



Report

# ‘The woman in the house, the man in the street’

Young women’s economic empowerment and social norms in Cuba

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Cover photo: A woman giving a pedicure in Havana, Cuba. Credit: Eric Parker/Flickr.

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# Acronyms

<b>CCRD</b>	Centro Cristiano de Reflexión y Dialogo (Christian Reflection and Dialogue Centre)
<b>CDA</b>	Center for Democracy in the Americas
<b>CEDAW</b>	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
<b>CEM</b>	Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (Centre for Women's Studies)
<b>CEPAL</b>	Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – ECLAC in English)
<b>FCS</b>	family case study
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>FMC</b>	Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women)
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>IDI</b>	in-depth interview
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>LAC</b>	Latin America and the Caribbean
<b>LMICs</b>	low- and middle-income countries
<b>NEET</b>	not in employment, education or training
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>ONEI</b>	Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información de Cuba (National Statistics Office of Cuba)
<b>SRH</b>	sexual and reproductive health
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>US</b>	United States

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# Executive summary

Since the 1959 revolution, the Cuban state has committed to women's empowerment and enacted a series of laws and policies to promote women's equal and active participation in all spheres of life. Sources agree that Cuba has made remarkable progress towards women's economic empowerment and gender equality, notably thanks to the provision of universal and free education, state employment opportunities, equal pay for equal work, maternity protection, and childcare facilities. However, it is also increasingly acknowledged – by the state itself – that these measures have been unable to bring about full equality and challenge deeply entrenched gendered social norms about women's and men's roles in the family and in society.

This report presents findings of a research project examining how gendered social norms affect the economic empowerment of adolescent girls and young women in modern-day Cuba. It is based on interviews with 71 Cubans, including adolescents and young people, family and community members, in one urban site (Jovellanos, Matanzas province) and one rural site (Los Palos, Mayabeque province) – both areas with relatively low socioeconomic indicators. Study respondents identified skills training opportunities, maternity protection, childcare support and social assistance programmes as critical for the economic empowerment of young women.

The state does provide various skills training programmes to help those who have left the education system to acquire basic skills and gain economic autonomy. Despite their potential, such programmes are often of poor quality, not responsive to market demands, and therefore fail to reach those most in need – especially in rural areas. They also lack flexibility to accommodate the needs of young mothers. On the other hand, long-standing maternity protection policies mostly benefit women in state employment,

while few fathers take paternity leave. Existing childcare facilities are insufficient to meet demand, with the subsequent crisis of care either preventing young mothers working or increasing the domestic and care burden of older female family members. Although the state continues to assist those who are unfit to work and have no other support, the system seems unable to accommodate growing needs, and women are forced to confront a relentless bureaucracy without being able to access the appropriate and timely support to which they are entitled.

While gender parity has been achieved in primary education, girls are more likely to be enrolled in secondary education and they account for the most university graduates. Getting an education is perceived to be more important for women than for men as a necessary condition for achieving self-reliance. However, young women dominate university and skills training courses that lead to careers aligned with feminine caring qualities, which are also less well-paid than male-dominated jobs. Gender norms about what boys and girls can and should do, as well as early pregnancy, financial difficulties, limited family support, low expectations and inadequate public transport, have all been identified as key challenges in accessing education.

Within the current national context of poor economic growth, limited work opportunities, low salaries and high prices, youth struggle to find employment and gain economic independence. Apart from having the typical formal qualifications, good connections and social networks appear to be critical to securing employment. Young men are more likely to be economically active than their female counterparts. Gender occupational segregation and relevant norms about feminine and masculine types of work, the persistent male breadwinner model, the difficulty of combining work and household responsibilities (which



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are still perceived to be women's priority), and exposure to sexual harassment emerged as key challenges facing young women in the Cuban labour market. On the other hand, enjoying one's work, earning a decent salary and being able to combine work with domestic and childcare responsibilities are the three characteristics of a good job for young women with children – who tend to face the greatest disadvantage in the labour market.

Although spouses are legally obliged to share household responsibilities, women continue to shoulder the lion's share, with working women having a 'double working day' and often relying on other female family members (older or younger), who learn their domestic obligations from an early age. Domestic and childcare tasks are still perceived to be women's work; moreover, if a man is seen doing such work, it can challenge his manhood. Parenthood is widely perceived as a blessing, but motherhood is considered the ultimate expression of womanhood. Accordingly, women are the primary caregivers, expected to dedicate their lives to their children as 'natural' nurturers, a capacity determined by their reproductive biology.

Adolescent girls and young women are involved in decisions that affect their lives. Key factors shaping the extent of girls' and women's involvement in family decision-making include household type, income-generation ability and good communication skills, but also adherence to traditional norms around male authority, and the threat of violence. As mothers, women may dominate decisions about child health, nutrition or education, although men are often the ultimate decision-makers on the grounds that they (usually) contribute most of the income, are physically stronger, or are the household head.

Despite having equal rights to property and assets, women tend to have fewer household assets because of their lower purchasing power and are more likely to inherit property than buy it. Some maintain control over their resources, although most share them with other family members within the context of the family economy. As men are more easily able to mobilise capital or access credit, they tend to own more and larger businesses than women, who have fewer contacts and are less trusted

with money. However, women are typically perceived to save more than men. In case of an emergency, respondents spoke about pooling family resources, supporting each other, using remittances, mobilising savings, migrating in search of better economic prospects, or resorting to risky coping strategies. Women are often expected to show greater resilience as they have more experience dealing with difficulty and have greater adaptive skills. Yet those without family or social support, and internal migrants from eastern provinces, are more disadvantaged and struggle to survive.

Male and female respondents of all ages spoke about distinctive and complementary, yet unequal gender roles within the context of a persistent culture of machismo, in which men are afforded greater power, resources and privilege than women. Gender roles and activities follow the fundamental division of space into the domestic and public spheres, with women perceived to belong in the house, while men are perceived as best suited to the street and the activities that take place there. These gender attitudes and behaviours are learnt from an early age through daily interactions in the family, at school, with peers, or even from watching television programmes. Many respondents felt that their behaviour was under constant scrutiny, measured against gender ideals and judged in ways that can affect their self-esteem and shape their actions, with young women in smaller communities reporting more social monitoring and control over their movements, and greater social pressure to comply with the rules set by family and society.

However, respondents also spoke about individual agency and the right to choose whatever brings personal fulfilment without caring too much about public opinion or adhering to gender stereotypes. In almost all interviews, an egalitarian discourse emerged according to which all Cubans are equal and have the same rights to become full and productive members of society irrespective of gender and skin colour. Moreover, respondents agreed that society is changing, and that this change is accelerated by the new conditions and requirements imposed by the ongoing economic crisis and the subsequent reconfiguration of

familial and social relationships. Some changes can lead to positive outcomes, with gender roles being transformed out of necessity as women have to contribute to household income. One-third of women respondents admitted that they receive help from their partners and spoke about a more gender-equitable division of labour (though still not shared equally) at home – a change that is demanded by young professional women and facilitated by mothers who teach their sons to undertake such tasks.

Although some of its aspects are challenged, patriarchy remains powerful and continues to limit adolescent girls and young women's opportunities to realise their full potential. The number of households headed by single mothers is reportedly increased with some men failing to accept their responsibilities and abandoning their pregnant girlfriends and others leaving their partners and young children. Those mothers with limited skills and family support experience great difficulty making a living and balancing work with childcare, and may resort to risky survival strategies. In other cases, men unable to live up to the breadwinner ideal may feel threatened and refuse to lose their privileged position and give up some of their power to women, instead responding with anger and violence.

Evidence indicates that periods of crisis can open windows of opportunity to challenge and transform gender roles and norms. While Cuban girls and women have continued to face inequality and disadvantage at home, which is still considered to be their normative space, there is agreement that some positive change may be underway as part of wider transformations currently taking place in the country. There is also consensus that for this change to happen discriminatory norms need to be explicitly and intensively addressed through policies and programming across all spheres of life, including the home, because – as our respondents emphasised – this is where gender equality begins. Interventions to enable vulnerable adolescent girls and young women to unleash their economic potential and participate fully in the economy and society as active agents of change should be based on the collaboration of government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots movements, international

agencies and donors working on gender and/or youth issues. Such interventions could include the following:

**Skills training courses for vulnerable and disadvantaged girls and young women:** Conduct local labour market assessments and provide certified skills training courses, responsive to market demands, including website and software development, while also considering youth constraints and priorities (e.g. education level, workload, parenthood status, which would require childcare arrangements – including informal on-site creches). Use women trainers that can mentor and work more closely with trainees. Identify and promote role models that include successful women in non-traditional trades. Apart from technical skills, provide trainees with soft skills and rights training. Improve the quality and increase the number of existing courses for rural youth. Liaise with potential employers and explore the possibility of apprenticeships that can lead to employment.

**Business skills training and access to capital for young women:** Provide programmes to young women interested in starting a small business. Programmes should consider women's needs and constraints, provide basic business and management skills, and facilitate access to start-up capital for individuals or groups. Attention could also be paid to provision of skills required to set up new types of businesses with growing demand, such as online businesses.

**Local childcare services:** Invest in providing affordable childcare services for mothers who work or would like to work, offering subsidised childcare for low-income single mothers. Initiatives could include provision of training to those interested in becoming childcare assistants and who have available space for such a facility. They could receive additional support to get the necessary licence and start up a service that would cover neighbourhood needs.

**Safe and youth-friendly spaces for adolescents:** Create spaces where vulnerable adolescents, such as those lacking family support, or internal migrants, can access support and guidance in a safe, friendly and non-judgemental way, from trained peers who can also act as positive role models. Establish links with social services and families to provide specialist support to those

facing specific problems (such as early pregnancy or alcoholism). Organise workshops, games, athletic or art activities, and weekly meetings where adolescents are encouraged to share their thoughts on issues of interest, and where they can access information and become motivated to set goals and plan towards achieving them, while building their self-confidence and key life skills.

**Norm change communication interventions:** Design and implement more norm change communication interventions and media campaigns, including advertisements, popular television series, radio programmes, children's shows and online platforms that target diverse audiences, with a particular focus on adolescents and youth. Ensure adequate resources for

longer-term exposure to images and messages that promote gender-equitable relationships, such as men and boys sharing housework with women and girls, or women in occupations that challenge gender stereotypes – sending the message that there are no 'men's jobs' or 'women's jobs', only 'jobs'.

**Interventions targeting men and boys:** Engage men and boys in all efforts and provide spaces and opportunities at every level (from schools and universities to sports groups, workplaces and churches) to discuss, reflect and actively challenge gender stereotypes. Provide male role models, such as popular singers or athletes, willing to advocate for gender equality and use them as champions of change at the national, regional and local levels.



Women in Havana, Cuba, April 2015. Credit: Eric Parker/Flickr.

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# 1 Introduction

For adolescents and young people, enjoying good sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and developing the skills and capabilities needed to access training and employment opportunities are crucial if they are to make a successful transition into adulthood and become independent and productive members of their communities. Worldwide, today's cohort of adolescents and young people (those aged 10–24 years) is the largest ever, and nearly 90% of them live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (UNFPA, 2014).

Adolescence is a critical time of physical, social and emotional development but also a window of opportunity for building young people's capabilities, aspirations and agency (UNICEF, 2011). Despite recent attention internationally to the need to invest in human capital, SRH and economic opportunities for youth, adolescents and young people have often been overlooked by policy-makers as they fall between the categories of 'children' and 'adults'. In particular, adolescent girls and young women still face multiple barriers in accessing SRH services and decent and productive employment (UNFPA, 2014). For instance, in 2018, 29% of young women globally were working compared to 44% of young men. Moreover, 30.4% of young women were classed as 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET) – more than double the rate for young men (12.7%) (ILO, 2019a). Not only are NEET rates higher for young women but also NEET status is much more permanent for them than for their male counterparts; the NEET rate of women aged 15–24 in a country is closely linked to the NEET rate of women aged 25–34 ten years later (ILO, 2019b). Using data from school-to-work transition surveys in 32 developing countries, Elder and Kring argued that 'being young and female can serve as a double strike for those seeking to find productive employment' (2016: 2). Social norms, gender roles and inequalities have

been clearly identified as a key contributing factor (Gallup and ILO, 2017; UNFPA, 2014).

Adolescence is also a time when gender inequalities intensify, when gender norms that perpetuate these inequalities are endorsed, and when behaviours linked to gender expectations have life-long effects. With the advent of puberty, girls in LMICs often experience much stricter parental control and mobility constraints, their voice remains unheard, they are forced to prioritise helping with household chores, are warned to stay away from men (to avoid being violated), or are married off early. Boys, on the other hand, typically have greater freedom of movement during adolescence, but are also more exposed to risks and harmful behaviours such as substance abuse and unsafe sexual practices (in an effort to prove their manhood). Moreover, in societies where gender norms equate manhood with the role of breadwinner, boys are expected to work and contribute to family income. During adolescence, more than ever before, girls and boys learn – through their daily interactions with family and peers, schools, and other influences – what it means to be a woman or a man, and how they are expected to behave (Kågesten et al., 2016).

Defined as the social norms that relate specifically to gender differences, gender norms are 'the informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender' (Marcus et al., 2015: 4). Gender norms reflect, uphold and normalise unequal gender power relations that assign higher value to masculine attributes, roles and behaviours and enable some groups of men to have privileged access to power and resources (Marcus and Harper, 2014). They affect all spheres of life, including SRH outcomes (UNFPA, 2014) as well as access to skills training and economic opportunities, and types and patterns of work and earnings (Marcus, 2018). Individuals tend to conform with established



social norms to avoid being sanctioned (Marcus and Harper, 2014).

Nonetheless, norms are amenable to change, signalling the possibility of shifts in gender relations. Indeed, norms change when people challenge them, in response to laws, policies and programmes and wider social, economic or political pressures, and when a new role or behaviour is observed and acknowledged as an acceptable practice. However, norm change processes are often complex and non-linear, and can also trigger resistance and backlash from those whose power is contested (Marcus and Harper, 2014). Adolescence is a window of opportunity to promote (through policy and programmes) behavioural change and teach girls and boys new, more gender-equitable attitudes and enable them to reflect, challenge and adopt new gender roles as they transition to adulthood (John et al., 2017). Moreover, interventions for the economic empowerment of adolescent girls and young women need to address restrictive norms and attitudes in order to create an enabling environment for them to thrive (Stavropoulou, 2018).

This research project explores how gendered social norms operate and adapt within different institutional spaces while reflecting similar constraints on women's and girls' efficacy, physical integrity, development and overall empowerment. Its aim is to enhance knowledge and uptake of evidence among researchers, donors and international development stakeholders on how social norms affect the SRH and economic empowerment of women and girls. It also aims to suggest ways to tackle these discriminatory norms and support poor and vulnerable youth in developing countries to reach their full potential. To do so, our study explores the following research questions within the Cuban context:

- What is the relationship between SRH and social norms?
- What is the relationship between young women's economic empowerment and social norms?
- What policies and interventions have been implemented to address SRH, young women's economic empowerment and related social norms?

## 1.1 Women's economic empowerment in Cuba

Cuba offers a distinctive context in which to explore these research questions. As outlined in the literature review for this study (Leon-Himmelstine et al., 2019), Cuba's historical, political, economic and social trajectory has created a unique set of circumstances that have had far-reaching ramifications for gender equality more broadly and, more specifically, for the two themes of this study – SRH and economic empowerment.

Cuba is often considered to have more advanced outcomes (e.g. for health, education and gender equality) than other countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region and beyond. However, when one examines key indicators, a number of somewhat surprising findings emerge, at least from the published data. For example, UNICEF (2016) reports that 5% of girls were married by age 15 and 26% were married by age 18. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2019) notes that the adolescent birth rate was high (at 51.6 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19), while in 2018, female labour force participation was 40% compared to 67.4% for men (lower than regional averages).

In recent years, Cuba has also been undergoing economic, political and social transformations with implications for gender equality and for adolescent girls and young women. This study, with its two themes, aims to contribute to the analysis of such transformations. While our study themes and their impact on social norms are inter-related, we have explored them separately, producing two thematic reports that complement each other. This report focuses on young women's economic empowerment and relevant social norms, and begins by providing some key information about the context of the study (for the SRH theme, see Samuels et al., 2020).

Between 1959 and 1989, the revolution promoted equal rights for all Cubans, full employment, and universal free education and health; it also created a national social assistance programme and promoted women's labour force participation. According to Mesa-Lago: 'In 1989 Cuba was probably the most egalitarian country in Latin America' (2013: 17). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union



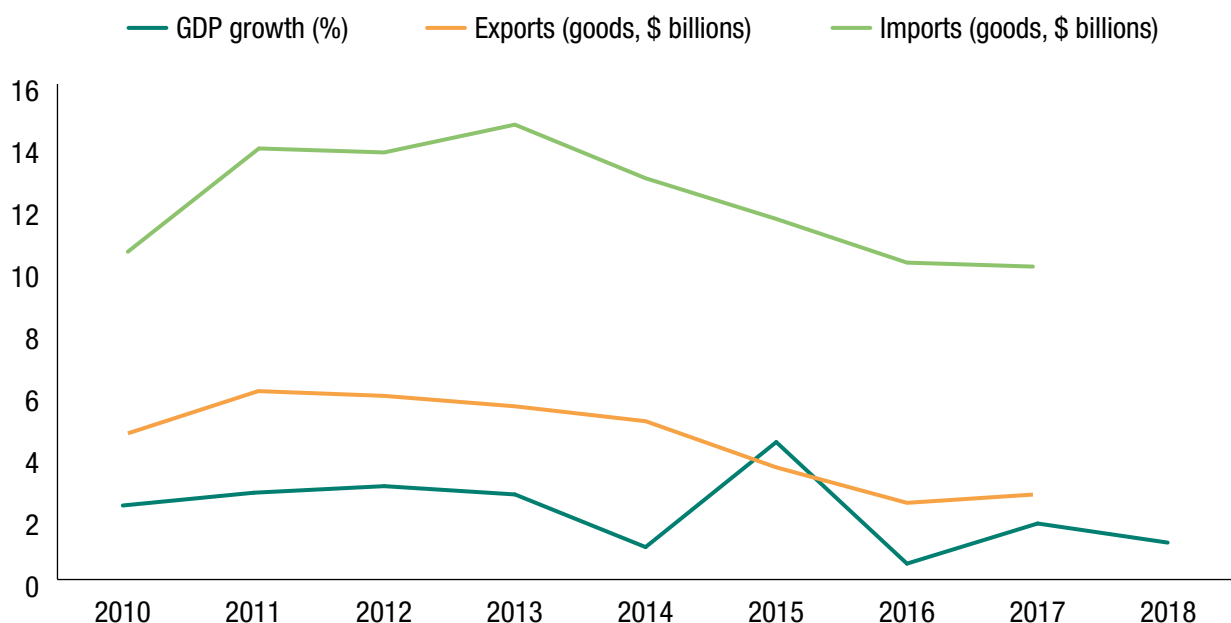
(Cuba's most important ally and provider of financial aid) in the 1990s led to a severe economic crisis, with gross domestic product (GDP) falling by 35%. During this 'Special Period', the state implemented a series of reforms, including greater openness to foreign capital, the development of services (mostly international tourism) and the emergence of small private enterprises. There was a period of recovery between 1995 and 2006, with economic assistance from Venezuela; but while economic indicators improved, poverty and inequality increased (Mesa-Lago, 2013).

The global financial crisis of 2007–8 triggered new problems, and new structural reforms were implemented to address them within an economically viable, 'realistic socialism' framework. As part of the reforms, more than 500,000 workers in the state sector would be laid off and the non-state sector would expand to absorb them. Non-state employment increased and included 178 self-employed occupations (some requiring specific skills, but most being unskilled trades). However, taxes and various other contributions linked to self-employment (such as payment of the required licence, personal income tax, social security contributions and sales tax) have prompted many people to stay in informal employment (Mesa-Lago, 2013). Today,

without assistance from Venezuela and facing an intensification of US sanctions, Cuba continues to experience prolonged economic stagnation (Feinberg, 2019), reflected in its key economic indicators (see Figure 1). The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) estimates that economic growth in Cuba slowed to 1.1% in 2018 from 1.8% in 2017 (2019a), but predicted that it would reach 2% in 2019 (2019b).

Although there are no official poverty statistics, Mesa-Lago (2013) contends that poverty and inequality are likely to have increased because of the reforms in the 2000s, the reductions in rationing, wages and pensions, and rising commodity prices. Zabala et al. (2018) note that studies confirm the re-emergence and persistence of poverty in the past two decades, although the term rarely appears in official sources. Everleny (2019) argues that, according to recent estimations, nearly 51% of the Cuban population experience income poverty. He also observes that income inequality is rising in Cuba; the Gini coefficient, which ranged between 0.22 and 0.25 in 1986, has exceeded 0.40 in late 2010s (ibid). The situation is particularly difficult in Cuba's eastern provinces and among migrants from these areas but also among specific population groups, including Afro-Cubans,

**Figure 1 National economic indicators, 2010–2018, Cuba**



Source: Feinberg (2019), based on data from the National Statistics Office of Cuba (ONEI)

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retirees, state workers in low-skilled occupations, those who lack access to foreign currency, and single mothers (Espina, 2017; Mesa-Lago, 2013).

The Cuban revolution led to significant changes in women's lives and remarkable progress towards gender equality. From the beginning, the revolutionary government was committed to gender equality and enacted many economic and social policies to produce a 'new' type of woman: 'the socialist woman would be the enlightened participant in public life, an equal partner in the home, and author of her own destiny' (Andaya, 2014: 13). That ideal socialist woman was the 'heroic worker-mother', contrasted to housewives who were considered to be 'unproductive citizens' with 'inferior political consciousness' (ibid: 28).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the state, in collaboration with the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) (the national machinery for the advancement of women), took significant measures to alleviate women's reproductive labour and redirect it to the productive sphere (Andaya, 2014). Key national policies for women's empowerment and gender equality included the campaign to eliminate illiteracy and empower women, the provision of free and universal education and healthcare (including family planning services), the provision of state childcare facilities for working mothers and the guarantee to equal pay for equal work (Núñez, 2018). These policies brought results, with women entering the labour force in large numbers – tripling their pre-revolutionary rate – with the aim of contributing to the economic transformation of their country and establishing a socialist society.

In terms of legislation, Molyneux (1996) makes explicit reference to the 1975 Family Code, which laid the foundations for efforts to increase men's responsibilities within the household and indicated growing awareness of the need to tackle gender divisions in daily life that continued to disadvantage Cuban women. Efforts for greater gender equality continued in the 1980s in response to demands from the 1985 FMC Congress to improve childcare provision and share housework with men. In 1980, Cuba was the first country in the world to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms

of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and promote women's equal participation in all spheres of life (CEDAW, 2011). Cuba ranks well on global gender indices: in 2018, its Gender Development Index (GDI) was 0.948 and its Gender Inequality Index (GII) was 0.312, both indicating little gender inequality (UNDP, 2019). In the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, Cuba ranks 31st out of 153 countries with an overall score of 0.746 (with 1 indicating gender parity); yet it ranks 107th in the Economic Participation and Opportunity sub-index (with a 0.617 score) (WEF, 2019).

Scholars agree that progressive laws and policies did enable Cuban women to enter the public sphere and benefit from education opportunities, as well as taking on wage employment and participating in political institutions. Yet their greater participation in the public sphere did not eliminate the prevailing culture of 'machismo' and thus the laws and policies failed to achieve full gender equality. On the contrary, patriarchy and machismo have persisted in Cuba, with the gendered division of labour remaining intact and women and girls still obliged to shoulder the triple burden of employment, housework and political activism. Moreover, since the 1990s, women have been disproportionately affected by economic crises, shortages and reforms, and have often struggled to provide for their families, experiencing increased responsibilities, heavier workloads and a persistent machismo (Härkönen, 2016; Andaya, 2014; Molyneux, 1996).

Over the past decade, it has been increasingly acknowledged that laws and policies promoting gender equality in the home and the workplace are part of the solution, yet they cannot transform gender roles or entrenched norms alone or quickly. In the 2011 report to the CEDAW, the Cuban state explicitly accepts the need for more 'progress in the field to break the patriarchal cultural mould' (2011: 6) and specifically work to eliminate gender stereotypes and behaviours rooted in patriarchy through concerted action at different levels of society, including laws, the media, schools and the family. While gendered norms about male and female identity are changing, the government accepts that, far from being a smooth and uniform

process, norm change happens in different ways and to differing degrees depending on the location and overall context (CEDAW, 2011). As María del Carmen Varoso González, a female member of the National Assembly, explained at that time:

It's not an issue of rules, it's not a problem of legislation – it's a problem of changing people's minds. The government and the revolution have given women every chance and opportunity and that's the reality. Cuba has the highest percentage of women technicians and engineers. However, this is not reflected in higher positions. Why? Because we still believe that we have to look after everything at home. It will take years to change that, but I have faith in the new generations. It's the only way. (CDA, 2013: 68)

In 2019, the Cuba national report on progress in the implementation of the Montevideo Strategy,<sup>1</sup> the regional strategy for gender equality, identified the persistence of gender stereotypes as one of the three key challenges that hinder further progress towards achieving gender equality. The report makes explicit reference to how these stereotypes shape the gender division of labour and interact with inadequate care services, which also constitute another key challenge to gender equality. Although women have increased their involvement in the public sphere, they also continue being responsible for the provision of care to both children and adults. The report notes that despite state efforts, the difficult economic situation that Cuba experiences because of the US sanctions does not allow the required investment and provision of additional care services to meet demand (Government of Cuba, 2019a).

Within the current economic context, lack of resources interacts with discriminatory social norms and an ever-present machismo to block women's advancement (Núñez, 2018). Feminist scholars have pointed out that strategies to tackle the problem should stop being only top-down and instead combine policies with action, bringing together government agencies and grassroots movements who will work together towards true gender equality in Cuba (see Núñez, 2018; Molyneux, 1996).

## 1.2 Study methodology

The study includes a review of available literature, which fed into the design and methodology of primary qualitative research in two field sites and is reflected in this report (and the accompanying report on SRH). Primary data was collected in December 2018 and January 2019 by a team comprised of two researchers from ODI and Cuban research counterparts. Data collection was facilitated and hosted by CCRD<sup>2</sup> in Cárdenas (Matanzas province). Data was collected in two sites: one urban, Jovellanos (Matanzas province); and one rural, Los Palos (Mayabeque province). A pilot to test data collection tools took place in Cárdenas (Matanzas province); findings from the pilot are drawn upon in this report and integrated into the Jovellanos field site findings, given the proximity of the two locations.

Jovellanos town (with a population of 26,216 in 2016) is the largest town in the municipality of the same name (population of 58,173 in 2016), where more than 70% of inhabitants live in urban areas. Main economic activities include agriculture (sugarcane, tubers and rice cultivation) as well as work in industries and factories. However, many industries and state enterprises in the municipality have closed down in the past decade (ONEI, 2017). Average

1 The 'Montevideo Strategy for Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the Sustainable Development Framework by 2030' is the official strategy to promote the gender agenda in synergy with the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development in LAC. Aiming to become 'a road map for the effective implementation of regional and global commitments on women's human rights and autonomy', it was adopted by the Regional Conference on Women in LAC at its 13th session organised by CEPAL in Montevideo in 2016 (CEPAL, 2017a: 12).

2 [www.ccrdcuba.org/](http://www.ccrdcuba.org/).

monthly salary in the province (Matanzas) was 891 pesos in 2018 (ONEI, 2019a). The second field site, Los Palos, is located in the municipality of Nueva Paz (Mayabeque province) in the west of the country. In 2018, the municipality had 24,070 inhabitants whose main economic activity is agriculture (ONEI, 2019b). Average monthly salary in state employment in Mayabeque is lower than in Matanzas province, at 719 pesos (ONEI, 2019a); it is even lower in Nueva Paz municipality, at 572 pesos (ONEI, 2019b).

The two study sites were selected in consultation with CCRD. Site selection criteria included: having relatively low socioeconomic indicators; presence of health centre staff and employers (either in small, medium or larger-scale enterprises) who could be interviewed as part of the two study themes respectively; and established contacts (as CCRD has existing programmes in both areas). In particular, CCRD partners working in these areas identified various social problems in need of further exploration, such as high rates of divorce, violence linked to alcohol abuse and familial problems, an increasing number of women-headed households and single mothers of young children, poor families living in overcrowded conditions, and early pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents. Moreover, we chose one urban and one rural site to explore whether and how access issues and conditions differ according to geographical location, whether there are differences in how norms play out in different locations, and how geography/location may impact SRH and employment outcomes.

Data collection tools included in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), family case studies (FCSs) (where more than one member of the household/family was interviewed),

and key informant interviews (KIIs) with main stakeholders. While the same sites were used to explore the two study themes, separate data collection tools were developed, and different sets of respondents were interviewed for each theme. Respondents included adolescent girls and young women (between the ages of 15 and 29), their family members (parents, siblings or grandparents), employers in state and non-state, agricultural and non-agricultural employment, service providers, and other members of the community. All interviewed adolescents were in school or attending training. More than one third of respondents were self-employed and a few had a small business such as a café. Nearly one third of interviewed young women reported being unemployed. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to include various types of households and respondent types (married/unmarried, with/without children, single mothers, younger/older, employed/unemployed/recipients of social assistance, etc.). A total of 71 people across the two sites were interviewed for the young women's economic empowerment theme (see Tables 1 and 2 for more details).

With appropriate consent, all interviews were recorded, and then translated (from Spanish to English) and transcribed. These were then coded thematically using a qualitative data software package (MAXQDA), following a coding structure that was developed jointly by the study team. Data from the coded segments was then summarised according to agreed themes and synthesised in a report outline. The research protocol, data collection instruments and informed consent forms were reviewed and approved by ODI's Research Ethics Committee. Ethical permission to carry out the study in Cuba was granted through the auspices of CCRD.

**Table 1 Number of interviews conducted, by type and location**

Field site	In-depth interviews adolescent girls and young women	Family case studies	Focus group discussions	Key informant interviews	Total participants
Jovellanos	11	6	2 (10 people)	11	38
Los Palos	10	2	2 (10 people)	11	33

**Table 2 Age and gender of study respondents**

	Jovellanos			Los Palos		
	IDIs	FGDs & FCSs	Total	IDIs	FGDs & FCSs	Total
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	11	8	19	10	7	17
Male	0	8	8	0	5	5
<b>Age</b>						
0–17	5	1	6	2	0	2
18–24	4	1	5	5	1	6
25–29	0	2	2	2	1	3
30–39	2	1	3	1	2	3
40–49	0	6	6	0	1	1
50–59	0	4	4	0	7	7
60+	0	1	1	0	0	0

### 1.3 Study limitations

Four study limitations need to be acknowledged. First, although respondents included employers in the state and non-state sectors, local providers of assistance and of educational and social services to youth, and state and non-state providers of childcare services, key informants at national level, including state representatives and policy-makers, were not included, so their perspective is missing. It is hoped that dissemination events (planned for both Havana and Cárdenas) will allow national stakeholders to engage with and comment on the findings.

Second, while some adolescent boys and men were interviewed, more views from them would have been useful to compare and contrast gendered dynamics around employment and household responsibilities, and to identify any intergenerational change. While some interesting findings did emerge and are presented here, the relatively small number of interviews with boys and men in the two field sites allows for only cautious inferences to be drawn from these findings. However, findings are situated within the wider literature from Cuba, and given that this is a qualitative study, the main aim is to capture the realities of a particular group of people in specific locations rather than to generalise.

Third, given the guidance provided by CCRD, members of the ODI team could be present

during interviews, but they were not allowed to ask direct questions nor to speak to service providers. However, they worked closely with their Cuban counterparts, who were extremely professional and carried out the research to a very high standard.

Finally, as CCRD was the entry point for the study and the recruitment of respondents, many held religious perspectives, which may have biased some findings. To provide balance, researchers also tried to select people who did not belong overtly to Christian denominations. In exploring the theme of young women's economic empowerment, only a few respondents made direct references to Christian values. However, the role of religion in present-day Cuba is a factor that needs to be acknowledged. While in pre-revolution Cuba, religious life was dominated by the Catholic Church, the revolution rejected all formal and non-institutionalised religions and promoted atheism as its official policy. In the 1990s, though, the wording of the Constitution changed and from atheist became secular, with Cubans allowed to practise a religion more freely than before (Härkönen, 2016). Since that time, the number and influence of Christian churches has grown, including evangelical churches which recently united to campaign against gay marriage. In a survey by a Spanish network in 2015, half of Cubans identified as religious, with 27% practising Catholicism, 13%



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practising Santería (a syncretic religion blending West African deities with Christian saints), and Evangelicals being the third main religion (Augustin, 2019; Watts, 2015).

## 1.4 Report structure

Section 2 presents key policies and programming linked to the economic empowerment of adolescent girls and young women in Cuba. Sections 3 and 4 examine how gendered social norms affect women's and girls' educational and economic opportunities respectively. Sections 5

and 6 focus on two areas of paramount interest for young women's economic participation – their domestic and childcare responsibilities. Section 7 discusses girls' and young women's involvement in household decision-making and the role of norms around appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours. Access to productive and financial resources and gender differentials is the focus of Section 8, while Section 9 examines how men and women are expected to deal with difficulties they encounter in life. Section 10 discusses key findings and presents some recommendations.

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## 2 Policies and programming for young women's economic empowerment

This section focuses on policy and programming in four main areas: skills training opportunities, maternity protection, childcare support, and social assistance. Study respondents identified these areas as critical for the economic empowerment of women in Cuba, including young women who may have faced difficulty or disadvantage and need support. The state provides various skills training programmes to help young women who have left the education system to acquire basic skills and gain economic independence. Despite their potential, these programmes can be of poor quality, tend not to be responsive to market demands, and fail to reach those most in need (especially in rural areas). They also lack flexibility to accommodate the needs of young mothers. On the other hand, long-standing maternity protection policies mostly benefit women in state employment, while fathers who make use of their right to paternity leave are an exception. Similarly, existing childcare facilities are insufficient to meet demand, with the subsequent crisis of care preventing young mothers from doing paid work and/or increasing the domestic and care burden of older female family members. Those unfit to work and without any support are entitled to welfare protection. Although the state continues to provide social assistance, the system seems unable to meet rising demand, and women are forced to confront a relentless bureaucracy, which means that many are unable to access appropriate and timely support.

The state also acknowledges the potential of communication campaigns to challenge and transform gender stereotypes and attitudes, especially among adolescents (CEDAW, 2011). However, only two of our study respondents mentioned watching television (TV) programmes that promote the sharing of domestic and care responsibilities between spouses or women's right to decide whether they want to have a child.

### 2.1 Skills training opportunities

The state has expressed its support for community-level training programmes for rural women, particularly for young women who have left the education system, to help them participate in economic activities (CEDAW, 2011). It also pays attention to the problems of young 'desvinculados', those 'disconnected' from education and work (Andaya, 2014), and seeks to incorporate them into the labour force so that they can contribute to national economic and social development. Those who have not completed their secondary education and have limited professional skills or who would like to develop their skills and improve their employability can access skills training courses on various subjects. The FMC has traditionally played a prominent role, leading programming that targets young women. In recent years, international development agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also

funded and implemented initiatives on women's and youth empowerment (CDA, 2013).

Study respondents were aware of courses available to both men and women. Although many would reportedly prefer to start a small business, very few courses provide basic business skills. Most of the courses available for young women provide training on sewing, hairdressing, make-up and beauty treatments, massage and pottery, as well as English language skills, computer skills and catering.

Well, there are many courses. I know some courses which are part of the Federation – for example, hairdressing, beauty treatment, those sorts of courses, like gastronomy. But that's what I know of courses for those girls who've left their studies, they can enter any activity. (Woman, head of human resources)

... it's for everyone, all members of society, both women and men, nothing to do with age or gender ... in the Women's Federation there are courses. I did two courses there when I was 20 or 21, I did a course on therapeutic massage and another on computer skills and there was also a course on nutrition ... For these courses you go to the Federation and you ask if they have courses or anything that women and men can study... they give you all the information, but you also need to be registered to be able to study. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Yes, we've carried out training sessions on how to start businesses in the church and we have teachers who share their own experiences and demonstrate how to deal with the finances to start a business or to look after themselves financially. (Woman, business owner, Jovellanos)

The FMC was repeatedly mentioned as the main provider of these courses. Some NGOs and

churches also organise training and workshops, while a few respondents explicitly mentioned that the Canadian government has been funding courses for youth and women. Participants need to register and pay some fees, although the exact cost was not clarified. Some women spoke in favour of these courses, as they help unemployed youth with low qualifications, especially girls who may stay at home, to acquire professional skills and find an interest, which may lead them to return to school or take up some income-generating activity and move on with their lives. A woman now employed in the state sector explained how doing one of those courses led her to change direction and had a very positive impact on her life:

I arrived there because my mother's neighbour worked there, I was at home and I did not do anything. And she told me, 'we are going to introduce you to the Federation, they will help you there' ... and I went there, and I did some courses, hairdressing, massage courses ... It's like, you open your own way, you open up to society, because sometimes you're in the house and you do not see anything. And from there I got involved, I passed a computer course. I returned to school, I finished my grade 12, and here I am. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

While such courses can undoubtedly play a key role in empowering disadvantaged youth, several respondents identified issues that compromise their effectiveness. The quality of courses is often low, the range of skills on offer does not tend to respond to local labour market demands, and available places may fill up quickly. Information about available training opportunities may be hard to get, with those who have better social networks better placed to receive such information. Moreover, respondents felt that youth in rural areas have fewer training opportunities than those in cities, and may have to travel to benefit from them. Another issue, highlighted by young women, was that mothers with young children may be unable to attend because of lack of childcare.

I think they last three months, and after that they give you a diploma, but you do not really learn anything. They just say that they give you classes. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

I would like more information available in municipalities, more advertising for these things. Because I have never seen any advertisement in my life. Most of the time it happens that the same thing is said to those who work in catering. They go and tell them that they have to pass courses so that they can surpass themselves, but it is they who already have their work ... But the people who are in the street, who may want to have that opportunity to pass the course, do not pass it. Because they do not find out, they do not know about it. (Woman, self-employed, Los Palos)

When these courses were offered by the Federation, my children were very small, and I did not have anyone to look after them so I could not go and attend any of these courses. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

## 2.2 Maternity protection and parental support

In 1974, the Maternity Act provided medical care and paid maternity leave to working women. Postnatal leave lasts for one year and can be further extended (though unpaid) for three months, if the mother is unable to find a place in the day-care centre. Respondents were well aware of maternity protection policies, and some mentioned that either they or their daughters had benefited from them. On the other hand, two women who had been working in non-state jobs reported not having any benefit and even being unable to keep their jobs after becoming pregnant, as their employers hired others when they left to give birth.

The woman keeps her job, and she even has a maternity leave, and she is

paid and has access to her salary or a percentage of her salary until the baby is one year old. (Woman, self-employed, Jovellanos)

My daughter carried on working while pregnant and afterwards, when it was time, she gave birth and they gave her maternity leave, and then she returned to work ... she had a salary of 800 or so pesos and they paid her something like 500 or so pesos. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

With a permanent job you know you have maternity leave, but without a permanent job there's nothing. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Since 2003, the law also allows maternity leave and benefits to be shared between the child's mother and father, or even to be taken by working grandparents if they leave their job to help with childcare. However, data shows that very few men use this provision. UNICEF mentions that only 125 men took advantage of this right between 2003 and 2014 (López-Fesser, 2019). These 'househusbands', who look after the children while their higher-earning wives work, are reported to be teased by their friends (CDA, 2013).

Our study respondents were aware of fathers' option to take leave in cases where the child's mother decides to continue working (if her salary is higher than the father's), if she were to die during childbirth, or if she were unable to care for the child. In each study site, people reported having heard of one such case, although they did not personally know the man who was granted paternity leave. On the contrary, they confirmed that very few men apply for it and employers do not welcome such requests from male employees.

Fathers who are responsible for looking after a child have the same rights as mothers. There are women who die in childbirth and the father has to look after the child. The same applies to a

grandparent who has to look after the child. Anyone responsible for looking after the newborn has the same rights. (Man, factory representative)

There was a man here who had twins and his wife left him ... He had to apply for paternity leave for a year so that he could do the duties of mother and father for his children. Then, he went back to work. (Girl, age 15, pre-university, Los Palos)

I heard of a case where the father requested a permit to stay at home while the mother went back to work. I just do not know if it is true. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

... just a few men ask for parental benefits such as leave, and they are even sometimes rejected by their bosses when they request them. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

## 2.3 Childcare support

After one year of maternity leave, the mother can apply to get a place for her child at the state day-care centre so that she can return to her wage employment. Launched in 1961 by the FMC, these centres (*círculos infantiles*) have aimed to provide a safe place for children aged 1–5 years to develop their skills, while allowing their mothers to participate in the labour market and contribute to the economic development of the country.

However, Cuba is facing a crisis of care, which is recognised by the state as a major challenge to gender equality, as we saw in Section 1.1. Andaya (2014) speaks about chronic shortages in state childcare facilities; for instance, in 1997, only one-fifth of working women had access to such facilities. Using recent data, Torres Santana (2019b) argues that the situation is getting worse, as the number of available places in state nurseries continues to be insufficient to meet demand, especially in rural areas. Torres Santana reports

that in 2018, out of 592,510 children under five, only 134,276 were enrolled in state nurseries – just 22.6% of all under-fives. Moreover, although 23% of preschool children lived in rural areas, only 2.3% of nurseries operate there. To meet demand, private childcare facilities have multiplied in the past decade. However, Torres Santana notes that many of the licences for childcare assistants (nearly one-third) have been obtained in Havana. She also estimates that just 1.91% of the total preschool population is taken care of in these private nurseries. The proportion is still low, partly due to parental inability to meet the high costs. Most importantly, if the numbers of children in public and private care are taken together, it becomes evident that only one in four preschool children in Cuba are looked after outside the home. Most continue to be looked after by female family members who have no other alternative but to be housewives. According to Torres Santana (*ibid*), Cuba's low rate of female labour force participation is a direct consequence of this crisis of care.

State data shows that in 2016 there were 65 state nurseries in Matanzas province, and 462 mothers benefited in Jovellanos municipality (ONEI, 2017). In Nueva Paz, the municipality where Los Palos is located, only four state nurseries were operating in 2018, benefiting 176 mothers (ONEI, 2019c). Indeed, our respondents stressed that the system can no longer meet childcare needs. Even women who work in the two priority state sectors (health and education) are unable to secure a place as demand is greater than supply, forcing them to try to get a place in a private facility, leave the child in the care of a female family member, or even take the child with them to work.

The capacity of the *círculos* at the moment ... is at the limit. What's more, they've exceeded their capacity by some 3,000. (Municipality representative)

I do not even remember how many times I went to the Ministry of Education so that they would accept him at the nursery. It was hard because every time they said something different, 'no, there



are no places', 'we are on holidays', etc. so he enrolled when he was over one year old ... my aunt looked after him until they finally accepted him ... that's their duty. (Woman, age 34, dentist assistant, Jovellanos)

... and we have colleagues ... most of the social workers have children and sometimes they come with their children to work ... We have three children here ... Now there are more options because of those who are self-employed and they have opened some nurseries and there are some ... even some of them have more than 100 children. (Municipality representative)

Respondents noted the increasing number of private nurseries run by middle-aged women. In both study sites, they spoke about the emergence of private nurseries that accept young children from 8am until 4pm or 5pm, charging 200–300 pesos monthly. Some middle-aged women also offer informal caregiving services.

We started this nursery because of difficulties that people who work were having in getting into the círculo infantil. We have 12 children and ... we look after them from 8 until 5 in the afternoon when the parents come to pick them up. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

... there aren't many private here, but I know a woman who looks after seven kids, but they need to be able to walk, they can't be babies for her to accept them. For example, they sit in their table and they have breakfast all together, they sleep a little bit, they have lunch, they play while parents work. (Woman, age 43, employee, Jovellanos)

These are women who have stopped working or they retired or are

housewives so to make extra money they look after children. Some of them have worked at círculos infantiles or schools. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

A study of self-employed people providing childcare in Havana found that all those involved are women and half of them had previously been informal domestic workers. Their decision to begin childcare was influenced by the ability to earn more. Yet all complained of high responsibility and exhausting work for which they earned 200 pesos monthly per child, up to five children, thus earning three times the mean average salary in state employment (Romero, cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017).

Study respondents also mentioned that other female family members (sometimes aunties but especially grandmothers), when available or living in the same house, also provide much-needed help to their working sisters and daughters by looking after their young children. This is in line with one woman's observation in Andaya's study on reproduction in Cuba: 'I know lots of women whose households continue on the backs of their mothers' (Andaya, 2014: 98). However, two respondents also expressed concern about the increasing responsibilities that grandparents have to shoulder in the face of limited state capacity to accommodate childcare needs.

I have been helping her since a long time ago. She [her daughter] arrives quite late and she leaves early for work. The children are more mine than hers now, they have always been more mine than hers. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

Because it happens sometimes that a lot of parents delegate this task to the grandparents. So sometimes the grandparents are very overloaded, and they are already at a certain age and so this means that ... the parents should be the ones responsible. (Woman, head of human resources)

In many cases, women continue to stay at home and look after their young children. Five young women reported staying at home instead of returning to or looking for work as they had been unable to find a family member to look after their child and could not afford a private nursery place. One other described how some women in the factory where she works, in order to retain their non-state work, decided to continue working and spend most of their income on private childcare until they could (hopefully) get a place in a state nursery.

In my case, I couldn't work, why?  
Because my economic situation did not allow me to do so. To be able to work, I had to pay someone else to look after my baby. That was 300 pesos per month and at that moment, I could not afford it. There are people who can work, because they get their kids to the círculo ... but there are others that cannot. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

It is basically what the worker earns, and she does it basically to keep her job. I get 315 pesos, I pay 200 to the nursery and I keep 115 pesos for the whole month. You are doing that to keep the job and not to lose it. And hoping always that next year I can get a space in the círculo ... Most of the people, not all, wait and never get it, because they don't have enough capacity ... There are some that say: 'to pay a month and having nothing in the end, I can look after the child myself, once the child starts primary school, I can try to get a job then'. Many women think like that, but it also depends on the job you have and if you want to keep it. But most say, 'I can come back later'. (Woman, factory worker, Los Palos)

Respondents also mentioned the Educate Your Child (Educa a tu Hijo) programme, but without giving any further information. Developed for children who cannot benefit from state day-care centres, this is a national

early childhood development programme that enables young children to prepare for school. It does not provide childcare, as mothers continue to be responsible for and supervise their own children, but it does offer guidance and share best practices. Mothers are taught by trained implementers, most of them women, on how to raise their children and encourage their intellectual, social and emotional development (CEDAW, 2011). According to the Cuban government, the programme benefited 463,000 children in 2019 (Government of Cuba, 2019b).

## 2.4 Social services and assistance

Cubans who face serious problems such as poverty, disability or substance addiction can access specialised social support services and programmes. In particular, those who are unfit for work and have no family members able to provide help are entitled to social welfare protection. Main targeted groups include families who face a specific problem, but also individuals such as older people in need, people with disabilities or who are chronically ill, mothers (but not fathers) of children with severe disabilities, and people in need of social and housing assistance. Benefits vary and may be provided for a certain amount of time only (CEDAW, 2011). In 2018, 181,355 vulnerable Cubans received social assistance. Data shows that 3.7% and 1.6% of all social assistance beneficiaries lived in the two provinces of our study (Matanzas and Mayabeque respectively), while 40% lived in the five eastern provinces (ONEI, 2019b), where poverty and vulnerability are higher, as noted in Section 1.1. A CEPAL report (2019c) notes that overall social spending as a percentage of GDP declined from 14.6% in 2017 to 9.6% in 2018. In 2018, social protection – a significant part of which is associated with old age – attracted most central government spending, followed by education and health. Yet it was placed third in general government expenditure, which includes both central and subnational governments.

Respondents identified certain groups of people as being in need of social support, including older people, parents of children with disabilities or severe health problems, single mothers without

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income, children who lost their parents or whose parents are unable to look after them, and adolescents who are out of school and engage in antisocial activities such as sex work, theft, alcoholism or drug addiction. Support includes in-kind assistance (e.g. mattresses, clothes or food), help to find employment or access childcare, counselling, but also housing and cash assistance. Social workers are the main point of contact, while a few people also mentioned the FMC (for women), and churches, who can help poor people in need.

I think a social case is when a person has more than three children and lives in poor conditions. When they don't have anything in their house. When they don't have a fridge or a TV. When the floor is of mud. When there is one bed for three people. When they don't have anyone who can help them ... Someone who has three children but who dresses like me or like everyone else, and is strong and can work – that is not a social case. (Woman, social services provider)

When it's an economic problem, it's up to us, the social workers, depending on the situation that the mother has ... if she does not have money, or a husband, or any family members who can help her, we go and do that work, to help those people according to their

needs, within the possibilities we have. Sometimes we enrol them in the círculo, so that they can go back to work ... There are women, as I explained, who do not work ... like a case that I have of a girl with three children ... the older ones study, the youngest is two years old and she cannot go back to work because there is no one to take care of that child. We help her with an income, until the girl enters the day-care centre and she is helped to get a job. (Municipality representative)

However, many respondents expressed concerns that the welfare system has deteriorated and is unable to meet growing needs. They noted that benefits that used to be received by older people and people with disabilities have been reduced or even stopped, while social service providers reported that cash assistance increased by 70 pesos in 2018. A few women receiving social assistance spoke about the bureaucratic difficulties they had to face to claim their entitlements, which can take considerable time, while they are struggling to cope with a difficult situation (see Box 1).

Things have changed and you cannot get that, elderly people who need them have lost their benefits ... a lot of things that were operating when Fidel was still there have been cancelled. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

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**Box 1 Having a child with disabilities**

Ana is a middle-aged woman who lives with her partner and her 30-year-old son. She got pregnant when she was 15 and gave birth to her son, who has hearing and intellectual disabilities and is unable to care for himself. As she needed money, she started working at 17, cleaning houses and offices. Then she took a training course and became a nursery assistant. All that time, she was living with her alcoholic brother and her mother, who looked after her son so she could go to work. Ana tried for many years to get social assistance and free her mother from looking after him. 'It was difficult for me to get it. I had a lot of problems and that's because my son had always been looked after. My mother always looked after him. But the time came ... when he became aggressive. My mother was over 70 years. She looked after him, but he became aggressive. He even pushed her – he broke her arm, he threw a hammer and hit her on the head. That's when I decided I had to stop working.'

In order to leave work, Ana needed to get what she calls 'the assisted salary', a type of social assistance for working mothers who 'have a child with problems and you don't have anyone to look after the child so you cannot work, and you need to'. She applied and was visited by a Ministry representative to check her situation. She had several visits, but nothing happened. 'Every time they came and interviewed me, nothing was finalised, and they wouldn't give me an answer. They would tell me again and again that the application wasn't accepted.' Then one day she met a friend from the provincial capital who had a similar problem and suggested she write to the director of social work there. 'It's because of that lady that I started receiving my cheques.' She also wrote to the state council and was visited by a woman who 'came and saw the conditions we were living in, and they gave me a house. The state council told the people here they had to give me two monthly cheques, one of 150 for the child and one of 200 for me.' From time to time, to meet her mother's health needs (she became sick), Ana did laundry services for other people. However, a few months ago, she herself got very sick (a problem with her lungs) and she is now unable to do any work. 'Thus, I stay at home. I look after my son and try to do some chores at home.'

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# 3 Education and training

This section presents findings on education and training issues that affect adolescents and youth in Cuba and are influenced by gender norms. While gender parity has been achieved in primary education, girls are more likely to be enrolled in secondary education than boys, and account for most university graduates. Getting an education is perceived as of greater importance for women than for men as a necessary condition for achieving economic independence. However, young women dominate university and skills training courses that lead to careers aligned with women's maternal and caring qualities. Gender norms about what boys and girls can and should do, alongside early pregnancy, financial difficulties, limited family support, low expectations and inadequate public transport, have been identified as the main challenges to accessing education. On the other hand, strong determination and persistence, along with family and partner support, emerged as the key enabling factors for academic success.

## 3.1 Access to schooling and importance of education

The Cuban Constitution grants all boys and girls equal rights to education. The state provides free universal education from primary school to university, with schools and training institutions in urban and rural areas alike. There are six grades of primary education for children aged 6–11 years and three grades of basic secondary education (grades 7–9) for those aged 12–14, which are compulsory. Students can then choose either to continue to upper (pre-university) secondary education (grades 10–12), which can lead to university, or to attend technical training. Latest data shows that in 2017–18, retention rates were 99.7% in primary education, 93.6% in basic secondary and 83.4% in pre-university (ONEI, 2019a). The CEDAW report notes that

‘there is always a small number of adolescents and young people who for various reasons do not complete these levels of compulsory education’ (CEDAW, 2011: 10–11).

Gender disparities in favour of boys have been eliminated. Enrolment rates in primary education exceed 99% for both boys and girls. While the Gender Parity Index is 1 for primary education net enrolment rate, indicating parity between boys and girls, it is 1.06 (2017 data) in secondary education, indicating that more girls aged 12–17 are enrolled than boys. Data available for Matanzas province, showed that the Index was 1.01 in both primary and secondary education in 2016 (ONEI, 2017).

Women also account for most higher education graduates in Cuba (ONEI, 2019a); in 2015, 60.5% of all graduates were women (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). Although enrolment rates in higher education have risen since 2013–14, the graduation rate more than halved (ONEI, 2019a). Data also shows significant progress in combating racial discrimination and promoting social inclusion: a CEPAL report (2017b) found that 38% of Afro-Cuban youth were in post-secondary education compared to 41% of their non-Afro-Cuban counterparts, with no gender differences.

Study respondents stressed that everybody in Cuba, irrespective of gender and skin colour, has the same rights to education. They also confirmed that most adolescents complete schooling up to grade 9. Several young respondents reported being at pre-university and planning for university studies; some were in university and others were attending various training courses, from construction to hairdressing. Many said that they or their children have attended more than one training course to acquire new skills and improve their employability; several women had attended courses provided by the local branch of the FMC.



Yes, it is common for adolescents here to stay in school... A lot of them just do grade 12 and many go to the university. (Woman, age 24, pre-university education, state employment, Jovellanos)

I studied information sciences in the university and after that I did a Master's. Then I was working ... and then I left everything because of photography. I decided to change career and I studied two years of photography in a school in Havana. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

Many respondents and their parents expressed the belief that studying and learning is important as it can help young people find employment and become independent. This was felt to be particularly important for women. Compared to the past, when girls were expected to get married and stay at home to raise their children, they are now expected to acquire professional skills, generate their own income and take control of their lives. The difficult economic situation requires that all adult family members contribute to the household income, while uncertainty, declining marriage rates and the increasingly temporary nature of partnerships mean that women may find themselves alone and forced to provide for their children:

My parents want us to study, because the truth is that we need to study, because they understand that this is what will prepare us for tomorrow, whatever we are going to do independently with our lives. (Woman, age 20, university student, Los Palos)

My grandmother and my mom supported me a lot not to drop out like my sister but to continue studying in this programme... They did that because, see, my mom tells me to study, so that I don't have, when I am a grown-up woman, I don't have

to depend on anyone. (Girl, age 15, technical school student, Jovellanos)

... when I got married, I was 22 and my wife was 17, so I got married and she was doing grade 12, and she never quitted school, and when she finished then, as a husband ... I asked her to study a university degree and she used to say, 'why should I study if you are the one working?' ... and I told her I do work, but that is now, but do you know if in five years' time you are still going to be with me? So, you have to build up your own skills because if tomorrow you are single, how are you going to make a living? What studies will you have? And this is what I tell our daughters now. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

### 3.2 Gender differences in course selection

Although young women account for most university students, they are largely choosing to study medicine, education and social sciences and humanities. For instance, data from 2009–10 showed that women accounted for 70% of those enrolled in medicine, 68% in economics, 67% in education and 65% in other social sciences and humanities. Men, on the other hand, accounted for 68% of students in agricultural sciences and in physical education, and 63% in technical sciences; they also comprised 56% of graduates in upper-secondary vocational education (CEDAW, 2011). Recent data from 2018–19 demonstrates that women students continue to dominate medicine, education and social studies and humanities (ONEI, 2019a).

When asked about what subjects young people choose to study, several respondents agreed that men and women typically choose different subjects. Men usually attend engineering, carpentry or masonry courses, while women prefer to do education or medicine – considered to be 'feminine' subjects that lead to careers appropriate for women's 'natural' caring qualities.

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Most of the time, different things ...  
Most of the time women like to study nursing, they like to study medicine ... education, law. (Woman, age 21, state employment, Los Palos)

However, different views were expressed when respondents were asked what young people can study. Most emphasised that every Cuban has equal rights to study whatever subject they want to, without discrimination and irrespective of what others tell them. Some added that women and men have the same intellectual capabilities to pursue all subjects and to succeed in their studies if they work hard.

Women and men have the same right in this country to study whatever they wish to. They can study the same thing because they have the same capacity. (Girl, age 15, school student, Jovellanos)

Service providers and students of vocational training also pointed out that the Cuban state offers the same training opportunities to women and men, mentioning cases of young women and men who had challenged gender stereotypes and chosen to attain skills traditionally linked with the opposite gender. Thus, some women opt to learn construction skills and some men choose nursing or hairdressing courses.

**Researcher:** Do you think that young women can easily access the training courses here?

**Respondent:** Yes. Because everyone has the same right to develop their skills. The whole world, the same, both women and men. We offer training in trades for men and women... And this is what happens here right now. We have girls who graduated as bricklayers – last year three girls graduated as bricklayers. We also graduated three in hydraulics. What you know is that builders are almost always men, but we have graduated women also in the craft of masonry. (Technical education provider)

What was evident in many interviews was the idea that times are changing, with women becoming empowered and able to set and achieve the life goals they want to, while gender norms are shifting towards greater gender equality.

Most of the time, women and men are expected to study different things. But these days it seems to me that women have become empowered and that they can do and carry out whatever they set out to do, as much as men themselves do, and there are many times that they do it even better. (Girl, age 15, school student, Los Palos)

**Respondent:** Well, I think that it is a decision of each man and woman to make. I think if one day I would go back in time and I would want to study something that someone tells me is a career for men, I would say ‘this is what I like, and this is what I want to study’.

**Researcher:** Why?

**Respondent:** Because that is how it is, because it is to look for my future, for what I want to achieve, for what I really want without caring if that is for men or women ... for me that is irrelevant.

**Researcher:** From what you are telling me, this has changed in recent years?

**Respondent:** Well, I think yes, even though we are a ‘machista’ town, but I think that yes, we have made some progress on that issue. (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

### 3.3 Challenges to accessing education and training

All interviewed adolescents reported attending school and planning to continue with some training or even university. Several women who were interviewed also reported having attended

university and training. However, all respondents had family members, classmates or neighbours who had left school or university, and many had also experienced considerable difficulties to complete school and acquire some professional skills. Apart from having to study hard to pass the university entrance exams, respondents identified the following challenges: inadequate public transport system; financial difficulties; low value placed on education; youth disillusionment; early pregnancy; limited family support; and gender norms. The interaction of these factors appears to shape young people's opportunities for educational progress and academic achievement.

More than one-third of respondents identified transport as a major challenge preventing youth in rural areas, away from the provincial capital, from attending university. This echoes findings of the 2016 national survey on gender equality, in which 32% of women and 35% of men identified transport as a key problem in Cuba; it was identified as the second most significant problem for women in the provinces of our two study sites (CEF-FMC et al., 2018). Respondents noted that public transport is scarce and private transport expensive for those who need to use it regularly. Young people reported having to work to meet transport expenses. People need to wake early, queue in long lines, travel in overcrowded buses and in uncomfortable conditions, spend more time waiting, and return home late. Five respondents felt that the situation can expose young women to additional risks of sexual harassment and violence if they miss the bus and have to hitchhike or walk home in the dark.

Transport, transport for all the things. Transport is bad, and lately it is even worse. (Municipality representative)

I was working, literally I was working to pay for the transport. Without eating anything there in Havana, just one day of travelling costs 100 pesos and that's basically the minimum salary for two weeks. (Woman, age 23, graduate, unemployed, Los Palos)

I used to get up at 4.30 in the morning to go every day to medical sciences ... Then at 6 o'clock there is a bus that goes to school, but sometimes it does not always come ... you have to take other buses that go to Havana that go by the same school ... From there we do not have fixed transportation, so as the school is close to the road, we go to a bridge, and wait for somebody to pick us up. The trip is quite difficult and uncomfortable, and really hard, because it's all the things you then have to do at school, what you have to do there plus the fatigue of the trip, which is uncomfortable. (Woman, age 20, university student, Los Palos)

Those who are unable to secure accommodation in university facilities face difficulty to attend and are forced to find work or rely on family support. Having a child attending university in the provincial capital or in Havana stretches family incomes further.

... although education is free ... it is always going to be expensive, in this case for the family, because ... we manage the family income always together. But if she [his daughter] goes ... she will affect the family economy, even if we can, even if we want to ... to help her to go to university in Matanzas, it will be difficult, it will be very difficult. (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)

I also had financial difficulties because even though I was working, I was a student, my salary was only 213 pesos. Between supper and transport, it wasn't enough to make ends meet. My mother sometimes had to give me money so I could go to school. I think the economic factor is always a problem for everything. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

In a few cases, it was also reported that parents could no longer meet family needs and their older adolescent children – both boys and girls – had to drop out of secondary school and contribute to household income. This was particularly the case with migrants from the eastern provinces who lacked documentation and a permanent address and faced serious survival issues. Respondents also noted that boys are more likely to be affected than girls as, in line with the traditional male breadwinner role, they are expected to earn money and help their families. On the other hand, girls may also feel pressure to find men who have money and even get pregnant by them, so that they can leave home and have someone else to look after them:

... for women is worse ... they abandon their studies when they are in grade 9 or 10 ... I think that it is because they think that they will get married and someone else will take care of them and pay the bills ... because they think that men need to have the last word at home and also be the provider, while women are housewives and stay at home and men take care of them. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Parents' limited education levels and the undervaluing of education have also been identified as contributing factors, along with lack of parental encouragement:

Family economic problems make their situation difficult. Unconcerned parents also influence a lot. Parents should be concerned, because look, you could have a bad situation but if you always have a figure who's telling you, 'No, you can't leave school because this is going to benefit you' and this person encourages you ... It doesn't matter what situation you have, your parents are always going to want what's good for you and are always going to find a way, even if it's 5 pesos, so you can go to school ... I think that's what has the most influence, the concern parents have. (Girl, age 16, school student, Los Palos)

However, some parents and older siblings also expressed great concern about allowing their adolescent daughters and sisters to move to the city alone to study. Girls were often described as delicate and vulnerable by nature, unaware of people's real intentions and an easy prey to male sexual advances. Their fear was that the girl would end up with an unwanted pregnancy and would eventually drop out of university. Three girls also reported being attached to and not wanting to leave their families and hometowns, thus planning to attend skills training courses close to home.

But for her to study arts, for me is very difficult to accept that my girl travels or goes to a school where she needs to sleep and stay alone there, and I won't have control of her when she is still too young. So, I will never let her go to a school where I don't know what she can do, what is going to happen. I am afraid of that. (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)

Because I think instead of coming home with a certificate, she will come with a pregnancy. Because she is very ... she doesn't have a weak mind, nothing like that, but she is easy to manipulate, because she is very naïve ... It is easy for anyone to influence her, anyone ... Then I am afraid ... that she faces that, that is like a fierce wolf waiting for someone to eat. I am afraid. (Woman, age 43, employee, Jovellanos)

Early or unwanted pregnancy was the most commonly cited reason for girls and young women not completing secondary or university education. Respondents spoke about themselves, their sisters, daughters, classmates or friends who got pregnant, kept the baby and ended up leaving their studies (see Box 2). The issue affects girls far more than boys. Boys are expected to accept their responsibilities and support their girlfriends emotionally or even materially by finding work and providing for the mother and the child. Yet in practice, they often abandon their partner.

Although pregnant girls can continue studying or return to school or university after giving birth, the arrival of the baby changes their lives and their priorities, and they find it increasingly hard to meet their household, child and education obligations if they have no support. Young mothers themselves decide what to do, either alone or in consultation with their parents (especially the mother) and/or partner; in some cases, their partner may force them to ‘dedicate themselves to their children’, which is considered the natural thing for a woman to do, while men are the ones for whom it is normal to work to support the partner and child.

... there’s a lot of school girls ... they have ended up pregnant. Two girls who were studying with me – one in grade 8 and another in grade 9 – and they ended up pregnant ... and they dropped out of school, they couldn’t carry on. Now they have their kids ... It’s just the same in ‘pre-university’ ... there are various cases of girls who end up pregnant and stop ... They can’t carry on studying and have to dedicate themselves to their children. (Girl, age 16, pre-university student, Los Palos)

You asked me about obstacles. Well, I wanted to study in the university, I wanted to continue, because I like learning. But it was hard because I already had my children. My mother was also working and had other things to do. So, all this situation made it very difficult for me to attend university. This was the only thing I did not manage to finish. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Several respondents stressed that, within the worsening economic context characterised by limited work opportunities and low wages, many young people question the value of education as they observe that it may no longer lead to a good career and a decent income. Thus, instead of ‘wasting their time and energy’ studying for a university degree, they prefer to start doing any

work possible. Boys are more likely to complete secondary school and seek to gain economic independence, reflecting the primary role afforded to them by society as the family breadwinner.

I think that most people study at least until grade 9, and I do not know anyone now who is not doing at least that grade, but then I think the interest to study declines, and, what I have found is young people asking themselves why they keep on studying, if getting a degree makes no difference? So it is better to start working young, when you are 17, and thus they start having an economic gain – for example, to start a business – because at the end they finish a university career, which will give them only 400 or 500 pesos ... so most of them ... are not attending their classes because they think this way. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Maybe boys are more likely because they want to be independent sooner, earn their own money. Maybe after grade 12 they go straight to work and don’t want to study. After all, the process of studying doesn’t pay. Maybe they want to start earning out of necessity given the situation in Cuba now. Maybe boys have different ideas than girls in this respect and want to get a job to support themselves. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

Many respondents also spoke about some disillusioned youth who reject old values, develop materialistic aspirations and, instead of focusing on their studies, prefer being in the streets, partying all night and seeking to buy brand clothes, computers, mobile phones and other items of social status. Parents’ inability to control their adolescent children or even parental indifference are identified as part of the problem. Boys are more vulnerable to such ideals, as they are perceived to be more independent and less attached to the family and the home, and to prefer having fun in the streets instead of



## Box 2 Getting married at 17

Miranda is a 17-year-old girl who studies in grade 12 in Jovellanos. She wants to be a nursery teacher and estimates she still needs six more years of studying and training to reach her goal. After nearly one year in a relationship, she got married recently to Jose, 21, at their local church. He is also finishing grade 12 while doing agricultural work on his own farm and other farms.

Apart from studying, Miranda also helps in her parents' café, cooking or serving food. Her parents gave her a small one-bedroom flat at the back of the café where she lives with her husband, and they give her some money from time to time: 'my father helps me with giving some money ... I am his daughter and he helps me in that way'. To meet household expenses, Miranda has also started working as a manicurist. She paid 145 pesos for equipment (table, nail polish, etc.). She charges 5 pesos for natural nails and 25 pesos for acrylic ones. She likes her job, and her husband allows her to do it as she gains a small income: 'It is money that he doesn't need to give me anymore'. It enables her to meet any personal needs she has: 'I have my money and with my money I decide what I can do'.

Before getting married, Miranda was planning to go to university in the provincial capital to study English language. After discussing her plans with Jose, 'we decided with my husband to study here because I also like teaching young children and that's all, to stay at home, to stay here'. They have also decided to wait until she completes grade 12 to have children. 'In case of having a baby now, we both agreed to wait a bit. My husband and I, we are always talking about it, actually I would like to have my baby now. But he is right in what he says, we just started, we are getting used to, and I need to finish school ... I need to finish school because it is a big responsibility'. At her school there are nine pregnant girls and two others who just had their babies, but teachers are supportive of these young mothers to return and finish school. She believes there is a big difference between boys and girls who become parents: 'Always if it's a man it's different. Because the child belongs more to the mother ... The father doesn't need to be with them, he doesn't need to breastfeed them. The father can go to work and see them after work. The mother is the one that should be with the baby all the time.'

Her father is concerned 'I felt it was very early for her to get married at 17 years', he confided. He is aware that she would like to study English as he did, yet he is unsure whether she will be able to now: '... we are trying to respect her life, her decisions, even though she counts on us ... but it is different because she is a married woman, she is starting her family. I don't think it's sensible that she commits the whole week to go to university, away from her husband, it doesn't make sense, so for her it is going to be more difficult to study a career outside the town. Then, what happens is that it is a small town, far away from Matanzas city to study a good career, so she needs to sacrifice herself. To travel every day, or to sleep and rent a place, I think it is going to be a little bit more difficult now.'

Miranda's mother had wanted to study nursing when she was younger, but had to stop because she got pregnant. She tried again when Miranda was 13 months old: 'I started in medical sciences and I was there for three months but ... travelling at 5 am wasn't easy ... after three months travelling to Matanzas, I started noticing that all the time that I was travelling ... I never had menstruation, and I said, 'this is weird'. I thought I was stressed, I don't know how many things I thought ... what I can tell you, it wasn't my nerves, it was the second baby that was on her way. And, it was like that, it was like that.' So, she stopped studying and focused on her family. And she feels that the same will happen with Miranda: 'she won't go to university outside Jovellanos, because she is married, her life is no longer the same ... I am almost sure that she isn't going to study anything'. The only thing she insisted was that Miranda finishes school: 'when she said about getting married, I said, fine, there isn't a problem, you get married, but you have ... either way to keep studying'.

studying. On the other hand, girls are perceived to be more studious and content to be homebound. Such views are linked to persistent gender stereotypes that divide spaces and activities into male and female areas and allocate the public sphere to men and the domestic sphere to women. Boys are thus expected to be in the street, while girls remain inside the house (Härkönen, 2016).

But there are many adolescents who do not study anything, they only spend time on their phones, on bicycles, in the streets ... Since their parents have no alternatives and they are busy with their own work, looking for a better life, these adolescents are left to do what they want. (Woman, age 34, dental assistant, Jovellanos)

For boys it is more difficult to study and go to college ... Because at that age there is the street, it is more difficult. In girls it is different ... Because the girls are more involved in the studies, and the males are more involved in fun and those things. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Los Palos)

### 3.4 Enabling factors

Respondents identified two critical factors for completing one's studies: strong determination and persistence, and support (emotional and material) from the family and/or their partner. While we heard numerous examples of girls and young women who got pregnant and left school to focus on their children, there were also cases of young women who experienced financial difficulties and had an early pregnancy, yet were able to return to school or university and complete their studies or attend training while they were also working. These young women wanted to study to improve their lives and overcame difficulties to achieve their goal. In most cases, they were supported by their mothers, who helped them take care of their young children, or by their partners who respected their wish and agreed to help them continue their studies – even when that

challenged normative expectations about maternal dedication to family:

Well, always the distance influences a lot, but it was not like an obstacle for me not to reach my goal, which in this case was to study. It always influenced a lot, but it did not stop me. In general, I was able to move ahead with the support of my family, of my partner. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

... I have a friend who is studying in university. She got pregnant, and she was doing her fourth year, and then her mother told her 'do not worry, you just get your qualification, finish your career, whatever happens with the child, I will look after him'. I think what is actually missing in other cases of pregnant girls is support. (Woman, age 23, graduate, unemployed, Los Palos)

**Researcher:** And do you think there are some girls who study more than others?

**Respondent:** Maybe those that have more family support. Somehow the family influences you, if you have a father or a mother, who says 'look you are going to continue studying, look we are going to do this, look I am going to help you, do not worry'. Even if they get pregnant 'do not worry I'll take care of the child, you go on'.

**Researcher:** Has anyone ever forbidden you to work, to study, to move forward?

**Respondent:** No. My husband sometimes sees it as strange because as he left school, he says to me, 'but you're crazy, are you going to continue studying?' and I say, 'I want to continue studying because that's what I like'. (Woman, age 28, employee, Los Palos)

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# 4 Productive employment and decent work

Within a context of poor economic growth, limited work opportunities, low salaries and high prices, young Cubans struggle to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of productive employment and decent work (SDG 8). Apart from formal qualifications, good connections and social networks appear to be critical to securing employment. Young men are more likely to be economically active than their female counterparts. When young women were asked what constitutes a good job, the three main responses included enjoying one's work, earning a decent salary, and being able to combine work with domestic and childcare responsibilities. Young mothers tend to face the greatest disadvantage in accessing work and earning an income. Overall, the key labour market challenges facing young women in Cuba include: gender-based occupational segregation and norms about appropriate types of work; the persistent male breadwinner model; the difficulty in combining work and household responsibilities that are still perceived to be women's priority; and exposure to sexual harassment and violence.

## 4.1 A hard day's work

The performance of the Cuban economy continues to be weak and living conditions remain extremely challenging for many Cubans. Low salaries, insufficient food and housing and transport difficulties have persistently been identified as major problems in the past decade (CEM-FMC et al., 2018; Mesa-Lago, 2013). Two-thirds of respondents in our study admitted difficulties in making ends meet, and half reported doing two jobs to earn enough to meet their basic needs. Many respondents implied that

they are involved in the black market, buying and selling goods and services to access the necessary money and items they need.

Salary, housing ... food is very expensive. Instead of dropping, prices increase, meat is already at 60 pesos. With the new laws, there is no food and such things, and as taxes have gone up, the situation will get worse. (Agricultural cooperative manager)

We both work but we can't make it. Money is not enough. Not only for us, I think for 90% of people. (Woman, age 57, employee, Los Palos)

I have a friend who works in education but is also a weaver and weaves bracelets for a handicraft business ... So, the work obliges you to do this. They don't pay enough – the salary barely pays for the electricity bill and the food. We're working for the state because this basic salary pays for something, but we have also to work for someone else – sewing clothes or weaving or mending shoes or washing and ironing. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

... because of the economic situation, almost everybody needs to make up something, if they work, their salary is not going to be enough, there is always a new business, or the name that we don't give it – that is the black market

– they are always going to use the black market to survive because their salary is not enough ... that is done by both men and women. (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)

## 4.2 Declining employment rates and gender segregation

The Constitution and laws grant equal access to employment and all positions and jobs for all men and women (CEDAW, 2011), although the retirement age for women is 59 years and for men 64 years. Official data shows that in 2018, 49.5% of women were economically active compared to 76.9% of men (ONEI, 2019b). This rate is lower than the regional average for economically active women (50.3%) (ILO, 2018). The unemployment rate for women in Cuba is 1.8% while the rate for men is 1.6% (ONEI, 2019b). Lowest labour market participation rates for women were recorded in the eastern provinces (CEM-FMC et al., 2018).

Over the past decade, labour force participation rates in Cuba have declined for both men and women. Estimates show that, although women increased their participation

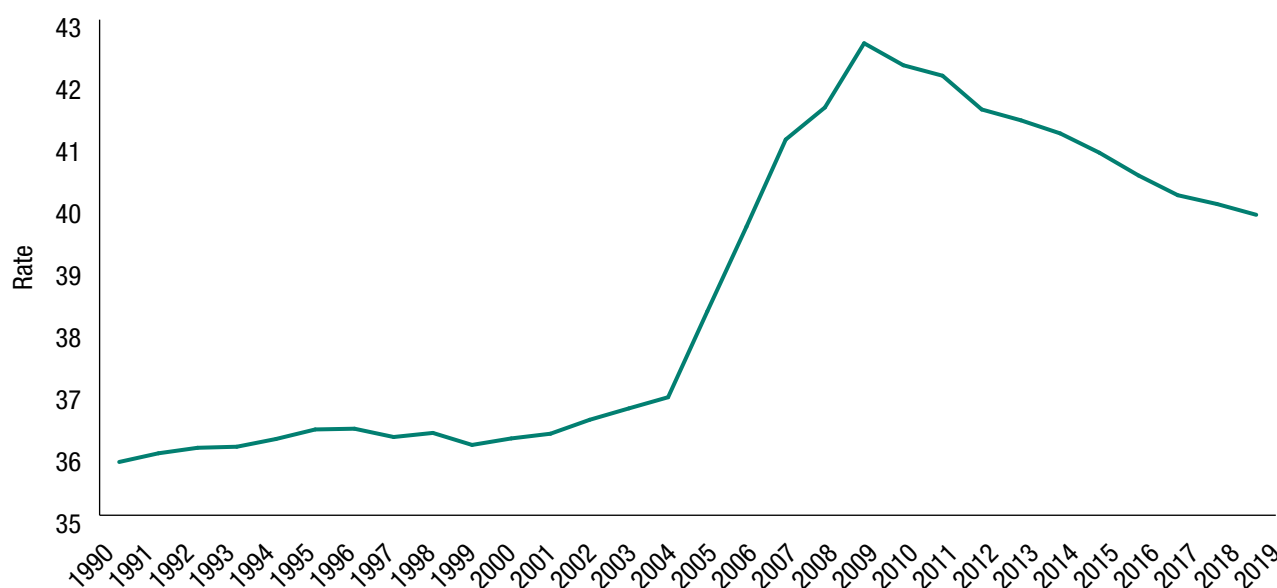
between 1990 and 2009, both male and female participation rates have been declining since 2010, down to 39.85% for women (in 2019) from 42.6% (in 2009), and down to 67.2% for men from 69.3% (World Bank, 2020) (see Figures 2 and 3). Data from the 2012 Population and Housing Census indicates that Afro-Cuban women have the highest labour force participation rates (ONEI, 2013). Echoing that, one study respondent said that ‘there are women who do nothing, like the white ones, you can see fine white women who do not want to work’.

In the national survey on gender equality, 35% of men and 22% of women identified inability to find employment as a major problem (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). Study respondents echoed this, and spoke about constantly searching for but being unable to find employment, and compared this situation to the past, when jobs were more readily available for all.

**Researcher:** What difficulties do people face to get a job in our country?

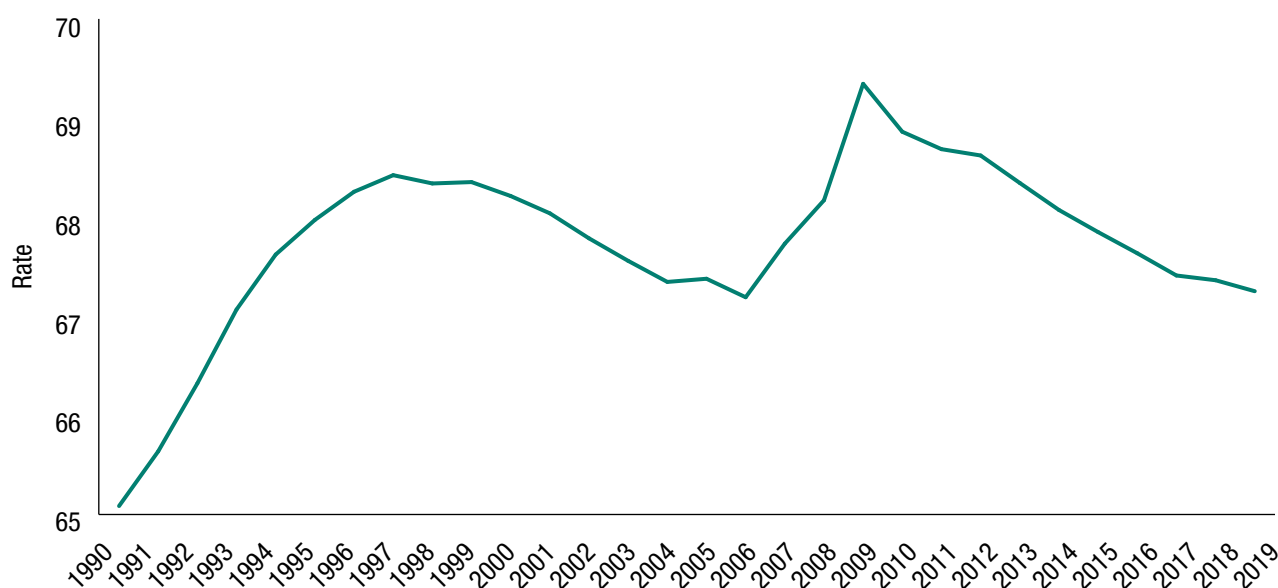
**Respondent:** Well, usually there is no work. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Jovellanos)

**Figure 2 Labour force participation rate, female (modelled ILO estimate), 1990–2019, Cuba**



Source: World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?end=2019&locations=CU&start=1990&view=chart>)

**Figure 3 Labour force participation rate, male (modelled ILO estimate), 1990–2019, Cuba**



Source: World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.ZS?locations=CU>)

There are not enough jobs. Jovellanos was an industrialised municipality, but now everything has been taken away. My sister wants to change jobs, but I say no because there is no job. There is no employment in the municipality. It is not the same production as before ... That amount of employment we used to have is no longer the same, wherever you look. (Municipality representative)

In 2018, 84.6% of all working women were employed in the state sector, which continued to provide 68% of all jobs in Cuba. Gender sectoral and occupational segregation remains a major issue, with women dominating the health (69%) and education (66%) professions but comprising a relatively small proportion of those in manufacturing industries (27%), agriculture (16%) and construction (11%). Of the women in the non-state sector (divided into the cooperative and the private sub-sectors), 24% were in cooperatives and nearly 76% in the private sector, with most reporting being self-employed workers, either undertaking income-generating activities as independent workers or operating small businesses (ONEI, 2019b).

### 4.3 Salaries

The Constitution guarantees equal pay for equal work (CEDAW, 2011). However, salaries vary by sector and province, with men concentrated in sectors which pay higher salaries than female-dominated sectors. Thus in 2018, the highest average monthly salary was in the construction sector (1,539 pesos), while the average monthly salary in the health sector was 808 pesos, and in education 538 pesos (ONEI, 2019b). Studies have highlighted that Cuban women earn less than men not because of gender pay discrimination but because they are concentrated in sectors and occupations that pay less – namely the state sector, the service sector, and in administrative occupations (CDA, 2013; Mesa-Lago, 2013).

As salaries in the state sector are low, studies have documented women choosing to move into other sectors. For instance, Wehrli (2010) focused on women in Havana who left their poorly paid state jobs to start selling coffee, providing manicures and hairdressing, or giving private classes, earning 5–15 times more than the average government salary. Nonetheless, many women continue to remain in state employment as they enjoy better protection and benefits than those in the non-state sector (Echevarría, 2014). Indeed, a recent study highlights that state sector



workers have extensive labour rights and social benefits compared to the minimum standards that characterise non-state employment, as evident in the types of contract, benefits for sick leave, number of days of annual leave and regulations for termination of employment (Torres Santana, 2020).

All respondents unanimously agreed that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work, irrespective of gender or skin colour, because in Cuba all people are equal and equal pay is a right. However, a few also noted that stereotypes about what men and women can do persist, with some employers discriminating in favour of men as being more capable of doing all sorts of jobs.

I think that if a woman decides to do a tough job, a man's job, it's because she has the right attitude and I don't know if they should value the fact that she's a woman ... but it seems normal to me that she earns the same salary because she is really doing the same job. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

**Researcher:** Do you think that men and women should be paid the same if they do the same job?

**Respondent:** I do not know how to tell you. Although we have the same rights, there is a lot of discrimination of men towards women in the workplace. Some think that women cannot do the same as men. But we can do the same. (Woman, age 31, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Interestingly, three women suggested that women should be paid more as they combine productive and reproductive work, ending up having a double working day:

... women should not be paid the same because we work more than men, the double day. We have to work in our jobs and we also have to work at home, work that many times is not shared. We get home and then we have to cook, to do everything ... However, the man gets back from work and says, 'hey you, bring me my sandals, is the food ready?' Not in all the cases but in most of them, a high percentage, in that issue we have made less progress with men, they do not help us. (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

## 4.4 Youth employment

Young Cubans in particular struggle to find employment and gain economic independence. Latest official data shows that in 2018, youth aged 17–29 accounted for 18% of all workers; males accounted for 72% of working adolescents aged 17–19 and 61.5% of those aged 20–29. While most young men were manual workers (carpenters, mechanics and construction workers), most women worked as technicians (a category that includes those with a professional qualification such as doctors, teachers, lawyers), thus in jobs requiring higher academic qualifications than those dominated by men (see Table 3). Young men also accounted for the majority of those in executive positions (ONEI, 2019b). Data from Matanzas

**Table 3 Workers aged 17–29 by age, gender and category (in thousands), 2018, Cuba**

	Manual workers	Technicians	Administrators	Services	Executive	Total numbers
Age groups and gender						
17–19	31.9	8.6	9.8	10.4	1.0	61.7
Women	2.9	5.4	3.6	5.6	0.0	17.5
Men	29.0	3.2	6.2	4.8	1.0	44.2
20–29	322.1	239.9	60.6	155.4	26.9	804.9
Women	35.2	154.4	39.8	68.9	11.2	309.5
Men	286.9	85.5	20.8	86.5	15.7	495.4

Source: ONEI (2019b)

province, where the urban field site of the study is located, shows that those aged 17–19 accounted for 3.3% of the working population and those aged 20–29 for 19.5% of all registered workers in the province (ONEI, 2017).

Some evidence indicates that youth in the self-employed sector – a survey in Havana found that 30% of self-employed in the sample were youth – tend to be employees and hired in less specialised activities with low salaries (Fundora, cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017; Pañellas et al., cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017). Youth and their parents who participated in our study complained of a lack of jobs, which affects both graduates and those without formal qualifications. Many graduates are unable to find employment appropriate to their studies and some are forced to accept whatever is available or to explore other options.

I'm a graduate of foreign languages, I graduated 10 years ago, and I couldn't find work in what I wanted and because of that I went from one place to another until I decided to stop working for the state and to work for myself. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

My children are well-educated but there are no opportunities. I know computer scientists who have had to work in agriculture. What is he doing there? He is a scientist, a very well-prepared professional and earns 300 pesos, not even enough to buy chewing gum. (Agricultural cooperative representative)

Not only are there no appropriate jobs available but salaries are often too low to cover basic living costs and fail to meet youth expectations. Thus, even if they initially accept a job, when they realise that they need to work long hours to earn even very little, they often resign and continue searching.

It's usually the younger generation who has the high turnover. Because of the salary ... Young people start and leave immediately because of the salary. If

they were paid well, they would care about their job. A high percentage of all new employees leave because the salary isn't high enough. They can only earn 250 pesos. (Factory manager)

Because the truth is that life today is very expensive ... And what a worker earns, it is not enough to be able to fulfil all the needs that young people dream of, like buying \$30 trousers. (Non-agricultural cooperative manager)

Given low salaries and high food prices, some people are attracted to jobs that complement the salary with food items:

**Researcher:** And why do you think they work in the chicken farms?

**Respondent:** Because they receive eggs, chicken meat, and when working for me they do not have that, it is not the same. Only women work in the poultry shop, and it is a difficult job ... In the poultry farms salaries are low and the other place where many women work are the slaughterhouses. They give them a piece of meat and they solve a problem. They take it home or they sell it, they have money. (Agricultural cooperative representative)

A recurring theme during interviews concerned lost values and disenchanted youth. Several respondents spoke about youth having lost their values and preferring to stay idle instead of becoming active, working hard and doing something with their lives. Lack of a strong work ethic, growing materialism and consumerism, and a preference for 'easy money' and enjoyment of the present without taking responsibility for their actions were interpreted as the consequence of a deepening social crisis (see Box 3).

Searching and finding employment was described as a laborious task. In the case of university graduates, they are offered job placements relevant to their qualifications and in line with the needs of the local labour market.

### Box 3 A lost youth: poverty, uncertainty and new values

Such views about a lost youth that respondents of all ages expressed in our study are not new. In the early 2000s, Gonzalez and McCarthy (2004) pointed out the growing division between state and youth in Cuba that started in the late 1970s.

Youth played a key role in the triumph of the revolution and subsequent efforts to build a strong nation. They were a new generation rejecting individualism and materialism, embracing and exemplifying unselfishness, egalitarianism and patriotism in the service of the revolution. However, especially after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic crisis that followed, the relationship between the state and Cuba's youth started to be characterised by tensions; what many young people experienced in their daily reality – having to cope with limited opportunities and inability to fulfil their aspirations – did not match their socialist ideals. Youth accounted for the majority of unemployed in the early 1990s and their only means to survive included self-employment, black market and sex work. At that time, they were also exposed to alternative norms and ideas, often from contact with relatives living in the US. Many young people reacted by listening to Western music, dressing in Western clothes, speaking about individualism, wanting to leave the island, and engaging in stealing, transactional sex or drug use. For older generations, these youths appeared to be 'disenchanted, disillusioned, and rebellious', and to 'consciously reject official dogma and the regime's prescribed norms of behavior' – a reaction which was predicted to continue in the post-Castro period (Gonzalez and McCarthy, 2004: 34). Indeed, a study in the early 2010s also reported that youth were more interested in mobile phones and dollars, were exposed to what they saw on the Internet, and aimed to seek opportunities abroad (CDA, 2013). Similarly, Härkönen speaks about 'Cubans' heightened desires for consumption' in the post-Soviet years as they continue being exposed to such commodities through their interactions with the diaspora and tourists (2016: 8).

Many respondents in our study shared similar views about 'a degraded generation'. Some youths are visibly challenging values about working hard to make a living and prefer to spend their time in the streets having fun, asking their parents for money, or even stealing and engaging in transactional sex in order to get consumer goods, within the context of a persistent economic crisis and growing uncertainty.

Youth are now looking for easy ways of getting money ... so, what I have seen is that 80% of young people spend their time drinking, until 2 am, waking up late at 10 am and then they start looking for 50 pesos, enough money to have food, and then that is the labour day, that is it. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Youth is very bad ... There is a lot of corruption ... a lot of juvenile prostitution, many girls do not want to study but they want to be in the street ... going after men with money, such is life... Because of the situation we now have. (Woman, dentist assistant, Jovellanos)

I don't know, this generation has become degraded, and I don't know if it is because of the situation ... they have lost the values ... the principles that either men or women should have ... I can't understand but now it is normal ... Yesterday at 1.40 am ... there was so much noise and ... there were 8 or 9 boys, no way they were 18 years ... They were drinking from a bottle, why? ... Also, you go out and what you see are those girls, their way of dressing, that are just provoking ... They do things just to get some jeans. (Woman, employee in a café, Jovellanos)

### Box 3 A lost youth: poverty, uncertainty and new values (cont'd)

Everything has changed... Young people don't want to dress with cheap shoes ... they want Nike, Adidas, shoes that cost a lot, that I couldn't buy with the savings from this business. (Woman, business owner, Jovellanos)

However, some respondents made it clear that such attitudes do not apply to all Cuban youth. They noticed that when parents and teachers are close to young people and offer opportunities for discussion and guidance, and when opportunities for work are available, youth can be motivated to do something with their lives instead of staying idle and resorting to negative habits, trapped in a cycle of hopelessness and rejection.

I worked 16 years in Varadero [a famous beach resort in Matanzas] with young people ... young people here have nothing to do with young people there, in those places young people do not think about leaving the country ... but here that is what they all think about ... You see them talking and you hear they are thinking about how to leave ... because of the situation they face here ... Young people here sadly have nothing to do ... absolutely nothing to be ... Here they just go out and ... are disrupting things, yelling at people, breaking stuff, because they do not have any motivation. But in other places they have opportunities and ... they wake up, take the bus and go back to work. But here they do not have that chance. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

When they graduate, we visit them and give them a job placement according to the offers in the municipality. It is all in the municipality. We go over all the offers and see if there is anything that interests them. If they aren't interested in any, they have to do their own job search ... Most graduates accept offers. Some regret accepting and leave the position and ask us what else is available. In general, it works because we try and find them something relevant to what they studied. If they studied accounting, we find them a placement in that field. (Education provider)

However, having appropriate social networks and good connections emerged as a critical factor in finding employment – even if it is only temporary and does not involve a contract. Family members and friends often share information about potential opportunities and employers who are looking for new staff:

**Respondent:** Not many people go to the Ministry of Employment. They do

their own job search. They ask their relatives: 'Are there any jobs there? Look, I finished. I left my job'.

**Researcher:** That's basically how people find jobs here?

**Respondent:** Yes, through contacts. (Factory manager)

**Researcher:** How did you get this job [state sector]?

**Respondent:** Because my husband knows the chief of staff and asked him to tell me when there was a vacancy. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Jovellanos)

**Researcher:** So, the way to get employment is personal contacts?

**Respondent:** Yes, personal contacts, but you need to have a certain level of studies that is required. (Municipality representative)

This is in line with findings from a study on women's participation in non-agricultural cooperatives (catering, hairdressing and interior design services) in Havana and Matanzas. Most cooperative members were men; one factor accounting for women's low representation was their limited social connections. While men socialised with other co-workers, neighbours and male friends that invited each other to participate in cooperatives, women's social activities tended to involve relatives with no useful job connections (Caballero, 2018).

When asked about the skills they value, employers made it clear that applicants should have finished grade 12 at least. This is the standard requirement to seek employment in Varadero, the popular beach resort, where salaries and working conditions are deemed better than in many other places.

Well, I would like to work in Varadero. They pay you a good salary ... but they said they ask you to have completed grade 12 and that is something I do not have ... You also need a good friend to take you there because not everyone can get there. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

For many other jobs, a graduate degree is required. Soft skills are also greatly appreciated. Employers value being hard-working and motivated, showing commitment and punctuality:

Talent ... knowledge ... commitment. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

That they do the work for me, that they're loyal, that they arrive and leave on time. These things are fundamental. If you arrive early at my business, I'm happy. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

Yet the literature has also pointed out that job advertisements and employers in the service sector often look for younger, good-looking and fair-skinned women (Pañellas, 2017).

Studies have noted that the Cuban culture pays particular attention to female beauty, with women expected to take good care of their bodies and try to look attractive (Härkönen, 2016). These women are more likely to find work at restaurants, coffee shops, hotels and other places frequented by tourists (Balán, 2018; Fundora, cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017). Indeed, in many service jobs in the non-state sector, employers and other respondents emphasised the importance of recruiting young and pretty women to attract customers:

Private companies nowadays hire young, pretty women with nice bodies and nice hair. (Woman, age 48, unemployed, Jovellanos)

I will tell you based on my experience and what I have seen. I think that nowadays it matters a lot whether a woman looks pretty. A woman's chance of finding a job is affected by her looks. (Woman, state employment, Jovellanos)

Every time I go to restaurants, there are some men but mainly they hire good-looking women, very feminine ... someone clean and nice, because businesses look for people with a nice appearance ... because that attracts others to your business. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Several respondents, including many young women, expressed a wish to start their own small business as the best option to earn a good income, be in control and see their efforts bear fruits. To do so, however, they must first have funds to pay for a licence allowing them to work as self-employed in an authorised occupation, as well as paying taxes and social security contributions. Lack of such funds was the primary factor holding them back. A few others spoke about running small informal businesses, while some young people were working as unpaid or unregistered workers in their family business.



I help in the business ... whatever is needed ... anytime that I can do it ... He [father and café owner] gives me some money ... is not that they need to pay me, my father helps me with giving some money ... For one week I worked during the holidays, he gave me 250 pesos. But that isn't a salary ... he gives it to me because I am his daughter. (Girl, age 17, school student, Jovellanos)

Although young people face a lot of difficulty finding employment or starting a small business, young men may have more and better contacts to facilitate their entry into the labour market, and may face less gender discrimination than young women.

**Respondent:** For men, when searching to get a job, I think it's easier, they have more open doors than women; that also has to do with the preparation that the person has.

**Researcher:** And why do men have more open doors?

**Respondent:** Because this society is still a machista society ... Although we have already tried to remove all these barriers, they persist ... We are trying to break it for a long time now, but it is still there. (Woman, factory manager)

We women have to invest more effort and work ... because of the society we live in. Here they believe that a man deserves more of something, that he has more physical strength, and then that he deserves more jobs and money. (Woman, age 23, graduate, unemployed, Los Palos)

Respondents agreed that women with young children face the greatest difficulty in finding employment as they are expected to prioritise their children's needs at the expense of their work and performance. Employers thus prefer to recruit men, or women without children. In particular,

single mothers with young children (who are most in need of work) face the greatest problem – an issue discussed further in Section 6.3.

There is still that thing in society, when women are looking for a job, the first thing that they ask them is: do you have young children? Are you married? Because women find it difficult when they have children ... The man has no concern if his child got sick ... or of having to cook ... those things, the man is more independent than women in that aspect. (Social services representative)

**Researcher:** Now, if she were a single mother, do you think she would have more challenges to find a job?

**Respondent:** Yes, because she does not have the support of anyone. In my case, I had to wait for my children to go to school so I could get a job. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

## 4.5 'Good' and 'bad' jobs

When asked to define a 'good' job, most respondents felt it involved two things: it would be something the person enjoys doing and provides fulfilment; and it would generate adequate income to ensure a decent standard of living. A few people also mentioned having good working conditions. Mothers with young children added that a good job would be one that allows them to combine work with childcare responsibilities.

A good job ...? First, that you like it. This is fundamental ... Second, the economic part, that it provides an income, is fundamental. I think that besides the income, that it allows you to spend some time with your family. My free time is a bit scarce, but I feel like I have time, for my children, for my husband, for the house. I think those three elements are crucial. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

A good job? First of all, having good workplace health and safety conditions ... Having a good salary, which is what people really need regardless of the job they have. I think this is the main concern of all Cubans ... A salary which matches the price at which things are sold. Also, the job should be stimulating. Being appreciated when a job has been done well ... Maybe the bosses aren't polite, don't know what you are doing and treat you badly. Not getting paid for your work and so forth. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

Conversely, a 'bad' job was defined as something that does not match one's skills and preferences, and does not provide enough income. A few middle-aged women expressed their distaste for physically demanding jobs, including agricultural work. Many respondents also spoke about activities that are considered shameful, and explicitly referred to sex work (see Box 4).

Well, for me the only bad job is prostitution. Any other job that a woman does is honourable and is a good job. That's the only one for me, it's the only bad job for me – that a woman, a young woman sells her body for some money or fashionable clothes. But all the rest, any job that a woman carries out is good. Provided the job is decent and helps boost the work of the country, it's a good job. (Woman, head of human resources)

However, given the limited opportunities available and the need to earn money, respondents tended to agree that people often lack choice and have to compromise and accept whatever work there is, even if it does not live up to the ideal. This is particularly true for those in greatest need, including unskilled young women or single mothers.

We can't choose what we want to work on ... because sometimes there's the need and you are forced to do something you dislike because you know you need to

help your family or because you have a child ... You know that if you don't work, you don't eat, you don't survive ... Some people work in things they dislike but they have to do it because it's compulsory to have something. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Because necessity forces these women to accept bad jobs. Maybe they don't have skills, they don't know how to sew, they don't have office knowledge. Maybe they only have grade 6, not even grade 9. Maybe the financial situation in their house is worse than other people's but it's a job for them. (Woman, human resources manager)

## 4.6 Work and women's empowerment

All respondents agreed that women have to work. When asked to provide a reason, two main issues were identified. The first was the difficult economic situation, low salaries and the need for more family members to generate an income and pool resources. In the case of single mothers, working to provide for their children is not a choice but a necessity. Moreover, as partnerships become increasingly temporary, women need to work and have some economic autonomy to avoid depending on men, who are often described as irresponsible.

Because women must have their independence. Because tomorrow they can be alone and must face life alone. (Woman, age 31, unemployed, Jovellanos)

... women cannot depend anymore on men, in this country we cannot depend on men. (Municipality representative)

... to provide for themselves, for their needs. If there is a child, for example, they have to provide for the child ...

#### Box 4 Sex work

There is a relatively large body of literature on sex work in Cuba, especially on jineterismo, a term referring to a broad range of activities between Cubans and foreigners that include sex for cash practised mostly by women but also some men (see Leon-Himmelstine et al., 2019). Lack of well-paid jobs and the growth of international tourism have prompted young people to work in the sex industry where they can access higher income and other life opportunities, such as travelling abroad, migrating or getting married (Cabezas, 2014). Embarking on relationships with tourists also has financial benefits for others in society such as landlords, who rent rooms, and family members. Studies have found that partners and parents of jineteras encourage them to engage in such activities (Kummels, 2005; Pope, 2005). Although sex work is not a criminal offence in Cuba, the government aims to prevent it (CEDAW, 2011), and some evidence suggests that women sex workers face social stigma as they are challenging norms about morality (Pope, 2005).

The issue of sex work ('prostitution' and 'jineterismo' were used interchangeably to refer to exchange of sexual services for cash) came up several times during interviews in both field sites, and was often linked to economic stagnation, widespread financial difficulties and a shift in people's values. Respondents, including social workers, said that 'it has increased because of the life problems that exist now and that parents cannot give everything to their children', especially if there are many children in the household. In all cases, they spoke only about girls and young women, always expressing negative views about the shameful and immoral nature of this work. However, one respondent spoke about the case of a girl who was abused by her stepfather and left home without any other means of surviving, stressing that 'not all cases are the same'.

In Jovellanos, sex work was linked to international tourism in nearby Varadero, while in Los Palos, it was linked to internal migrants from the eastern provinces, many of whom have no other alternative than to resort to such activity. In some cases, adolescent girls and young women are forced by their parents or partners to do so.

... there are girls here that do that. Here there are rooms that are rented out ... But to put yourself in the place of these girls, to see what led them take this decision. Sometimes it's the parents ... and because they don't have any money. (Girl, age 16, school student, Los Palos)

... there was a case when they closed a house where many young girls were prostituting themselves ... with older men. (Woman, age 24, education provider, Los Palos)

... there is a lot of prostitution here ... The girls usually come from dysfunctional families with lots of problems, they live in extreme poverty ... and some who want to have nice dresses, live life ... It is more frequent when there are poor people, where there are scarce resources, and there are even mothers who prostitute these girls, especially from the east. (Man, business owner, Los Palos)

However, three respondents linked sex work again to a loss of values among young people and the desire to make 'easy money' and meet consumer needs: 'Prostitution, the way I see it, is a way to earn easy money ... It is easier to sell your body instead of trying to get work'.

Social services often try to help these girls and women get back to school, access training or find decent employment. But it is often very difficult for these girls to change their life:

#### Box 4 Sex work (cont'd)

About a year ago we found a girl who has three children ... they had her working in prostitution. What she did was prostitute herself with the youngest girl in her arms. We visited her, we gave her resources, we gave her everything but a cheque book because she is at working age. But she said that selling orange juice and lemon juice was not better, and she said it was better to be working in prostitution with a foreigner and the little girl (Social services representative).

If a woman is single, if she is not with the father of the child, she has even more need to work because, if not, how will she provide for herself and the child? How will she provide for the household needs, for food? Yes, women have to work. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

However, a few women respondents linked economic participation to empowerment and self-accomplishment, and enjoying a more equal relationship with their partner (also see Box 5).

I think that work was the best that could ever happen to us. Because ... there was a time that I did not work, and I depended a lot on my husband. I never liked to depend on someone ... and I did not like that my husband asked me 'on what did you spend the 10 pesos that I left on the desk?' Because yes, because we are free, because we do not have to explain to anyone what we do ... (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

... because a woman is independent and it can help because money is not only coming from one side, you complement each other ... She also gains self-confidence about what she can do, she believes in herself, she feels fine with what she does. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Women have to be independent ... you need to have your money, your

own personal goals that you want to achieve, and no obstacle can stop you. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

## 4.7 Challenges to finding employment

Study respondents discussed a number of challenges that young women face to access and succeed in employment. These include: the gender occupational segregation that characterises the Cuban labour market and norms about what women and men can do; the male breadwinner model and men's reluctance to allow their partners to work; the difficulty of combining work and household responsibilities; and exposure to sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.

### 4.7.1 Occupational segregation and gender norms

Gender norms continue, to some extent, to shape the types of work women and men aspire to and end up doing. The gender differences noted in higher education (with many girls choosing to study subjects and acquire skills linked to traditional gender roles) are also observed in the labour market. In the national survey on gender equality, 62% of Cubans reported that women should not participate in physically demanding activities, with more than 90% believing that women are better suited to work in caring professions such as teaching, healthcare and childcare, while men are more suited to being carpenters, mechanics, builders or farmers (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). Half of respondents in our study also believed that men can do any job, while women are 'delicate' by nature and their 'weak bodies' make them less capable for certain activities:

### Box 5 'Work hard, believe in yourself and try'

Celia is a 25-year-old mother who lives with her partner, their 3-year-old son and her mother in a small flat in Jovellanos. Although she was thinking of going to university, as soon as she finished school she started working to contribute to household income. She did several casual jobs, most often being an office assistant. After the birth of her child, she stayed at home 'dedicated to my son' without any income as she did not have a permanent contract and so had no maternity leave. As the family had difficulty making ends meet, one day she decided to look for a job. She contacted a local food factory, which, according to a friend, needed staff, and for the last nine months she has been working there six days a week from 7 am to 8 pm, or even later: 'sometimes there is lots of work, I arrive tired and I just want to sleep, sometimes there's too much work to do and the next day I have to get up at 6 am'. She gets paid 60 pesos a day, so earns just over 300 pesos a week. Work is necessary: 'I am working now because I really need a job, I need to help my mum and raise my child'. She spends her salary on paying for her son's nursery, and buying him clothes, shoes and food. As she is an only child, she helps her mother too. Her partner also works and all of them pool their earnings and 'manage money together as a family'.

Celia's mother also works, as a nurse, so is often unable to look after the child, who goes to a private nursery nearby, recommended by a colleague. The nursery place 'is not very expensive because she [the nursery owner] knows my situation, that I need her to look after my child because I need to work, and my mum also has to work ... My boy didn't benefit from the círculo [state nursery], because I just started work at the time and I did not have a contract. We also tried through my mum's work to get him a place, but again my mum is not the main carer, so it was not possible. Thus the owner said 'I charge 200 pesos to look after him, bathe him, give him his lunch, once you finish you can collect him' and I said perfect, because I can pay her weekly, monthly, or whenever I can, she does not get upset because she knows my situation.'

In recent months Celia has also been studying part-time (half a day a week) for a degree in education, in the provincial capital. Her cousin heard about this new course for young people without qualifications, and told Celia. After discussing it with her partner and mother, she applied and got accepted. It is a struggle to combine work, taking care of her young son, sharing household chores with her mum, and finding time to study: 'it's been very challenging but I'm trying'. But she has the support of her partner and her mother.

Celia is passionate about women studying and improving themselves: 'Today a woman can study so many things, a woman can be an engineer, technician, agronomist, many things like men; the good thing is that there's equality and there are no gender inequalities in the workplace, everyone has the right to work, we don't see the inequalities of the past ... People used to say "that's a man's job" but now women also do it, now there's equality to work, to study, everyone the same.' She dreams of the day that she will get her degree, but she is realistic about her future options as she knows there are very few jobs available and even graduates cannot find a relevant job. But she is optimistic, and her motto is: 'Work hard, study, believe that what you want is possible, have the will and try'.

Well, for me personally, there are jobs that men do that I don't do because they require more strength ... For example, a car mechanic or a carpenter. Yet there are women who are mechanics as well ... Plumbers, electricians, welders, builders – those are for men. And for women: saleswoman, manicurist, hairdresser,

laboratory technician, nurse, doctor, finer jobs. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

I wouldn't like my daughters to be a construction worker, for example. I think it is tough job for women. I wouldn't like it, but if they want to



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do it, I won't oppose that. (Woman, age 43, employee, Jovellanos)

The same gender stereotypes characterise not only the state sector but also the private sector, including self-employment and business opportunities. Small-scale studies have found that self-employed women engage in economic activities that tend to reproduce their domestic and caregiving roles (typically working in food preparation, coffee shops, hairdressing and beauty activities, sewing and providing childcare) (Morales et al., 2018; Mesa-Lago, 2017; Díaz and Echevarría, 2016; Romero Almodóvar, 2015). A study of self-employed people in Havana found that well-educated white men had better occupations than non-white women with low education (Pañellas et al., cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017). Moreover, most self-employed women are employees rather than employers (Fundora, cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017). For instance, Echevarría and Lara (in Torres Santana, 2020) report that 67% of self-employed women (in 2012) were not business owners but salaried employees.

Respondents in our study also observed that women prepare and sell food, sell clothes, have beauty salons, run cafes, hostels and nurseries. Although some thought that women can be involved in any type of business, most noted that men typically own more and larger businesses as they are more easily able to access credit – an issue discussed further in Section 8.3.

Women have the same potential as men to do any type of business. (Woman, age 48, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Normally they [business owners] are men because they are those who have a bit more income and other ways of obtaining the necessary resources. But you also see a lot of women with small businesses ... We're talking about manicuring, nurseries, cafes, hairdressers, beauty salons, massage parlours ... these are women's businesses. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

A few respondents also noted that in several cases, both employers and potential employees tend to reproduce gender expectations about what men and women can do, and allocate tasks aligned with the established 'tradition'. For instance, some job advertisements specify they are looking for male candidates only.

Sometimes men don't want women to do a certain job, even though it isn't necessarily physical, because they are not used to women doing that job. Women could do the job perfectly, but people always consider men to be stronger. (Agricultural cooperative manager)

In some areas, there are more women and in others there are more men, for many reasons – either the physical effort the job requires or because it is a tradition to be a man's or a woman's job. (Woman, age 52, factory worker, Los Palos)

... there are some positions we usually give to women, such as packing. We don't usually hire them for production. All the packers are women ... and men do the heavy lifting. (Man, factory manager)

... there still exist positions only for men and when the offers are published, they require that the applicant should be a man. (Woman, age 52, factory worker, Los Palos)

However, there have been some shifts in attitudes about what types of work men and women are suited to, and many respondents reported seeing men and especially women doing jobs traditionally linked with the opposite gender. These women are challenging gender stereotypes and becoming role models for other women determined to pursue their aspirations even if they do not comply with norms or trigger negative reactions and comments questioning

their femininity. Once again, the equality discourse was also put forward by respondents to legitimise their argument that in Cuba every person has the same right to any profession.

Well, really men and women can do the same ... A woman can be a teacher, a man can be a teacher, a woman can be an engineer, a man too, a man can manage human resources and a woman too, a woman can drive and so can a man. At least in this country, men and women can do the same careers and have the same opportunities. (Woman, head of human resources)

There are professions that people say: 'Oh, a woman driving a truck, a woman pulling cables, no'. Some people are shocked, while others admire them ... But they can do any job. Women should say: 'I can do this. I am going to take a course in hardware.' Let her work in hardware. Let her do whatever work she wants. (Man, factory manager)

I am a person that what I can do, I do. I do not care if it is a job for men, in the same way that I ride a bike, I can carry a sack of cement, I can lift a sack up, and for me there are no jobs for women or jobs for men. If I have to do it, if at that moment I need to do it, I do it. I do not care if they call me 'butch woman' (marimacha), I do not mind what they say to me. (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

Data also shows that men account for the majority of those in management and executive positions. The literature points out that perceptions about women's lack of leadership skills, limited aspirations and prioritising domestic and care roles hinder their participation in managerial roles (Calixto and Castañeda, 2015; Romero-Bartolo, 2011). In a study of eight companies in Havana, Echevarría (2011) found

that gender expectations influenced selection and promotion processes. Employees prioritised for managerial jobs were those perceived to be always available and able to work long hours, thus typically men without childcare responsibilities. Echoing such views, one respondent in our study (an employer) accepted that despite their potential, women are often overlooked:

Sometimes we limit women. Let's say there is a mountain to climb, the woman can also climb it – of course she can, just like the man. However, sometimes, we don't give women positions of responsibility because they have issues at home, they have children. Nonetheless, they could do the job perfectly. This is machismo and a taboo that needs to be overcome. (Man, agricultural cooperative manager)

I think women put those limitations on themselves sometimes. Sometimes the company, the managers, put it. (Woman, factory manager)

Núñez Sarmiento (2010) found that many professional women themselves were not willing to hold such a position as it would require too much time, increase their overall workload (as they would continue to be responsible for household tasks) and take time away from looking after their children. In our study, an adolescent girl who stated that women can take on leadership roles admitted that she personally would not like to take over the family business but would prefer her husband to do so, as it would entail too much responsibility for her.

Because he is more that type. He knows better how to manage it. I can help him, in everything I can, but I don't want to be the boss ... it would be a lot of weight and responsibility, so, I wouldn't like to be a boss. I would like to work ... but apart from that, no, I do not want to become the boss in any job. (Girl, age 17, student, Jovellanos)

In the national survey, 76% of women and 74% of men stated that both men and women can take on a managerial role (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). In our study, when asked whether a woman could become a manager, director or even the president, all but one of the 39 respondents gave positive answers. Some provided examples of women they know who are hotel managers, bank or factory directors, headteachers or senior government officials. Some also provided examples from other countries in the region:

I have a friend who is the manager in the hotel she works for. I think that women can do the same as men. For me, there is no difference. (Social services provider)

There have been cases of female presidents – not in Cuba but in other countries. There used to be a female president in Brazil. (Girl, age 15, student, Los Palos)

Well, in recent years we have seen more women managers in businesses. Before, it was only men but now women have a fundamental role in leadership ... Even here, in the municipality, the president is a woman and she has been assuming that role for a long time and has done it very well. (Man, factory manager)

Many respondents emphasised that these are relatively new developments and that the situation is gradually changing, although there is still much more to be done. Respondents spoke about equality of opportunities irrespective of gender, and women now having better academic qualifications than men.

Sure, I think we can do it [those roles]. Because we are equal, because if a man can, why a woman can't? I think women can also do it. (Girl, age 17, student, Jovellanos)

... there has been a change. The taboo of machismo has been broken a little but not as much as it should ... There are many [female] comrades in high positions, which you wouldn't see before ... positions of great responsibility in the province, in industry, in government and at a national level ... I think there is still work to be done but they are a lot more visible than they were. Women are participating more directly in society. (Man, farm owner)

Within the wider context of equal opportunities, three respondents explicitly also mentioned that apart from increasing participation of women in senior positions, Afro-Cubans are also becoming more visible – partly because of quotas enforced in state sector employment. Whether this holds true across the entire country remains unknown; a few sources argued that despite some progress, Afro-Cubans have persistently lower rates of participation than white Cubans and are under-represented in managerial positions and higher-paid jobs (see Mesa-Lago, 2013).

... so, in the past there were only white people in management positions but now, according to the party's rules, there must be two persons of colour doing the same work. And these are now enforced, so in these positions, they check that they meet the target of having a certain percentage of people of colour, so the difference does not exist anymore ... and they did that here in the hospital also considering women. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

#### 4.7.2 Challenging the breadwinner ideal and male power

The male breadwinner ideal persists within the broader machismo culture in Cuba, and continues to shape young women's economic participation. A study of men aged 21–60 in Havana noted that many continue to support masculine stereotypes, including the belief that the man is the provider of resources, the one who

brings money and food, and is mainly responsible for meeting family needs. Professional and economic success enables men to maintain high self-esteem and feel powerful and in control. A reversal of roles, with the woman supporting the man, is perceived as a shattering blow to his manhood (Formental Hernández et al., 2014).

Although the Family Code explicitly states that married women do not need spousal permission to enter a profession (OECD, 2019), 7.3% of women in the national survey on gender equality reported asking for permission to work. An urban/rural difference was identified, as 5.7% of women in urban areas asked for such permission compared to 13.5% of women in rural areas (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). Several respondents in our study confirmed that some men are still reluctant to or do not allow their partners to work, as they consider that women's employment questions their ability to provide for the family, signals their failure as breadwinners and poses a threat to their authority. In those cases, manhood is equated with the provider's role. Two young women admitted that their husbands did not want them to work on the grounds that they were able themselves to cover all household needs and thus there was no need for their wives to undertake any paid work:

My own case: initially, my husband would not let me work, he said no, that he was able to maintain the house, that I did not need to work and that he gave me everything – it is machismo. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

... there are men who don't want their wives to work. There have been arguments and problems because they say, 'women should stay at home to look after the children and husband'. But that's not so much the case anymore. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

Usually the man is the problem, this is the mentality of the Cuban. The man is me and the one who brings the money

to the house is me. (Man, business manager, Los Palos)

One adolescent boy rejected the idea that his future partner would contribute to the family income:

... I would not allow that the woman adds to the income of the family from her salary ... because I would not like it. (Boy, age 17, construction trainee, Jovellanos)

Such perceptions also shape men's and women's attitudes towards the income generated by women. Again, in the national survey on gender equality, 51% of men and women said that the income level generated by a man compared to that of his partner is not important. Yet 17% of men said that the man should earn more, and 20% reported that if the wife earns more, he will feel disadvantaged (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). While a few respondents (male and female) in our study stated that if the woman's income is higher than her partner's it is not important, the majority acknowledged that it can create serious tensions in the relationship, as some men may feel threatened and their household position challenged. The issue was interpreted as an aspect of machismo and men's need to feel dominant and strong:

When I worked in the store my salary was higher than that of my husband and nothing happened. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Jovellanos)

Sometimes it brings conflict, not always but sometimes the man ... thinks that because the woman makes more money, she is going to think of him as less of a man. But no ... even if he makes less money the important thing is to join forces ... I don't see why they react that way but sometimes it happens, and men think 'she won't care about what I say or my opinion'. It happens but it shouldn't be that way ... if the couple wants to go ahead, they should focus on the common goals they have. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

... you are asking about the control that men may lose, because if women earn more and have more economic power then they may have also more power over men ... That may happen in some cases, but not in others, it may happen but depends on each couple ... and how they think of each other. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Some men may not allow their wives to participate in activities that involve interactions with other men, whether co-workers or clients. Indeed, the owner of a farm confirmed cases of men refusing to let their wives or daughters work in the fields with male workers.

**Respondent:** Yes, that is also a problem ... a man not wanting his wife to work in the fields.

**Researcher:** And who has said as much?

**Respondent:** One came and said: 'My wife is not coming here'... Because here men and women chat, but what does that have to do with it? I ask them what the problem is. I don't like that attitude. When there is a group of people – men and women – working together, they can talk about anything, respectfully, and they talk and laugh. Some men don't like that and say neither their wife nor their daughter can go to such a place because they think a woman who works in the field will stop being faithful to her family, to her partner. (Farm owner)

### 4.7.3 Combining employment with domestic and care work

The male breadwinner stereotype continues to interact with the dedicated mother and wife ideal; this notion of women as primarily responsible for domestic and care tasks contributes to notions of women as secondary earners. As we discuss in Sections 5 and 6, Cuban women continue to spend a disproportionate amount of their time and energy on household and care tasks (CEM-FMC et al., 2018), and they are expected to

continue performing them adequately even when they also do paid work. Many study respondents commented that women can do paid work and contribute to household income on condition that they do not neglect their primary responsibilities and balance work with family commitments.

I don't see anything wrong that women could be independent in the sense that she can work, that she can provide income to the family, or whatever, but as long as she doesn't abandon her responsibilities to her family. (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)

... if the balance goes heavier on one side, that means that things are not going well. This is fundamental and the family is the priority. The economic part is also important to feel good about yourself. But if your family is not ok, the family comes first, and the rest is secondary. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

Of course, women face certain obstacles which ... us men don't face. When a young child has to go to the nursery, who takes him? The father goes to work, so the mother has to take him. And when it's time to cook, the woman cooks. When it's time to do the washing, the woman washes ... Women have a lot more work to do than men. I feel that sometimes us men don't realise how much they do. Even when they work outside the home, they also look after the house, they look after the children. Few men go to the kitchen or mop the floors. Those are considered women's jobs and there you can see the concept of machismo. (Man, farm owner)

However, many working women struggle to strike the desired balance. Supportive partners who share household responsibilities without feeling that doing so threatens their masculine identity can enable their wives to pursue their

careers. Supportive family members who help with household chores and caring also help working women. Two study respondents spoke about working from home, so that they are able to look after their children. Others (especially women with young children but no access to childcare) often decide not to undertake paid work until their children start primary school. Available sources emphasise that women's preference for low-paid state jobs is linked to the maternity provisions such jobs provide, namely maternity leave and childcare. Some have linked the lack of childcare provision to the fact that nearly half of all Cuban women remain economically inactive (Torres Santana, 2019b). However, there are also women who have no choice other than to work. As one respondent noted:

There are women who have to go out before the babies are six months old, many women have to go out because their economic situation is not so good. (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

#### 4.7.4 Harassment and violence in the workplace

The national survey on gender equality presented data on intimate partner violence, with 38.4% of women reporting having experienced psychological violence, 6.6% physical violence and 4.9% sexual violence at some point in their life (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). Additionally, femicide rate was 0.99 per 100, 000 inhabitants in 2016 (Government of Cuba, 2019b). Such data shows that violence against women and girls is a problem in Cuba (Torres Santana, 2019a). However, there is very little evidence about sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, with the exception of women engaging in sex work (Pope, 2005; Cabezas, 2004). The Criminal Code provides penalties for sexual harassment but without clarifying the context in which it takes place (OECD, 2019). In 2013, CEDAW expressed concerns about the absence of any provision on sexual harassment in the workplace in the Cuban Labour Code and of any relevant complaints (CEDAW, 2013). Although none of our study

respondents reported having experienced violence in the workplace, four women did acknowledge that it happens, and considered it as another expression of machismo that can deter women from seeking work. However, people were somewhat reluctant to discuss the issue, which should be explored further.

Well, in the working spaces, there are always some men who are more macho than others and then women, the women always feel more pressure. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

**Respondent:** ... the way some employers think is that they can mistreat workers. Simply because I am the boss and I need you to do this and I want you to do it and that's it. Then sometimes maybe so you do not lose your job, because you need money, well you hold on, as we say literally, and that's it. You keep working and tolerate his behaviour.

**Researcher:** And do you think that influences the decision of women to continue working or quit looking for a job?

**Respondent:** Depending on your needs. If you need it, well, you just keep going and look forward, and tolerate the boss's behaviour. If not, well, you say 'Bah, I'm going to drop it because I'm not going to be enduring abuse'. And you face it again and then just leave your job – but it depends. (Woman, age 28, employee, Los Palos)

Because there are jobs where the boss mistreats you ... and it influences the woman's decision to work. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Los Palos)



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# 5 Unpaid domestic work

Although spouses are legally obliged to share household chores, women continue to shoulder most of the burden, and women who do paid work have a double working day. Other female family members also provide their unpaid labour – most often daughters who learn to perform their domestic obligations from an early age to prepare for running their own household one day. Domestic tasks are still perceived to be women's work; if a man is seen to do them, it can challenge his manhood. However, one-third of women respondents admitted that they receive help from their partners and spoke about an ongoing change and a more gender-equitable division of domestic labour, which is now demanded by young professional women and facilitated by mothers who teach their sons to undertake such work.

## 5.1 Women's double working day

The CEDAW report (2011) argues that the legislation attributes economic value to unpaid domestic activities, and that women and men have to share these activities equally. Children are taught at school that they should collaborate with adults in household chores and appreciate each other's work (CEDAW, 2011). Torres Santana (2019b) emphasises the significant contribution of unpaid household work to the Cuban economy – its economic value was estimated to be equivalent to 20% of GDP in 2002. The national survey on gender equality estimated that Cuban women spend 26.51 hours weekly (on average) doing unpaid domestic work, compared with 17.27 hours for men. Women are disproportionately responsible for cleaning, washing, ironing and cooking, while men tend to do household repairs and help with taking out the trash and with food purchases. Women in rural areas and in eastern provinces are more involved in household chores than women in urban areas and in other provinces.

Not sharing household work was also mentioned as a cause of arguments between partners. Accordingly, 30% of Cubans identified domestic responsibilities to be a problem for women (CEM-FMC et al., 2018).

In our study, respondents agreed that domestic work largely remains women's responsibility, affecting their overall well-being as they have a 'double working day' with limited time to rest. And as one respondent stressed, because this unpaid domestic work takes place at home, it remains invisible and undervalued. Lack of household time-saving amenities also increases women's time poverty (see Box 6).

Because after finishing our work day, we have to work at home, but this work isn't paid by anyone and we have to wash, clean, iron, attend to the children, our husband, everyone ... And those of us who don't work outside but work at home have to spend all day with a broom or looking after our father or looking after our grandfather, and it's work that isn't seen, it's invisible work. (Woman, church leader, Los Palos)

How much time I spend? ... It depends on the job. But even if the woman works, she spends all the time she has at home. So be it a Sunday, she also needs to do them. Like me, I have to get up at 5 in the morning to wash everything, make food, and be able to come and work here. We women always look for time. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

Because the day has only 24 hours and if we are foolish enough [to take on

### Box 6 A washing machine: woman's best friend

A few women commented that one reason why it is so hard to combine their domestic and work responsibilities is the time they have to spend on various tasks but without the necessary time-saving amenities. Two respondents emphasised the importance of having a washing machine to free up time for other activities:

If I tell you, how many things I do here ... cooking, washing, cleaning ... But now I can't complain because in terms of washing, thank God, I have a wonderful washing machine that does everything, and I just take the clothes to the drawers and that's all. Because I leave at 5 am to go to work and return at 5 or 6 in the afternoon, and while I am away, I put all the clothes in the washing machine ... It is the best. I even named her; I called her Mirana. She helps me, she is my friend.

paid work], we have to spend 24 hours working at work and at home. We don't have time for our own rest. (Woman, age 35, state employment, Jovellanos)

However, some women also admitted spending less time on domestic chores when they live in extended households, which is often the case, given the housing crisis and financial problems that force many to live in inter-generational households and pool resources (including labour). Mothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, aunts and sisters often contribute their unpaid labour and enable other family members to do paid employment:

I think [women do] very little. Because they have their mother. If you realise that in Cuba, we live three generations in the same house or even four generations ... That is to say, I have my grandmother or my mother to cook for me and so I go out ... I go to work. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

our respondents repeated several times the old saying that 'women belong in the house, men belong in the street'. This domestic/public divide organises and normalises feminine and masculine activities. Those taking place at home belong to women and correspond better to their feminine attributes, while those taking place outside the home are more suited to men:

Because that's our task. Because these activities are our task. There are men who do help women in housework, but I think they are few, men belong more in the streets. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

... those things are usually meant to be done by women because they are considered feminine. For example, the housework is mostly linked to women ... because it has always been this way. The person responsible for the house is the woman ... for washing the dishes, cooking, ironing, mopping the floor, all the domestic duties. The man has this 'macho' stereotype that he is responsible for bringing money to the house. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

## 5.2 Women, housework and gender norms

In her study in Havana, Härkönen (2016) speaks about the gendered division of space between the house (la casa) (considered women's domain) and the street (la calle) (considered men's); this is not just in Cuba but evident across the wider Caribbean region. Indeed,

Girls start helping their mothers from an early age, as a way of learning to prepare to run their own household one day (Romero Almodóvar, 2011). Many women in our study emphasised

that their mothers taught them that they have ‘obligations’ at home, which they have to meet. Mothers also confirmed that they force their older daughters to help at home and learn to perform domestic chores. However, they felt that younger girls are less interested in learning to do these things now, compared to the older generation:

When I was a child, I did it with my mother. My mother always taught me that I have obligations at home which I need to do. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

My mom always told me that we have to help at home ... before they forced me because I did not want to, but now it’s not like I want to do it much, but I have to do it, because I need to help in the house. (Woman, age 20, university student, Los Palos)

I tell her [the oldest daughter] that she must help me, other times I leave her alone. Sometimes I push her to help me, because I need someone to help me since there are three children. I do not push her to help me regularly like it is her obligation. Because they are kids you must teach them, not to cause them harm but rather to prepare them for the future when they will need to do these things themselves. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Girls spoke about learning to perform household chores since early adolescence and having to help their mothers, although some admitted that their studies have to take priority and that mothers only expect them to help when they can. However, this was not the case with their brothers; four adolescent girls complained that their brothers do not help at all and are allowed to do ‘absolutely nothing’ and spend time with their friends.

**Researcher:** At what age did you start to help with the domestic tasks?

**Respondent:** Since I was 13 years old, I clean, I mop the floor, I wash.

**Researcher:** And how long do you spend doing those activities?

**Respondent:** Well, sometimes I spend three hours. Sometimes I spend less time, that depends on the activities I must do that day. Before I go to bed, I do some of them, like mop the floor or things like that. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

**Researcher:** What chores do you help with at home?

**Respondent:** Everything ... I clean, I cook, I scrub, everything, I pick up everything, me and my sister.

**Researcher:** What does your brother do at home?

**Respondent:** He does nothing. (Girl, age 15, school student, Jovellanos)

... my brother is the one that does nothing. Because he spends time mucking about in the street, passing time with his friends. (Girl, age 16, school student, Los Palos)

## 5.3 Men, housework and gender norms

The literature notes that men ‘traditionally’ do not help with household chores as these are considered women’s work (Romero Almodóvar, 2011) and should be avoided, otherwise ‘it erodes their virility’ (Nuñez Sarmiento, 2010). Thus, Härkönen (2016) notes that a man often needs to live with a woman to have the domestic

work done. In our study, respondents confirmed that men can return home after work and take a bath, watch a television programme or go out with friends, while women have to continue working. Or they can help with tasks that do not question their masculinity, those classified as 'manly things', such as buying groceries, cleaning the yard or taking out the trash. However, some women questioned such distinctions, arguing that men can also perform the same domestic tasks as women, and some men do (although the majority still embrace the machista ideal):

There are things that specifically belong to women that a man can also do ... In the end, these days there are men who do the same things that women do at home, but they are a small percentage. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Some men do everything women do ... but the majority don't ... because men are machistas. They don't think certain things are men's jobs and they don't realise we can all do the same things. What us women can do men can do too. And what men can do, us women can do. Why can't men mop? Why can't they clean one day? Why can't they start making food when women are working? But some do. (Woman, lawyer)

Because we live together. We have the same rights. To share everything. And I think that yes, we must share everything, work, all the tasks of the house. I think that when the couple lives together and gets along, they should share all things. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

One-third of women respondents reported that their partners help with some domestic tasks, sometimes taking the initiative without being asked. Men regularly help with cooking, cleaning and washing. This sharing of domestic tasks is greatly appreciated and welcomed by working women:

My husband helps me a bit ... he helps me in the kitchen. If he uses something, he cleans up after himself, he doesn't make a mess. If I'm washing, he helps me. We help each other out. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

... if I am working, my husband is the one that makes the things in the kitchen, sometimes me, it depends. My husband likes helping, so I let him help me. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

Well, in my case, my husband helps me in everything. All the time, when I was pregnant, when I gave birth and now. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Jovellanos)

However, if I ask him for help, he helps, which is the important thing. Sometimes he helps without me asking because he says that, although he is working hard, he understands my problems. So, he says: 'What do I need to do? What needs doing?' or 'Is there anywhere I need to go.' (Woman, age 48, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Several men also confirmed helping their partners or mothers with household tasks, emphasising that they do not consider it a challenge to their masculinity, but they recognise the need to help at home and feel satisfied by doing so. In some cases, men are forced to help out of necessity, and then gradually get more involved.

Yes, I do all that at home, I do the dishes, the laundry, the ironing, and I clean for her [sick grandmother], and I cook for her ... Sometimes when my parents have events and other tasks to do, I stay at home and I have my little sister, but she does not know how to do things yet. So, the person who cooks, helps my grandma and other

stuff – it’s me, and that does not make me feel I am less masculine ... I rather feel myself useful at home and I can help my family. (Man, age 18, self-employed, Jovellanos)

I was raised by a family in which women were always those who did these tasks so I never even learnt how to fry an egg ... then when I got married and I lived with my wife ... and that was a bit shocking because we all get sick and then she was sick in bed, and I was not even able to warm up the food ... so I have been working on this and getting better ... I learnt to do a few things and I do the dishes, but cooking is something I do not do yet. (Man, age 25, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Nonetheless, some men of all ages implied that taking on – or being seen doing – what are regarded as ‘women’s tasks’ would challenge how they think about themselves. Most recognised that they have been raised without having to do any domestic chores and expected that what their mother did would be performed by their wife, so there was never a need to learn; thus, it would be difficult to start doing these chores now as an adult.

... because I was never taught ... up to today I have never been taught that. (Man, age 25, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Although there are a lot of men who don’t want to clean and there’s a lot of men too who wash and clean, above all they clean, but with the door closed – so no one sees them. (Woman, church leader, Los Palos)

Studies provide evidence of gradual changes in attitudes and behaviours, especially among younger couples, as young professional women expect that their partners will share domestic responsibilities, thus negotiating and promoting a more gender-equitable division of domestic work

(Díaz González, 2010; Nuñez Sarmiento, 2010). Respondents in our study also agreed that some change is underway. The ideology of machismo is being challenged as everything is changing, and women have to work and earn money and thus have less time at home. Television programmes showing men sharing domestic tasks and helping their partners may also contribute to shifting gender norms and make such activities more socially acceptable.

This has changed ... because women began to work ... Before, women used to stay at home, their work was at home, as housewives. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

... my husband was raised by his grandmother and his mother, then, because he was the ‘machito’ of the house, how can a macho mop the floor? ... He was born giving orders and that was it ... Then when we started to live in our house by ourselves, he started to change a bit, he and this work I have here, where basically I spent most of the day ... he had to take on other roles. He now warms up his breakfast, he makes his own coffee, he goes to do the shopping and those things. (Woman, age 52, business owner, Los Palos)

My husband does these things as well. Many men nowadays help their wives. In the past there were more machistas. Now ... I don’t know if it’s because they have seen that machismo has started to finish ... There are more programmes on TV showing men helping their wives. (Woman, state employment, Jovellanos)

Apart from wives, mothers also play a critical role in preparing their sons to take on an equal share of domestic chores – something that many respondents explicitly recognised. Mothers are the ones who should teach their sons from an early age to undertake household work as they

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do with their daughters. Some said they already do so:

My older son does a lot of things, and I ask him to do, and he cleans and does everything. (Woman, self-employed, Jovellanos)

It is very important to teach boys how to do these things ... it is about including that in the normal education they receive. Men need to learn about helping and collaborating at home, because we all together do more now ... So first you teach them by playing when they are young, as she does,

'clean this or clean that' ... and you are stimulating them ... because we no longer need to live according to that machista idea about women doing everything and men doing nothing, just waiting for women to bring them a glass of water ... So, we now work and then we come back home to add more working hours. (Woman, self-employed, Jovellanos)

If I teach a boy to do one thing and teach a girl to do another, then I'm starting to create a macho inside my home. The roles should be the same. (Woman, age 47, business owner, Cárdenas)



# 6 Unequal parenthoods

This section explores notions of motherhood and fatherhood in Cuban society. While parenthood is perceived as a blessing for men and women, it is particularly important for women as it is seen as the ultimate expression of womanhood. Although parents are legally expected to share responsibility for their children, in practice women continue to be the primary caregivers, sacrificing and dedicating themselves to their children. Many men are increasingly more involved in their children's lives and help their partners; however, there is also a growing trend of men abandoning their pregnant girlfriends or leaving their families, with women forced to take on sole responsibility. Thus, the number of single mothers has risen in recent years and many women experience great difficulty making a living and balancing work with childcare, often with no state or family support.

## 6.1 Parenthood and motherhood

The Family Code recognises the family as the fundamental unit of Cuban society and grants equal rights and duties to women and men in family relations. Parents are expected to act in the best interests of their children (CEDAW, 2011). From our interviews, it emerged that parenthood is still highly regarded in Cuba. Despite difficulties, having children was presented as a blessing that derives from the biological urge to reproduce, but one that also makes people happier and ensures that they will be looked after in older age.

I think so, that is a very common saying about our biology – ‘you are born, you reproduce, you get old and then you die’. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

A child is the greatest gift you can get. A child is part of you. (Girl, age 15, school student, Los Palos)

I think having a child makes your life happier. You have someone that will look after you when you are old, sick and in need. Children are the ones that will look after their parents in the future. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Apart from the joys of parenthood, respondents agreed that the birth of a child changes life for ever and having someone totally dependent on you can be a rewarding but also an extremely demanding experience. Although early marriage and/or pregnancy happens, it is not desirable, as adolescents are not considered emotionally and financially ready to take on the responsibility of raising a child. The consequences are more severe for girls and, as already noted in Section 3, they may be forced to leave school to look after the baby, with or without support (also see Samuels et al., 2020).

... a girl of 15 or 16 years is still studying and has not matured enough to face a pregnancy, maybe what also changes is her family's support ... Her life is going to change, so adolescents should think about that because a girl of that age would have to drop out of school and sometimes parents don't accept that and force them to go through an abortion ... Many things get difficult because they are not prepared psychologically, they don't have their bodies and minds completely mature to face that. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Life changes completely. When there is a pregnancy, everything changes. For example, if you are studying, you have to interrupt your studies. If you are not studying, if you have finished studying, it's the same ... I think everything changes when you have a baby. Life changes completely. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

Parents and adolescent girls alike expressed the view that it is better to avoid pregnancy until girls have finished their education, started working and have acquired some experience of life so that they can step into that new stage and focus on their maternal responsibilities.

So, once she [her daughter] has achieved what she wants, she can say 'now I can have children'. I would like her to enjoy her youth, that she studies, works, that she fulfils her own aspirations in life. Then she can fulfil her aspiration to become a mother. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

... when I have enjoyed my youth. When I have lived enough experiences and I'm capable of having a child, that's when I would like to have a child. (Girl, age 14, school student, Jovellanos)

Children appear to be particularly important for women, and respondents perceived motherhood as the ultimate expression of womanhood. All felt that it is of utmost importance for a woman to become a mother. A Cuban anthropologist observed that women 'are programmed' from childhood to have a family, and no alternative option seems to exist for them (CDA, 2013).

Motherhood is the most beautiful thing in the world. (Woman, age 34, dental assistant, Jovellanos)

... it's something superior, women should feel proud to become mothers

and to know that a piece of yourself depends on you. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

While not all men are capable of being good fathers and they can be allowed not to have children if they do not want to, most respondents had difficulty accepting that a woman may choose not to have children and focus on her career or live a life without responsibility for a child. It is often considered 'natural' for a woman to want to have children, far more than for a man, and infertility problems were mentioned as the main reason for women not having children. This finding contrasts with the national survey on gender equality, in which 62% of Cubans agreed that 'a woman can feel good as a woman even if she does not have children' (CEM-FMC et al., 2018).

Well, a woman who is dedicated to her job and does not want to have children ... No, I don't think it is fine to only focus on work because what's the purpose of life in general? Children, family. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

If she is only focused on work, maybe she isn't interested in having children. Some people might criticise her. In general, the natural law dictates that women must have children unless they have a health problem or aren't able to have children, but I don't know. I wouldn't criticise. If that's what she decides, it is up to her. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

## 6.2 Maternal and paternal responsibilities

Legislation recognises the shared responsibility of mothers and fathers to care for, educate and guide their children. As discussed in Section 2.2, maternity protection and related benefits have been extended to fathers, although only mothers can receive social assistance for children with

severe disabilities (CEDAW, 2011). However, in the national survey on gender equality, nearly 60% of men and women agreed that babies need to be closer to their mother than their father, and 51% believed that a man cannot provide the same care to his child as a woman does. Interestingly though, 48% of women and 47% of men also expressed the view that the father should play an equal role in the care and education of children. However, despite good intentions, women reported spending 5.41 hours on unpaid childcare weekly, compared with 2.22 hours for men (CEM-FMC et al., 2018).

Regarding the parental responsibilities of women and men, two views emerged in our study (see also Samuels et al., 2020). Most respondents stressed that at least in theory, mother and father have the same responsibilities towards their children – that is, to provide them with emotional and material support to become good citizens and productive members of society.

... the children belong to both of them and the upbringing is a responsibility of both, it's not like the mother is responsible for raising a child, and the father only earns the money ... I think they have the same responsibilities. (Woman, age 20, university student, Los Palos)

They both have the same responsibilities because it's the duty of both the father and the mother to raise their children, to set a good example, to provide for them. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

On the other hand, others have observed that women have more responsibilities. In her study on kinship and love in Havana, Härkönen (2016) writes that Cuban men and women experience different needs and expectations of care, with women being valued as 'loving nurturers'. Similarly, Andaya speaks about their 'supposedly natural affinity for nurturance and reproductive labour' (2014: 93), an idea that continued to prevail in post-revolution times. Several respondents said that from the time a

woman gets pregnant until she dies, she is always responsible for her child. Children belong to their mother as women bring children into the world; determined by biology, the mother–child bond is thus thought to be a much stronger one than that between the father and his child.

A baby changes the life of the woman more than that of a man. We cannot compare. Children are women's children, they belong to the mother. (Woman, age 34, dental assistant, Jovellanos)

Mothers are always there. Children are born from their mothers after all. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

... it is important for a man to have a child ... but not to the same extent that it is for a woman ... because at the end, the man contributes to making a child, but he can move on with his life, as if nothing happened. He doesn't have to carry the baby for nine months in his body. (Woman, age 23, graduate, employee, Cárdenas)

Mothers are thus expected to show greater dedication and always prioritise their children's needs over their own. As they are the ones giving birth and breastfeeding, they are the ones expected to stay at home and take care of the children, while their partners go to work and provide for the family according to the male breadwinner ideal.

Normally it is the woman who has to stay at home and look after the child, while the man goes outside to work ('La mujer a la casa, el niño y el hombre a la calle al trabajo' – the woman in the house with the baby, the man in the street for work). (Woman, age 23, graduate, unemployed, Los Palos)

Almost always ... Mostly the mother always has the overload. Why? Nothing

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more than for being a woman. (Woman, age 35, state employment, Jovellanos)

Similarly, respondents suggested that working mothers have to do their best to balance family and work responsibilities and always ‘put family first’. This is in line with findings from other studies. For instance, Nuñez Sarmiento (2005) found that 13 out of 15 men in her survey argued that ‘women have to be mothers in the first place, then workers and lovers’, and only three accepted that the three roles can be performed simultaneously. Similarly, women felt that they should combine all roles, yet motherhood was the most important of all. In our study, some respondents even condemned women who do not prioritise their children’s needs as ‘bad mothers’ and responsible for family problems.

A woman has to act like a mother always. One must have time for her children. I always have time. And I always give myself time to do everything at home, to see my friends, but I always take care of my children. (Woman, age 31, unemployed, Jovellanos)

The responsibilities fall more on the mother’s side ... Because the father spends less time at home and not all fathers assume the responsibilities that they should. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

The family faces problems and becomes dysfunctional because as a mother, if you don’t dedicate time to your children, if you don’t know how they’re behaving, the father who has to do it doesn’t care ... Women are mothers because we look after these little details – how their grades are going, how they’re behaving, with whom my child spends time – the father doesn’t. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

While respondents gave a rather uniform picture of women as mothers, they did note that all men

are not the same. They distinguished between men who do not want to have children, men who want to have children and to look after them, and men who have children but show no care or parental responsibility. Most respondents identified two emerging trends, one positive, one negative. The first is that men have started showing greater interest in getting involved in their children’s lives and sharing responsibilities with their partners, more than ever before. Women talked about their husbands helping them with the baby, feeding, cleaning and changing nappies, or helping at school, especially when they are also working and need support.

Many men do everything as well. They look after their children, take them to school, help their wife ... Well, there are men who are good and who help their wives, and they do the same things. (Woman, head of human resources)

Because my husband changed his life completely. He was not as he is now ... He has dedicated himself to the family, he has dedicated himself to the house since our daughter was born. And for me it is important, and I think it changes a man. (Woman, age 24, education provider, Los Palos)

Men and women both spoke about the shift currently taking place towards more gender equality. Many men are accepting and sharing parental responsibilities with their partners without feeling that doing so makes them less of a man, but are to an extent motivated by their wish to enjoy fatherhood and the need to help their working partners. Although welcoming such changes, respondents also contended that care responsibilities are still not shared equally, and that it will take more time for new practices to become accepted as the norm.

It has improved because it wasn’t like this before. Women used to have even more responsibilities when it came to children. Now we are nearly the same. Not equal, but nearly. (Woman, human resources manager)

Because the man has as much family responsibility as the woman. But although this has changed, still a lot is missing because many family responsibilities, although not all, still fall on the woman. For example, bathing small children, preparing food ... That is changing, but that is also not a thing that can be achieved today or tomorrow. There are still years needed to achieve such equality but if they have the same rights, how can it not happen? (Man, age 56, business manager, Los Palos)

The other emerging trend is far less positive. It seems men are often abandoning their pregnant girlfriends or leaving their partners without much support, thus contributing to the growing number of single mothers forced to shoulder all domestic responsibilities and raise their children alone.

The irresponsibility is so much ... boys don't care ... they don't see responsibilities, they focus on the sexual act, as a moment of pleasure, and they don't see its consequences ... They don't see a pregnancy as their responsibility ... In some cases, the mother is giving birth and the father doesn't even know that she is giving birth ... (Woman, age 43, employee, Jovellanos)

... it is not the same to be a father. A father can be anyone ... in my case, the father of my children, he does not care about anything. I do not tell him anything either. He is the dad and he must know what his responsibilities are, and he must care. But he does not. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

### 6.3 Single parenthood

The number of single mothers and female-headed households in Cuba has been increasing, though it is difficult to find accurate data. Torres Santana (2020) notes that 40% of Cuban households were headed by a woman in 2011 compared to 28% in 1981, and it is estimated that this will rise to

50% by 2030. However, evidence indicates that single mothers and female heads of household, especially women with incomplete education, are more vulnerable and affected by poverty than men (Campoalegre, 2013; Mesa-Lago, 2013), and most of them do not participate in the labour force: only 39% considered themselves to have a stable, formal job compared to 65% of men who head households (Torres Santana, 2020).

Study respondents stressed that many single mothers struggle to survive and are unable to access any support. The situation is particularly difficult for low-income mothers who do not receive any financial assistance from their partners and need to work as well as look after their children.

... because being a single mother, you dedicate yourself to your children, you need strength to assume that responsibility. Some women have done it because they believe and trust themselves that they can do it, like 'I can work and do anything to feed my children' because a mum with children would do anything for them ... So yes, it is difficult because sometimes they don't have anyone who can look after them or they don't have support from their families. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Well, if she is a single mother then that is society's problem ... because being a single mother means that the man who was with her wasn't capable, was a coward, wasn't able to assume the responsibility for the pregnancy with her. Thus, she is brave, she deserves everything, the more help she can be given, the better. (Girl, age 16, pre-university student, Los Palos)

Indeed, single mothers are given priority for employment and childcare. Those unable to find work are provided with social assistance, which includes a monthly benefit and housing support. Some respondents spoke about cases of young single mothers in their communities who could

not find work but received economic and material assistance until they were able to send their children to school and then look for work, or who have been assisted to send their children to public nurseries. However, as discussed in Section 2.4, government expenditure and numbers of those receiving social assistance have been declining (ONEI, 2019b) while needs are increasing; thus, not all needs can be met, leaving some single mothers in a desperate situation (see Box 7).

I have a friend in this situation, and she got help from the social benefits office. She has three or four children and she cannot go to work because she

has nowhere to leave her children, so the office supported her economically and gave her mattresses and clothes for the children, shoes, towels, sheets ... I know also of another case of someone with three little children. She went there and got economic support ... but the economic help is given until she works ... so it is not permanent, but only to help you out while your children are young ... because people think that it is forever, but they will help you only until your children grow and then you can leave them safe and go to work. (Woman, self-employed, Jovellanos)

### **Box 7 A single mother in need of social support**

Teresa, 24, has two children aged 6 and 7. Her partner is in jail but ‘even when he is free, he does not care about his children’. She lives in a three-generational household in Jovellanos. The economic situation is very bad; she lives in the crowded two-room house along with her children and nine other family members.

Motherhood for her ‘is good and sad at the same time. It is good because you experience what it is to be a mom, you know what motherhood is. At the same time, it is sad because sometimes you do not have the support of anyone, and you are alone and you do not have anything to feed your child, and there is no help from anyone.’

She attended school until grade 11 and then she dropped out because she got pregnant. After the baby was born, she decided to stay at home to look after the child as other family members could not help (‘everyone gets up early and leaves’) and she could not afford to pay for childcare so that she could go out for work. She thinks a single mother faces greater difficulty getting a job ‘because she does not have the support of anyone. In my case, I had to wait for my children to go to school so I could get a job’. She started doing temporary jobs, such as working in a café and in a tobacco plantation; ‘sometimes when I was working, it was tough work’. On average, she earned 30 pesos daily, which she used to pay for food, children’s clothes and electricity.

Teresa is not currently working as ‘now there is no work’. But as her family also faces survival issues and ‘no one can help you’, there are ‘things that you have to do ... Well, for example, you can sleep with someone that helps you to solve your problem, that is one ... well, in my case, I am doing it, I do it only because of my children. I have two children, I do not have support from the father of my children, nor from my family.’

Although she is aware that there is social support for cases like hers, she has not received any such help, and she is in despair. ‘The only support that helps in these cases is social assistance. But it doesn’t really help ... Because in my case, they have never visited me ... it is more than a year that I went and requested a piece of land and they haven’t given it to me yet ... For example, that the father of my children is in jail, they give you a cheque, they help you economically ... they give you a pot, a mattress, those sorts of things. In this case, I am a critical case, but they did not help me with anything’. She believes that people like her, who seek social assistance, are ‘... people in need, they are not faking it. They are real people who need support. If they are asking for a piece of land, they should give it to them. So that they can build their own house and raise their children in a house where there are not that many people.’



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Interestingly, two women respondents also spoke about cases where women (very few compared to men) abandon their partners and children. Single fathers also face difficulty to fulfil their responsibilities, but in their case, they are perceived to struggle not with making ends meet but with fulfilling the child's emotional needs (something a woman is 'natural' at):

It might be difficult as well because it might not be easy to be a single father, maybe the wife died or she left

him, so it's a responsibility he has to assume ... If the mother is around it is different, children belong to their moms, they are there all the time with the mom ... It depends if the father helps so the child has a good life, but if not ... it's difficult, it's not easy to be a single mom that you know you need to support the child all by yourself. But it's not easy to be a single father either, it might be difficult too. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

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# 7 Household decision-making

This section shows that adolescent girls and young women in Cuba are involved in decisions that affect their lives. Regarding decisions about key family matters, factors determining the extent of women's involvement include, household type, income-generation ability, good communication skills, but also adherence to traditional norms around male authority, and the threat of violence.

Most adolescent girls and young women respondents who were still living with their families said they are involved in decisions such as what to study at university, when to leave school or get married and have a baby. Family members and partners tend to provide advice and support, although there have been cases (as noted in previous sections) where, for example, parents objected to an early pregnancy and men did not allow their partners to work.

**Researcher:** What role do you have in decision-making at home?

**Respondent:** Well, I am of legal age, I make my own decisions, sometimes I consult with them [parents] as we all live together. (Woman, 31 years, unemployed, Jovellanos)

When it comes to deciding about major family issues and large household purchases, differences emerged depending on the type of household. Those living in extended households comprising three or more generations reported that older household members (such as the grandmother, mother, father or uncle) either dominated or were actively involved in decision-making. In the case of nuclear families, most respondents spoke about joint decision-making that takes place

after discussing the issue. This was particularly the case when women were also working and earning some money. Very few respondents (both men and women) said that the man takes decisions alone without consulting his partner or other family members.

Not all the time has been this way and I tell you that: when we were living together (with his mother- and grandmother-in-law) it was different, but now that we live the two of us together, the one that decides it is me. (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

I live alone with my wife, and the decision is made by the two of us, because there is no one else involved. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

These findings are in line with the national survey on gender equality – 71% of women and nearly 53% of men did not think that men are better decision-makers than women. More than 86% of men and women agreed that couples should make the most important decisions together, even if the woman has a higher income. Only 4% of women felt that women should be the decision-makers in that case, while 10% of men and 6% of women still believed that in all circumstances, men should be the household decision-makers. There were higher percentages of men and women agreeing that men should be the sole decision-makers in the eastern provinces and in rural areas (CEM-FMC et al., 2018).

In some cases, those with greater experience of the issue under consideration make the final decision. Thus, women typically dominate

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decisions in areas linked with their domestic and reproductive roles, such as children's education or family health or nutrition:

Yes, I think it's fine [for women to make decisions]. Maybe us women have a better knowledge of what is needed. Women know better what is needed, what the children need. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

In other cases, some reported that men are the ultimate decision-makers – because they earn more, or reflecting tradition according to which men are the household head and thus the ones to decide (this argument was often linked to religious beliefs according to which as Christ is the head of the church, the man is the leader of the household), or because the partner accepts men's physical power.

In most families, the men are the ones that make most of the decisions. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

Why me? because I am the one who works ... She works but she keeps her money for herself because I earn more money. (Man, age 25, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Well, I always, even if I take the decisions, even though I am the head of the family, I always talk with my wife, in many decisions even in the business, I always ask for her opinion. (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)

... that's always been the case, the man is the boss. (Woman, self-employed, Los Palos)

Since a long time ago, man has always dominated, he is stronger ... by nature, he is stronger than the woman. (Woman, employee, Los Palos)

When asked about household decision-making, most respondents linked relationship power dynamics with income-generation. Having their own income repeatedly emerged as the key factor enabling women to have a say in household decision-making, while earning more than the woman was the key factor enabling men to be the main decision-makers.

... both should decide, because if that money comes from both sides, the two need to agree, not only the woman. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

If she works and is independent, self-confident, I don't see why not, it depends, if she is alone with her child, she needs to do it but if there are other people, they should sit together and manage the money together as a family. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

I know some cases where the money that the woman earns is decided between the two, but I know many cases that ... [what to spend money on] is decided by the woman who earns it, who works for it, she decides what should be done with it. Well because ... in this case it is she who is working hard to earn money ... it is she who decides what to do with what she earned ... (Man, self-employed, Los Palos)

In all cases, respondents spoke about the need to have good communication, respect each other's views, and try to discuss the issue and reach agreement.

**Respondent:** We have good communication and we take decisions together ... well, I can't say always, because sometimes there are decisions which are benefiting one person. But we always take into account the conversation and reach an agreement ...

**Researcher:** And when you don't agree with each other, what happens?

**Respondent:** When I think that he's not right I try to give an explanation and take into account his view, so as to arrive at the same decision. (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

Sometimes in any family there are disagreements, but we sit down and take decisions together. I always listen to my mum's advice, also I'm her only child, but we sit together, decide together, how to do things ... but we always talk together. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Men do not always accept their partner's view and disagreement can lead to spousal tensions. In at least one case, the woman revealed that her first husband did not want to listen to her on grounds that he was making most of the money, and even resorted to physical violence to impose his view and reaffirm his control of the household. This was perceived to be an expected reaction, as many respondents felt that men tend to have a natural disposition to violence – one third of participants in the national survey on gender equality also agreed that men are violent by nature (CEM-FMC et al., 2018).

We are a united family ... my husband likes fighting a bit but, in the end, he does what I say. Then, we always speak, and I tell him always – 'look, this is better for us' — and I convince him, then, in the end it is me who decides. (Woman, age 52, employee, Los Palos)

I had a first marriage which failed for this reason. Because my salary wasn't enough to be taken into account and his was, since he was a professional ... For that reason, he said that he decided what should be done with the money, and this was one of the things which destroyed the marriage ... I couldn't

put up with that anymore ... and that was [the reason for] our divorce ... You're suppressed, you're abused, not just with blows but psychologically, because you're humiliated. That's what's happening right now in our society. It's the men who decide and another very nasty thing is that they have the power to decide, and we've given them this power over the years. But I think that men and women are the same, they should be at the same level ... if my husband and I don't agree on what to do with money then ... he has to think about how we can arrange things between each other to resolve certain issues (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

Let's see, because men solve everything with violence while women solve problems by talking. (Girl, age 15, technical school student, Jovellanos)

Several women argued that partners should be equally involved in decisions and their views should have equal weight. Respondents identified an ongoing change, with women able to voice their views and becoming more involved in or even leading household decision-making. Such changes were explicitly linked (by male and female respondents) with women's economic participation and growing autonomy.

**Researcher:** So, do you think that things have recently changed and that women are more involved in decision-making at home, or they participate less now?

**Respondent:** Recently they participate and make more decisions ... they even yell at people ... because economically they did not have power in the past, but now they have it and do not depend on a man, so if they do not like a man then they split up and they just leave ... In the past they could not do that, and they used to give birth to 10 children, and where could they go to

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with 10 children? They had to do sex work to be able to sustain themselves, because they could not do other work. But nowadays they have four or five children and they can leave their husbands because they have jobs and continue working. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Well, in the past women did not share their opinions ... decisions were made by men and women were not allowed to have a say ... But now it is different. (Woman, self-employed, Jovellanos)

Yes, I think times have changed and now there are more women having the last word. (Woman, self-employed, Jovellanos)

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# 8 Access to productive and financial resources

Despite having equal rights to property and assets, women tend to have fewer household assets because of their lower purchasing power and are more likely to inherit than buy property. Some maintain control over their resources, although most share them with other family members within the context of the family economy. As men are able to mobilise more capital or access credit more easily, they own more and larger businesses than women, who have fewer contacts and are less likely to be trusted by money-lenders. However, women are perceived to save more than men in order to deal with emergencies.

## 8.1 Access to property and household goods

Women and men have equal rights to access, administer and own land and other assets. Collective ownership prevails over individual ownership, and most land ownership is acquired through inheritance. Daughters, sons and surviving spouses unable to work have equal rights to inherit (CEDAW, 2011). The new Constitution recognises private property. However, sources have argued that men benefited more from land distribution reforms in recent times and account for most landowners, while they also have more access to technology, machinery and agricultural inputs (Hernández, 2017; Grogg, 2014; CDA, 2013).

In our study, respondents focused on household assets, notably the house and movable assets. Most observed that women tend to acquire property by inheritance. The most valued type of property is a house, given the lack of adequate housing and the need to share accommodation with other family members.

Many women, as exemplified by the quote below, expressed the wish to own their own house and a few reported having inherited their home from their mother. Alternatively, people believed that a woman who works and has adequate earnings can save up and buy a house. One respondent indicated the possibility of getting a bank loan to build a house or an extension, using one's salary to repay it.

Because I would like to be the owner of my own property and not to live in someone else's house. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Having a car emerged as an asset that many would like to acquire, as transport in Cuba is notoriously difficult. Four respondents reported that the family owned a car – in three cases, it was in the man's name. Two respondents were business owners and used the car for business purposes such as carrying goods and clients. With these exceptions, respondents noted that they own only a few household assets such as a television, computer, refrigerator, furniture or even cooking utensils, which they share with other household members. Some spouses reported not bothering about ownership, while others said they owned the amenities because they paid for them. Men appeared to own more assets than women as they tend to have greater purchasing power.

We don't, we haven't considered, never, never, in these 19 years that we are married ... we haven't considered separate assets, this is mine and that is yours ... (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)



I bought all the things I have at home, but that does not mean that they are only mine ... we are a marriage and it is supposed to be that everything at home belongs to both of us ... I have never said, 'do not touch the computer, it is mine'. (Man, self-employed, Jovellanos)

According to the Family Code, in the case of divorce, common property should be divided equally between husband and wife. Study respondents said that divorce sometimes ends with spouses fighting over household equipment and movable assets. However, as most people live in consensual unions, it can be difficult to distribute assets equally if the couple split up after several years. Those who do not have any assets but live in a house owned by others are at risk of being left with nothing in case of divorce or death.

**Researcher:** Who owns them?

**Respondent:** My husband has bought everything. But we have never talked about that.

**Researcher:** Who decides how to use it?

**Respondent:** No one.

**Researcher:** If you divorce, who would take everything?

**Respondent:** What belongs to him is his.

**Researcher:** Do you have co-ownership with him?

**Respondent:** No, I don't. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Jovellanos)

I use a part of the house but that little part is not mine. If tomorrow my mother dies, I will lose everything. I will have nothing. Because in the end, he's not my dad either. Even though he raised me, he's not my dad. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

## 8.2 Control and management of resources

Most respondents reported working and generating their own income – yet in several cases they admitted receiving monthly remittances from relatives in North America or Spain, which help them meet their needs. In many cases, they pool resources, including money:

Depending on who has more resources, money, we all contribute to the household. My daughter also provides some if she has some. Keeping the household is a collective activity. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

Well, in my case I manage my money but I don't say 'this money is mine', if I need to buy things for the house I buy them, the things for my child, for my mum and that's it, we don't say 'this is mine', no ... everything is for all of us. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Sometimes people have family in the United States. By family I mean children, parents. They live well. They have clothes, shoes, whatever they like. (Woman, receiving social assistance)

The issue of control over resources emerged many times during our interviews. Some women reported that they maintain control over their money and neither their father or partner gets involved; she manages it and decides what to spend it on, including household needs such as paying for electricity or food.

**Researcher:** Who decides what to do with the money?

**Respondent:** I decide what to do with my money.

**Researcher:** Your father or your husband, have they forbidden you to

work at any time or tell you what to spend the money on?

**Respondent:** They have always supported me and have never questioned me about my money. My husband has always told me that my money is mine. And I do what I want with it. (Woman, age 24, state employment, Jovellanos)

I know some cases where ... [spending money the woman earns] is decided between the two, but I know many cases that this money is controlled by the woman who earns it, who works for it, she decides what should be done with it. (Man, self-employed, Los Palos)

I know of cases where the man is the one who decides what to do with the money, but I also know of many who do not, where everyone has their money even though they share it, even if they share it ... but each one handles their own money. (Woman, factory manager)

Regarding who is better at managing resources, respondents expressed different views. Some thought that women are equally capable of or even better at managing household resources. Others, including women, suggested men are more capable, comparing them to young women who would like to spend all their money on fashion and beauty items. Many spoke about co-management, especially where resources are pooled. Spouses referred to ‘a family economy’ within which they try to combine and make best use of available resources.

... the family economy, the money is in a drawer, we all know that is there, she knows that she can’t waste it and I know that too ... If one day she wants ... to buy something for herself, she comes to me and she asks me, and I almost always ... say yes, you can buy it. And the same happens with me,

she never reproaches me if I spend ... because we trust each other that we aren’t going to waste this money. (Man, age 47, business owner, Jovellanos)

### 8.3 Access to capital and business ownership

Studies have highlighted the growing self-employed sector in Cuba and the proliferation of small businesses. However, lack of funds emerged as a key obstacle to starting a business. In a survey of self-employed people in Havana, 35% complained about the lack of financing. Those receiving remittances, white Cubans and those with middle or higher education, excellent social networks and good locations were far more likely to access capital compared with low-educated, non-white Cubans who had ‘minimal investment’ (Pañellas et al., 2015, cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017).

The situation appears to be even more difficult for women. Using data from the 2012 census and a survey of self-employed owners, another study in Havana found that women are more likely to have poor access to credit and to legal and accounting advice (Díaz and Echevarría, 2015, cited in Mesa-Lago, 2017). In another sample of 66 small business owners – 36% of whom were women – Díaz and Echevarría (2016) also identified a number of factors making it more difficult for women to start a business. To get a bank loan, women had to meet a set of conditions that they found difficult, such as having a co-signatory or carrying out a feasibility study. Thus, women and men are often forced to rely on their savings or other sources of funds. However, because men received greater financial support from relatives living abroad – 42% of men compared to 22% of women – they have been able to accumulate greater capital and have found it easier to set up a business (ibid).

Given limited wage employment opportunities and low salaries, many respondents in our study expressed the wish to start a small business. Yet they were unable to do so as they lacked the necessary capital or access to credit to pay for the required licence (although some spoke about getting involved in illegal petty trade – in the case of women, selling food or clothes in the street).

As already noted, respondents observed that men own more and larger businesses than women. The main reason put forward for this was that men have more funds or are able to access the required credit more easily than women, as they have a wider social network.

There are some cases where women are the owners but in most cases the owners are men ... I think it's because they have more economic resources. I think so, it was hard for me to get mine. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

Normally owners are men because they are those who have a bit more income and other ways of obtaining the necessary resources. (Woman, age 43, unemployed, Jovellanos)

... those with greater incomes are men, who are those who put themselves out there to start large businesses. Us women are more constrained ... I started my business because I had my mother's experience and because I had the money. Nevertheless, if my husband had been the one with the money, it would have been his business and I'd have been his assistant. But in this case, it isn't like that, in this case I had the money and said, 'Let's do this,' and he agreed with me and we started this business. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

Cuban law grants women and men equal rights to obtain financial credit (CEDAW, 2011), yet it seems that it is easier for men to do so as they enjoy greater trust among lenders:

I think that, traditionally, men have been trusted more to start a business. I do not know if it is because they inspire more respect or trust, maybe not everyone is going to trust a woman to invest their capital in her because of those issues of gender. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

Sometimes people do not want to do business with women, they say, 'no, with women no, I don't like it', because there is still that attitude towards women ... Let me give you an example ... I am going to exchange money that is mine ... I need to change money into American dollars ... I tell you because it happened to me, and the person in the exchange facility says: 'No, no, your husband has to come. I do these things only with men'. There is that thing, see? I think that women can do it, but there is still machismo that prevents women from doing things. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

Respondents also pointed out that because men have better knowledge and more experience, they can run a business with greater success than women who may face difficulty and need guidance and support. Once again, gender stereotypes about women's ability to be entrepreneurs, access capital and manage a business or property make it harder for women to establish businesses and succeed:

First, she needs money ... but also support ... the main thing is support and to have money that can help you to open your business. (Woman, age 25, factory worker, Jovellanos)

Because ... men know more about what it is to manage properties ... I think that women can do it, but I also think they need to get help from men. (Woman, age 36, state employment, Jovellanos)

## 8.4 Savings

Women and men have equal rights to open a bank account (CEDAW, 2011). While those on low salaries often have little left over after covering their family's basic needs, many respondents revealed having some savings. Views about gender differences in saving attitudes varied: some expressed the typical view (already mentioned) that young women are more likely to

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spend frivolously on fashion and beauty items; others spoke about women always trying to save up something compared to men who waste money drinking and having fun.

Well, I don't have savings. My money is spent on a daily basis, so it is a bit difficult to save. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

I think that women, we save a little more than men, we are more meticulous. This is why, we are always saving for an occasion. (Woman, factory manager)

However, respondents tend to keep their savings at home (only two reported having a bank account). Not having a bank account enables them to access their savings quickly and easily without having to account for their actions, as banks require advance

notice for a withdrawal. Moreover, interest rates are too low to convince people to keep what little savings they have in a bank.

Normally I just save it [daily payment]. I would take some home and if there are things missing, then we buy those things, but my mother and my father are the ones that are in charge of most of those things. Personally, I keep it, I save it for any problems that can arise. I have my savings here. (Woman, age 23, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

Because sometimes money is needed for something and you have to queue or spend time to go to a bank and sometimes, they ask you, 'Why do you want to take money out? Why do you want to take out more than usual?' (Woman, age 43, business owner, Jovellanos)

# 9 Coping with difficulty and building resilience

This section explores how Cubans cope with adversity by pooling family resources, supporting each other, relying on remittances, mobilising savings, migrating in search of better economic prospects, or resorting to risky strategies. Women are often expected to show greater resilience. Yet some groups – such as those without family or social support, and migrants from eastern provinces – are more disadvantaged and struggle to survive.

Study respondents unanimously agreed that they have a lot of ‘tough experiences’ that made them build their skills, and they have shown remarkable resilience to survive with such scarce resources. They spoke about an ongoing economic crisis and growing uncertainty, which forces them to do their best to cope, undertaking laborious activities to secure daily food and preparing for the worst. In times of crisis, family relationships tend to be strengthened and each one is expected to help the other. On the other hand, such support may not be available among poor households who are already struggling to survive, leaving their members to meet their individual needs in any possible way.

We had good times, but right now we’re in bad times. These are bad times. Because I don’t see anyone doing anything for Cubans, Cubans are doing it for themselves. (Woman, age 34, business owner, Jovellanos)

Well ... everybody stays together, and we all try to help each other. (Woman, age 24, education provider, Los Palos)

We must go outside and fight every single day. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Most respondents explicitly noted that in times of need, they turn to other family members (parents, then siblings) for material and emotional assistance. Those already in need spoke about how families are helping them overcome economic difficulties or deal with an emergency, most often a health issue. Having relatives abroad and receiving remittances also emerged as a key enabling factor – for instance, in covering the required health expenses. However, Feinberg (2019) notes that remittance flows from the US and Spain are disproportionately directed to central and western provinces. Our study respondents confirmed the importance of family support and remittances:

They have helped me. Sometimes I did not have any means of doing it, and his family or my family helped me ... I have gone through very difficult situations ... Me? Just cry here and have a breakdown, and just get stressed. And then ask for help from my dad, my mother-in-law or my brother-in-law, telling them I need help to raise my child. (Woman, 34 years, dental assistant, Jovellanos)

There were a lot of expenses, but I have family abroad ... My mother got everything from there, diapers, sheets, her chair. They used to send everything. The money was for her to spend. That’s how she got out of troubles. I

looked after her day and night, but they sent everything. (Woman, age 48, unemployed, Jovellanos)

My family that lives abroad has helped me a lot too ... My uncles are the ones that help us occasionally. But they can always help us. (Woman, age 38, graduate, self-employed, Los Palos)

Another common coping strategy was using any savings in case of emergency. Although savings are often low, their purpose is to be used immediately to deal with a sudden shock.

It is important to have savings for many reasons. You always must be ready for emergencies – a member of the family can get ill or any other need can emerge. (Woman, age 58, business owner, Jovellanos)

... he had some money in the bank, but his sister got very sick – he told me this – and he spent the money taking her to the hospital in Havana. It was very expensive because of the car, eating while he was waiting for her to do her radiation treatment. (Woman, age 48, unemployed, Jovellanos)

When asked about gender differentials in coping with difficulty, many women spoke about their greater strength and resilience in the face of adversity enabling them to take action, while men get overwhelmed and fail to respond effectively. In most cases, this resilience was linked to women's greater experience of dealing with difficulty from an early age and having developed the skills to 'continue going' and find practical solutions to problems without getting lost in unproductive thoughts or drowning in despair; some even linked it to women's greater biological ability to withstand pain.

Women always face difficulties ... some men are softer and can't cope,

but I say that in general, women can face any difficulty. (Woman, age 31, unemployed, Jovellanos)

... we always try to find a solution to those problems. Men usually just remain passive waiting for things to be solved. Women are the ones who have to break their head to find a solution to problems. (Woman, age 23, employee, Cárdenas)

Women deal with problems well because they don't fall at the first problem they have. They always carry on. (Girl, age 16, pre-university student, Los Palos)

Yes, I would say that in that respect we are braver than men ... I think women can stand more, we are more resilient. Women see things in a more positive way ... I don't know why or how to explain it. Maybe because we are the ones that give birth to children but that is the way I understand it. (Woman, age 41, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Some respondents shared personal stories of women trying to respond to emergencies, often having to focus on the person who is sick and needs help. In such cases, women are still expected to take care of adult family members; as Torres Santana (2020) notes, in the national survey of employment in 2016, 119,000 women reported not being able to look for work because they were looking after an elderly relative. Cuba's ageing population and cultural preferences for ageing at home is increasing familial demands for women's unpaid care work and, within a context of economic scarcity, can exacerbate the problem (Núñez, 2018).

Well, sometimes women are expected to take charge. For example, my mother took the responsibility of looking after my grandfather. (Girl, age 15, pre-university, Los Palos)



A few others felt that men are more capable of dealing with problems as they have greater physical strength, more social connections or can access financial resources more easily than women. On the other hand, some did not perceive any gender differences in coping strategies.

Sometimes us women are weak when it comes to dealing with situations. Maybe because of character, feelings, of ... I don't know. Maybe men are a bit stronger. If men need something, maybe they go out and get it because they are men. (Woman, age 29, education provider, Los Palos)

... although men nearly always have a few more resources because they fight for them, search for them more. Men ... manage better. (Woman, age 48, unemployed, Jovellanos)

... and my father has great friends, he has a lot of friendships. Which I think helps to deal with problems as well. (Girl, age 16, pre-university, Los Palos)

Several respondents suggested trying to apply for social assistance, although they also emphasised that it has been considerably reduced, leaving many without the support they need – an issue already examined in Section 2.4. Without state and family support, and facing unsurmountable problems, some women may be forced to engage in transactional sex as a last resort:

These are things that you are obliged to do by the circumstances. (Woman, age 24, unemployed, Jovellanos)

Respondents also mentioned the possibility of youth leaving the country in search of a better future, and learning English was the first step in preparation for the journey. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has estimated a net migration rate of -1.9 migrants per 1,000 persons for the period 2015–2020 (IOM, 2020), indicating that more people have been leaving the country than entering. State data from 2017 reported that 26,194 left Cuba in that year, with the majority being men (56%) (ONEI et al., 2018). There is also internal migration and, according to state data from 2008–2017, eastern provinces had consistently the largest number of people migrating to other provinces. The national survey on migration found that the two most prominent factors for internal migration was to improve economic prospects and to find a better job. For external migration, the two main reasons reported included improving economic prospects and assisting the family (ibid).

According to official data from 2017 both Matanzas and Mayabeque provinces had more formal immigrants than emigrants – 10.5 per 1,000 inhabitants in Matanzas and 14.2 in Mayabeque. Most of these internal migrants came from the east, especially Granma and Santiago de Cuba (ONEI, 2018). Our study respondents in both field sites – and especially in Los Palos – spoke about the migration of people from eastern provinces to their area, and the harsh economic and social conditions they are still facing (see Box 8).

## Box 8 The girls from the east

Despite having played a key role in the revolution, the five provinces that comprise the east (Oriente) have seen a sharp decline in local sugarcane production and in national investment, thus falling behind the rest of the country. The east has also not benefited from growth in international tourism, remittances and small businesses (Feinberg, 2019).

Life for young people in the east, most of whom are Afro-Cubans, is difficult, characterised by deteriorating infrastructure, lack of economic opportunities, very low wages, poverty, low educational attainment and a general hopelessness. Studies highlight that young people and women in the east face serious social problems, with high rates of mental health problems and teenage pregnancy, high levels of forced sex work, and high levels of violence against women (ibid). The national survey on gender equality also found the highest rates of intimate partner violence in this region (CEM-FMC et al., 2016). In search of better economic prospects, many people migrate to the central and western provinces. Yet when they get there, they face hardship and difficulties, not only because they often lack official authorisation to migrate but also because they experience discrimination and even racism from fellow Cubans because of their skin colour, origin and accent (Feinberg, 2019).

Respondents in Los Palos reported that the area hosts many migrants from the east who arrive in search of work. Without legal documents they often fail to find formal employment so mainly work in agriculture, doing tasks that locals do not want to do as they are too physically demanding. As ‘Orientals’ lack legal residence, they live in informal settlements in ‘conditions of extreme poverty’. Some may get a temporary document for one year that helps them access medical and other assistance, but overall, they remain out of reach of basic services.

There are many women from the east here in search of employment ... in the east, it's not that there are no jobs, but wages are way below what they pay here. (Man, business manager, Los Palos)

I'm going to tell you one thing: the day they take the Orientals out of Havana, production will go down 50% ... Those who work with us, hard work, the cane, they are Orientals ... The situation must be more difficult over there, there is very little work, so they come here ... They come ... and without being bad people, we welcome them, and they live in a house and they take care of it. And a settlement is made there, it is registered, and the documentation is done. (Man, business owner, Los Palos)

A train container that was about to be destroyed ... they put a door on it, and they live there. People come to check and everything, because before that work was illegal, as they now have to bring their transit document. (Social services representative)

In some interviews, respondents spoke negatively about internal migrants, describing them as ‘peasants’ and linking their arrival with social problems such as stealing, sex work or child neglect and abandonment. Social workers who try to help those most in need recognise that many of the Orientals face precarious living conditions; for example, adolescents do not go to school but have to work in the fields with their parents. They also reported high numbers of adolescent pregnancies and cases of abuse and sex work, with some parents forcing their daughters into sex work, including a case of two girls sold by their mother to work as sex workers in a tourism zone:

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**Box 8 The girls from the east (cont'd)**

Most of the pregnant women I have are girls that come from the east – approximately 95%. Just one is from around here, and all the others live in poverty, they live in camps, and settlements. With alcoholic parents, single mothers, and they are single mothers too ... I had an interview with the family of a 12-year-old girl whose pregnancy was interrupted. The mother complained to public health because the girl wanted to run away with her boyfriend. The boyfriend wants to go there, and his father explained that [in the east] there is everything but no money, there is work that pays little, it is not like here, where a farmer earns 50 pesos, it is not much but it is better than what is there ... So they come to work here, to send the money there. And the boy wanted to go there with the girl.

People who come from the east engage in prostitution. They sell themselves for money, that's enough.

Depends on the case. For example, I arrived one day ... with the owner of the farm. While I was going to the house to talk to the family, a lady told me 'take those Orientals out of here'. I went to see them, I found them watching TV. The peasant had put a television and a refrigerator, they were there. The husband was working, and the girl was with other men. Two others that I had, a mother and another daughter, both became pregnant. She was 15 years old when she gave birth. She got pregnant and her mom too. Her mom was young.

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# 10 ‘Society is changing’: discussion and recommendations

During the past 60 years, the Cuban state has paid explicit attention to women and has enacted a series of laws and policies to empower them and promote their equal and active participation in all spheres of life. Studies confirm that Cuba has made remarkable progress towards women’s economic empowerment and gender equality, largely thanks to the provision of universal and free education, employment opportunities in the state sector, equal pay for equal work, maternity protection and childcare facilities. However, it is also increasingly acknowledged – by the state itself (Government of Cuba, 2019a; CEDAW, 2011) – that these laws and policies have been unable to bring about full gender equality and challenge the deeply entrenched gendered social norms about women’s and men’s roles in society and the household. This is evident by the fact that despite their participation in the labour force (49.5% in 2018 according to official data), Cuban women still bear the lion’s share of domestic and care responsibilities (CEM-FMC et al., 2018). Laws and policies have not transformed the gender division of household labour, which is linked to the stereotype that women belong in the house, while men are best suited to the street and the activities that take place there.

Using qualitative data, this study has confirmed that gendered social norms continue to influence the educational and economic opportunities open to Cuban youth and prevent girls and young women from realising their full potential. Young women continue to choose subjects aligned with feminine caring qualities and are concentrated in relevant occupations and sectors, which are typically less well-paid than those dominated by men. Moreover, the male breadwinner ideal

still holds strong, with men considered to be the main providers for the family, and women being secondary earners. Some men, including adolescent boys, made it clear that they do not (or would not) want their partners to work or cannot accept them earning a higher income as that would threaten their authority and manhood. Similarly, staying at home and being seen doing ‘women’s’ household work would be a blow to their masculine identity.

Many Cuban women end up having a double working day and struggle to balance paid and unpaid work, often relying on other female family members, including their adolescent daughters. Women also shoulder most childcare responsibilities as their reproductive biology is thought to provide them with a ‘natural’ nurturing capacity – indeed, most of our study respondents conflated womanhood with motherhood. Thus, women are expected to prioritise and focus on their maternal responsibilities and their family’s wellbeing instead of being professionals with career aspirations. As mothers, women may dominate decisions about child health, nutrition or education, although men are still the ultimate decision-makers on the grounds that they contribute most of the income, are physically stronger, or are the household head. Women also have fewer assets and capital, and they are trusted less by creditors. However, they are perceived to deal more effectively with difficulty than men, as they have more experience, adaptive skills and resilience.

Male and female respondents alike, of all ages, spoke about distinctive and complementary yet

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unequal gender roles sitting within the broader context of a persistent machismo culture, in which men are afforded greater power, resources and privilege than women. Few respondents made explicit reference to religious teachings and, in most cases, these were promoting spousal equality and collaboration and rejecting machismo. Respondents also noted that they learn from an early age what is gender-appropriate and acceptable behaviour and practice through their daily interactions in the family, at school, when having fun with peers, or from watching television programmes. For instance, a middle-aged woman observed that ‘since we are born, we are female and we must wear pink, play with dolls ... these things are imposed on us’. Many respondents felt that they were under constant social scrutiny, measured against gender ideals and judged in ways that can affect their self-esteem and actions. Working mothers who are not seen spending much time in the house or taking care of the family can become the talk of the neighbourhood and face criticism for failing to be good mothers. According to one young woman, ‘women are always being watched ... and people are always going to talk about women’. This was felt to be the case much more so than for men; social scrutiny and control of women is even stricter in small communities (as one respondent commented, ‘small town, big hell’). Young women may feel forced to comply with social rules and avoid doing things that might challenge those rules – such as not having children or developing career aspirations.

However, respondents also spoke about individual agency and the right to choose whatever brings personal fulfilment without caring about public opinion or negative comments for not complying with gender stereotypes. Such views were linked to two different issues. On one hand, the fact that all Cubans are equal and have the same rights to become full and productive members of society irrespective of gender and skin colour. This egalitarian discourse was repeated in almost all interviews and was the starting point and the main explanation provided by respondents when asked whether women and men can do the same studies and occupations, receive equal pay, or be promoted.

On the other hand, respondents agreed that society is changing, and that this change

is accelerated by the new conditions and requirements imposed by the ongoing economic crisis and the subsequent reconfiguration of familial and social relationships. Some changes can have positive outcomes: gender roles are being transformed out of necessity, as women who have to earn an income and contribute to the household push for a more equitable division of household labour, with some men increasingly helping (though still not sharing equally), and some aspects of machismo being challenged. As one young mother noted: ‘society is changing, and we are not staying behind ... In the same way that women are changing, men are changing too.’

Although challenged, machismo is still powerful and continues to affect the lives of adolescent girls and young women in multiple ways, limiting their opportunities and exposing them to new challenges. Respondents spoke about a growing trend of men leaving their partners, and a rise in the number of single mothers with young children. In some cases, boys abandon their adolescent girlfriends when they get pregnant. In others, men leave their partners and young children. Girls and women with limited skills and no family support struggle to make a living and may resort to risky survival strategies. Inadequate provision of childcare facilities and social support programming makes their situation even more difficult. In some other cases, men unable to live up to the breadwinner ideal may feel threatened and refuse to lose their privileged position and give up some of their power to women, turning to anger and violence instead.

Evidence indicates that crises can intensify gender discrimination and inequality, but they can also open windows of opportunity for renegotiation and transformation of gender roles and underlying social norms (Marcus and Harper, 2014; Elson, 2010). While the revolution promoted women’s economic empowerment and egalitarianism has been established as the dominant discourse, Cuban women have seen equality mostly on paper, whereas in practice they continue to face inequality and disadvantage at home, which is still considered their normative space. While there is still a long way to go before full gender equality is the reality in daily life, there is consensus that some positive change may be underway as part of wider economic and societal transformations currently taking place in

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the country. There is also consensus that for this change to happen, discriminatory norms need to be explicitly and intensively addressed through policies and programming across all domains, including the home, because – as our respondents emphasised – this is where gender equality begins.

When asked about the best interventions to enable adolescent girls and young women to fulfil their economic potential and participate in society as active agents of change, respondents repeatedly spoke about big policy changes that would create more jobs, increase salaries and improve infrastructure – namely transport, which is a significant barrier for rural youth in accessing services and employment. Less financially ambitious but equally important actions could be taken jointly by government, NGOs, grassroots movements, international agencies and donors working on gender and/or youth issues, to take advantage of the momentum and window of opportunity that exists. Based on our findings, we suggest that the following interventions could have most impact.

**Skills training courses for vulnerable and disadvantaged girls and young women:** Conduct local labour market assessments and provide certified skills training courses, responsive to market demands, including website and software development, while also considering youth constraints and priorities (e.g. education level, workload, parenthood status, which would require childcare arrangements – including informal on-site creches). Use women trainers that can mentor and work more closely with trainees. Identify and promote role models that include successful women in non-traditional trades. Apart from technical skills, provide trainees with soft skills and rights training. Improve the quality and increase the number of existing courses for rural youth. Liaise with potential employers and explore the possibility of apprenticeships that can lead to employment.

**Business skills training and access to capital for young women:** Provide programmes to young women interested in starting a small business. Programmes should consider women's needs and constraints, provide basic business and management skills, and facilitate access to start-up capital for individuals or groups. Attention could also be paid to provision of skills required to set up new types of businesses with growing demand, such as online businesses.

**Local childcare services:** Invest in providing affordable childcare services for mothers who work or would like to work, offering subsidised childcare for low-income single mothers.

Initiatives could include provision of training to those interested in becoming childcare assistants and who have available space for such a facility. They could receive additional support to get the necessary licence and start up a service that would cover neighbourhood needs.

**Safe and youth-friendly spaces for adolescents:** Create spaces where vulnerable adolescents, such as those lacking family support, or internal migrants, can access support and guidance in a safe, friendly and non-judgemental way, from trained peers who can also act as positive role models. Establish links with social services and families to provide specialist support to those facing specific problems (such as early pregnancy or alcoholism). Organise workshops, games, athletic or art activities, and weekly meetings where adolescents are encouraged to share their thoughts on issues of interest, and where they can access information and become motivated to set goals and plan towards achieving them, while building their self-confidence and key life skills.

**Norm change communication interventions:** Design and implement more norm change communication interventions and media campaigns, including advertisements, popular television series, radio programmes, children's shows and online platforms that target diverse audiences, with a particular focus on adolescents and youth. Ensure adequate resources for longer-term exposure to images and messages that promote gender-equitable relationships, such as men and boys sharing housework with women and girls, or women in occupations that challenge gender stereotypes – sending the message that there are no 'men's jobs' or 'women's jobs', only 'jobs'.

**Interventions targeting men and boys:** Engage men and boys in all efforts and provide spaces and opportunities at every level (from schools and universities to sports groups, workplaces and churches) to discuss, reflect and actively challenge gender stereotypes. Provide male role models, such as popular singers or athletes, willing to advocate for gender equality and use them as champions of change at the national, regional and local levels.



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