being considered the lesser sex, men will sometimes leave their wives out of their wills and pass the land along to another male. This leaves the widow without a roof over her family's head and without land that she can utilize for securing food for her children (Gender Equality in Cuba).

Women in Cuba represent the majority of college students and graduates, 43% of the active labor force, 70% of educators, 72% of health workers and 43% of all personnel working in scientific institutions. These Cuban women also hold 30% of economic management and policy posts, and 28% of seats in parliament. Even though there are more women working in some areas of the economy, extremely biased sexist attitudes remain. "Despite everything that has been done in Cuba for women, men continue looking down at us from a position of power," says Ivette Rodriguez, a 38-year-old engineer. "Changing that mentality will be much more difficult than passing laws," (Acosta).

Today around 85% of Cuban women over the age of 14, nearly 4 million women, are members of La Federación de la Mujer Cubana, or The Federation of Cuban Women. La Federación de la Mujer Cubana, or FMC, does a number of activities over a broad spectrum of areas which help women. The FMC runs several training centers and a publishing house to promote awareness in young women of their rights to

participate in all areas of their life and country. They carry out research into different aspects of women's lives where problems are, or can be, encountered. Then they try to find solutions or different steps to take to solve the problem, such as domestic violence and gender discrimination. One of their most promising roles is that of developing non-sexist attitudes in pupils in school and the challenging of traditional stereotypes of women which still exist in Cuban society (Women In Cuba).

Gradually, gender discrimination is changing, with more men working inside the home and more women seeking job positions outside the home. Being a traditional people, it is hard for many to make the transition from a male predominate society to an equal gender society (Gonzalez).

The position urban families and peasants are in is like a cycle: Peasants and low income families presently have little money and cannot afford land. They, therefore, do not have a place where they can grow their own food. Some of the families and peasants come together and make a multi-family plot in which they all share the products grown there. The food is only self-sufficient and they do not have enough to sell for a profit. No profit from their work means extreme limits on spending money. This again leads to the beginning of the cycle (Koont).

Many urban families are blessed with owning a little piece of land on which they can grow food or medical herbs to help their families and neighbors (Koont). Others are not so lucky and have nothing to work with and no place to turn to. Many families are living in poverty and buying food from local produce stores is out of the question due to low income rates, usually averaging \$20 a month. At times, even the supermarkets and ration shops also suffer from lack of necessities such as milk, sugar, eggs, and even toilet paper (Eire).

Because of all these factors, many people turn to the Black Market in search of their necessities. Food, clothing, medicine, technology, and many other resources can be found in the Black Market. Not only is it cheaper to buy the food there, but many people are also making a profit out of selling things. Women make clothing and sell it illegally on the Black Market in order to make some money. Many people who are living in poverty find it easier to go to the Black Market than to ask for help. Merchandise that is found on the Black Market is usually stolen. Some of these stolen goods flow into the market from places overseas, but many of the goods acquired come from all the things that disappear from pockets, backpacks, purses, and even trucks from warehouses, factories, supermarkets and offices. Many workers steal from their jobs in order to have items to sell on the Black Market. The problem is that because so many people depend on the Black Market for their needs they no longer see stealing as a crime. It is now normal for them to buy and sell items this way. "Stealing from the state, for Cubans, is like taking firewood from the forest, or picking blueberries in the wild," says Archibald Ritter, a professor at Carlton University and a Canadian economist. "It's considered public property that wouldn't otherwise be used productively, so one helps oneself." It is not because of a decrease in moral that Cubans have turned to the Black Market, but because they wish to ensure their survival and the survival of their loved ones. The Black Market has become a central source of income and life for those who have no other way to obtain it (Eire).

Gender discrimination and land availability for the poor are not only affected by present day problems, they can also be severely impacted by future issues to come. If the population were to increase, there might be less arable land available for all of the people who are in need. If the population were to increase with gender discriminative ideas, women would still not be treated as an equal. If there was to be a drought, or a long dry season, many of the little gardens and plots would wither and die of thirst resulting in a famine and the deaths of many.

In Havana, urban agriculture is saving the lives of many. In fact, the entire cultivated area of Havana belongs to urban agriculture. Just over 10,000 hectares of land are being used to cultivate crops.

Individual plots and patios are being used by individuals and families for growing crops. The majority of the crops grown in these small plots are completely organic, which is beneficial to the Cuban people (Mark). There are more than 60,000 patios in Havana with most of them using the produce self-sufficiently and/or shared with neighbors. Some communities have greenhouses so that they can protect their organic crops from the intensity from the sun and produce crops year around. Women and young workers incorporate themselves in this agricultural work, “production of the neighborhood, by the neighborhood, for neighborhood.”

Within Havana there are many organopónicos, or urban gardens, which are helping a countless number of people. With help from the government, organopónicos provide jobs for those who need it, fresh food for the community and they beautify the small, packed, and usually poor urban gardens (Lewis). The government provides communities with the land and the water needed for the organopónicos. Today, there are more than 7,000 organopónicos in Cuba, some are run by employees of the state; others are run cooperatively by gardeners, families, and communities, but both depend on help from the government.

Havana, which only accounts for 3% of the urban agricultural land in Cuba, works very hard on its agriculture. There are tens of thousands of plots, organopónicos, and backyard gardens that under one-fourth of an acre in size. The gardeners and owners of these plots and organopónicos make their individual contributions to urban agriculture. A. Falcon was an ordinary worker with no idea or experience on what it took to grow plants. He was given a task: turn an abandoned old lot filled with garbage into a garden where medicinal plants could be grown. Fifteen years after studying and researching medicinal plants and the best way to grow them, his garden grows over 40 different plant types. Another example of an individual input is Dr. Raul Gil’s patio found at his house. Being a doctor of mental health, Dr. Gil decided to learn to grow plants for use in his clinic. His backyard was neglected and an abandoned industrial site lied next to it. Being a doctor and not a poor peasant, Dr. Gil contacted the local government and asked them for permission to use the land. Fifteen years after obtaining, cleaning up, and studying the land, it made a modification from dry, garbage filled land to fertile arable soil. Now both those pieces of land are thriving gardens which are home to many different fruits and vegetables. The land that was considered terrible now provides the clinic with lettuce, pepper, spinach, cilantro, mangoes, mandarins, and so much more. If the rest of Cuba can follow these small-scale examples then they too can be provided with different crops (Koont).

There should be more people like Dr. Gil, who opened up an educational workshop for children teaching them agricultural practices. The workshop consists of instruction and discussion of economic, environmental, and social issues. After a break, the children then go outside to the garden and apply what they have learned. The children learn to plant seeds, how to treat growing plants, and how to treat each other. If there were more instructors and more workshops such as this, than more children of Cuba would learn agricultural applications and would be able to have their own successful gardens such as Dr. Gil’s (Koont).

To improve the present day status of urban societies, communities should take part in workshops such as this. Children, both male and female, should be allowed to work in the garden. Women should be given more opportunities to work outside the home and peasants need to have better access to land. One of the ways that this could happen is by implementing new government policies.

Because all the land in Cuba is owned by the government, the government can set up policies to help more people farm. One policy that could be implemented is to make a multi-year leave of absence from peoples, especially women’s, regular job available to those who wish to learn more about agriculture. During this leave, the Cuban people would learn new farming techniques and how to use new technology to improve urban agriculture in their area. The Cuban government should further their funding of organipónicos as well as continue to provide water and land. Another policy the government can adopt is to buy the land and equipment for the people who wish to farm and then share a percentage from the

farmer's profit. Or the farmers could make a "down-payment" on the land and then pay back the government with a percentage of their earnings by month, similar to paying off a house mortgage. These policies are reasonable and can help the people and government of Cuba prosper (Lewis).

For Cuba to advance further and secure a brighter future by 2015, changes in society would have to be made. Gender equality should not just be pronounced constitutionally, but enforced socially and demonstrated through education. Improvements in food security and land access should be made more realistic. If there was more access to land, widows (predominantly female), peasants, and urban families would not have to buy food and medical herbs off of the black market (Eire). Families would also have their own gardens and plots to plant on and then they could provide for their family. If there was less gender discrimination, women would be able to work outside the home and help support their family without criticism and without hindrance. The government of Cuba needs to educate their people about the women and men who are using what little land and resources they have to provide nourishment and medicine for their families. These examples will help all people of Cuba become more independent.

If the Cuban people continue on the path they are currently on, they will never truly be independent. With Venezuela and China basically carrying Cuba in their laps, Cuba has yet to catch up in terms of economic efficiency (World Bank). If the rest of Cuba were to follow the example being set place in Havana than their chances of securing food for generations to come will be immense. In order for this to occur, transitions from their current state would have to be made. Though it may be difficult, it is not impossible. As a successful medical herb grower in Havana says, there are three driving forces behind success for every action in life, even in difficult circumstances, "necessity, possibility, and will," (Koont). Cuba has necessity, Cuba has the means possible to resolve it, now Cuba just needs to have the will to move forward and evolve into a better country.

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