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## Lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba: family, rights and policy

Evie Browne

*This article draws on interviews with 17 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women living in Havana, Cuba, focusing on state support for their family relationships. It examines some of the tensions and contradictions between international and national policy, and societal norms, some of which support LGBT people, and some of which do not. In many ways, Cuba is progressive and has actively protected women's rights. However, non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming women appear to have been somewhat overlooked in the gains of the Revolution, as there are few specific policies protecting their rights. The key policy points participants raised were the need for same-sex marriage and the lack of assisted reproduction for those in same-sex relationships. Nonetheless, Cuba's traditional non-nuclear family forms also provide some social space for LGBT parents and queer families.*

Key words: Queer; Cuba; LGBT; socialism; marriage; reproduction

### Introduction

This article explores some themes of gender and sexuality in Cuba, investigating the everyday lives and experiences of self-identified lesbian and bisexual women. In particular, I focus here on participants' unmet rights to same-sex marriage and access to assisted reproduction. Women's rights have always been a beacon of success for the socialist model in Cuba, framed within international human rights norms (Johnson 2012), but it appears that rights for lesbian, bisexual, other non-heterosexual, queer, gender non-conforming and trans\* women are somewhat lagging behind. Despite strong rhetoric on gender equality and non-discrimination in international fora and in Cuban society, national policy is weak for sexual and gender minorities. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1979, but despite this early progressive move, few further legal changes have been made. However, social acceptance of LGBT people is fairly high, due to media and information campaigns from the state, and activism from the community.

The issues raised in this article are important – and sometimes central – to the lives of the women whose voices feature here. Same-sex marriage is not yet legal in Cuba, which participants viewed as active discrimination against them and obstruction of their rights. Assisted reproduction (that is, assistance from healthcare and medical professionals to have children) is available in principle but not in practice [1], and there is no state policy outlining specific access for LGBT people. This absence resulted in complex and contradictory discussions by participants, but most people wanted the state to support assisted

reproduction, and felt the absence as negative. Lesbian and bisexual women's parenting options are more supported than in many countries, through Cuba's social norms of non-nuclear family structures, and practical policy support for these. There are tensions between people's lived experiences and the presence or absence of state policy, which can both enable and disable. In many of Cuba's laws, there are no direct prohibitions for LGBT people, but nor are there protective and affirmative policies.

In the sections that follow, I set the context by giving a brief account of Cuba's history, and focusing in particular on gender and sexuality. In the second section, I explore how the family is understood in Cuba, and the laws and policies around it. After that, I move on to my research, and share some of its findings on same-sex marriage, reproduction, and lesbian and bisexual women as parents. In a final section, I provide some reflections on how the contemporary Cuban government is addressing LGBT rights.

### **The context: gender and sexuality in Cuba**

Cuba is a small island nation in the Caribbean. It has 11 million inhabitants, 2 million of whom live in the capital, Havana (Central Intelligence Agency 2017). It has a colonial Spanish history, including the importation of West African slaves. Its ethnic makeup is currently white, Hispanic, and black, but a large proportion of the population are mixed-race, or *mezcla*, *mestizo* or *mulato*. Uprisings against colonialism began in the mid-1800s, and the Spanish were finally defeated in 1898, with the help of American forces. The American influence and control over Cuba eventually resulted in Fidel Castro's Revolution, which ousted the American-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. The Revolution is ongoing, with the country ruled by the Communist Party.

The United States placed a political and economic embargo against Castro, or *bloqueo* (blockade) as the Cubans call it, in 1961. Since then, Cuba has been restricted from international trade and travel. It relied heavily on help from the Soviet Union, and experienced a decade of extreme poverty and shortages when the USSR collapsed in 1989, called the Special Period in Times of Peace. In some ways, Cuba is still recovering from this period, especially through the increase of tourism, a development strategy employed to bring in hard currency. Tourism is the major economic driver in the country. Barack Obama signalled that he would normalise relations between the USA and Cuba, and made some progress towards this, which has since been reversed by Donald Trump. Observers of Cuba now await further changes in American policy, which remains a dominant influence on Cuba's development potential. Fidel Castro died in November 2016, and the current President, his brother Raúl, is due to step down in April 2018.

Nowadays, Cuba supports gay rights and positions itself as a regional leader of a progressive socialist approach to inclusion and equality [2]. Yet despite the socialist language of

equality, the early Revolution was marked by homophobia. The 1965-67 Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) camps exemplify the early homophobic attitude. Male homosexuals, along with dissidents, intellectual elites, and religious people, were sent to agricultural camps for a period of hard labour, 'rehabilitation' and communist instruction (Hamilton 2012, 40). They were perceived by the state as 'counter-revolutionary'. Lesbians were not demonised to the same degree (Kirk 2011), although they were also discriminated against, and at least one camp imprisoned women (Stout 2014, 36). Known lesbians were not allowed to join the women's mass organisation (Saunders 2009).

From the 1970s, political and cultural acceptance of LGBT people increased, with repeals of criminalisation laws and increased positive media coverage of LGBT issues, but police persecution campaigns remained. Homosexuality became legal in 1979 with the amendment of the Penal Code to remove prison sentences for homosexual acts (Kirk 2011). The Cuban Constitution supports non-discrimination on the basis of sex, race, skin colour, religion and nationality. In 2010, Fidel Castro apologised for the bad treatment of homosexuals (Acosta 2010).

Since 2008, Cuba has voted at the UN in favour of LGBT rights, or statements against violations of rights on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Despite this general trend, in 2010 Cuba voted to dilute a condemnation of homophobia, a move which was vocally criticised by Cuban bloggers (Kirk 2011). In June 2016, the UN Human Rights Council issued a Resolution affirming protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, supported by Cuba and other states (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Discrimination/Pages/LGBTUNResolutions.aspx>).

There are currently no binding UN resolutions on LGBT rights, as these should be protected within existing human rights law and treaties. Similarly, Cuba has no affirmative laws protecting LGBT rights, as these are, in principle, contained within existing laws on equality and non-discrimination for all. Cuban policy does not emphasise rights for specific vulnerable individuals or groups, and these rights are occasionally seen as divisive and exclusionary. Due to this approach, LGBT people are structurally invisible in the constitution and other essential legal documents, only appearing in non-discrimination lists (Bastian 2011).

### **The family in Cuba: laws and policies**

In Cuba, both political and public discussions inextricably link women with families and social care, like in many countries (Lind 2012). The Cuban Family Code (*Codiga Familia*) is the principal policy instrument affecting all Cubans' family and household lives. Written in 1975, it outlines what a Cuban family is, marriage, rights and responsibilities of the family members towards each other, protection of children and older people (Hamilton 2012). The

Family Code states that marriage is a union entered into voluntarily by *a man and a woman* having the legal capacity to do so for the purpose of living together (CEDAW 2011). Based on the Family Code, other Cuban laws and policies assume an opposite-sex couple at the centre of the family. Attempts to revise the Family Code to recognise sexual and gender diversity and support non-heteronormative families have been ongoing since around 2007, but lengthy and long drawn out debates in the National Assembly mean that it is still under review (Kirk 2017). It is unclear what stage it is at, as Cuban governmental processes can be inaccessible (to both Cuban citizens and others).

LGBT parenting is not currently discussed in the media or government, but the absence of specific policy or discourse has not greatly hindered the lesbian and bisexual women in this study. The families they live in reflect typical Cuban family structures: either blended, extended, or non-nuclear [3]. These are supported by Cuban policy in a way which perhaps allows some space for LGBT and queer parenting, more than in societies focused on nuclear households. Lesbian and bisexual women are also supported by Cuba's positive protections for mothers in childcare, healthcare and schooling.

The current situation in Cuba for LGBT issues is largely driven by the work of *Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual* (CENESEX) [4]. CENESEX works on sexual education, including LGBT rights, violence against women, sexual health, adolescence, and other issues. CENESEX is government-funded but positioned outside the state, fulfilling many of the roles occupied by civil society and NGOs in other countries. The director is Mariela Castro Espín, the President's daughter. Her personal power makes CENESEX an influential institution: many interview participants credited her directly with the positive changes they have felt over the last ten years in social and cultural acceptance, and for campaigning hard for political and policy changes.

Cuba has been a regional leader for women's rights since the 1970s, hosting ECLAC's first Regional Conference on Women in Latin America in 1977, and remaining a Presiding Officer country since then (CEDAW 2011). Cuba was the first country to sign and the second to ratify CEDAW in 1980. It signed the Optional Protocol in 2000, but has not yet ratified this. Both these agreements happened quickly, showing Cuba's agreement with international norms around gender equality. Cuba has good women's equality by many of the usual international measurements. However, traditional gender norms remain strong in some areas of life. *Machismo* is common across Latin America – loosely translated as sexism or chauvinism. Women do most of the household chores, cooking, cleaning and childcare (Johnson 2012), while men take more responsibility for income-earning. Women are highly sexualised and objectified, judged on their appearance (Saunders 2009), with cat-calling (*piropos*) a daily occurrence (Härkönen 2016). These traditionally gendered social issues conflict with the empowerment and formal gender equality that (some) women also

experience. Significantly, lesbian, bisexual, queer, trans and other women outside the cisgender [5], heterosexual norm remain somewhat excluded from this general progress on 'women's issues'.

## **My research**

I interviewed 17 people who self-identified as lesbian or bisexual women in spring 2017, for my PhD thesis: a queer analysis of lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba [6]. I also interviewed nine academics, professionals working with LGBT issues, and activists, for their reflections on the policy environment. This is a small number, but the methods chosen for this qualitative research enabled me to focus in depth on the experience of each participant. Participants were sought through snowballing [7].

The participants were aged between 22 and 50; mostly middle-income and below. No particular effort was made to contact people from different ethnicities and class or economic backgrounds, but the group was varied. Seven were white, five mulata, three black, one india and one jaba [8]. They had jobs ranging from technicians, professionals, housewives, musicians, military, and Cuba's class of self-employed businesspeople (*cuentalpropistas*). While a few rejected labels and did not wish to define their sexuality with any specific identity, the common factor was a sexual attraction to women. Sexualities ranged from only ever having had sex with women; bisexual; people who had previously only had sex with men but currently have a girlfriend; and more. The results may be specific to Havana; as the capital city, it is more cosmopolitan and liberal than small towns and rural areas.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted mainly in Spanish and sometimes in English, with the help of my Cuban research assistant and interpreter. He is a 27 year old black heterosexual man, and I am a 33 year old white heterosexual British woman. We usually met in a café or at participants' homes. Interviews were audio-recorded and then reviewed and listened back to in conjunction with notes I made at the time.

In the next section, I share some of the findings. I use pseudonyms in this article to protect anonymity. I use the terms LGBT and 'lesbian and bisexual', as this is how Cubans refer to themselves. Cubans do not usually use LGBTI, Q, queer or any other terms.

## **Findings**

### *Same-sex marriage*

Same-sex marriage (*matrimonio entre personas del mismo sexo*) is not currently legal in Cuba. There is enough social tolerance that LGBT people can live in marriage-equivalent relationships, sharing a house and life together. This reflects a norm in Cuban society, which

does not place much value on formal, legal marriage, and has many opposite-sex couples living in consensual union. However, 11 of the 17 lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to for the study expressed strong desires to get married, or to have the possibility open to them. Some strongly preferred formal, legal marriage, while others said they would be happy with a recognised consensual union. The primary reasons people gave fell into two camps: one, they wanted to legally protect their relationship and family rights in case of death, inheritance, and children; and two, that they wanted equal rights to social institutions.

Mayte (28, lesbian, white) directed me to look at something she had written about her desire to marry her girlfriend:

*I'm a Cuban woman, born and raised in Cuba and as every woman, I dream of getting married surrounded by people who love me...*

*I want [sister], [friend] and [friend] as my bridesmaids. I want [friend] as godmother, I want to see my love on the arm of her dad and I want her to walk next to me. I want to get married on the beach and my wedding to be organised by [friend] who is an excellent planner and a great friend. I want a toast with my family, I want [friend] and [friend] to tell our story and we all get excited and smile. I want my mom to help me with the dress and [male friend] to catch the bouquet to see if he loses his phobia of marriage. I want both of us to wear a white dress, I want to say my marriage vows and let everyone know that you renewed my life.*

*I refuse not to dream, but especially I refuse to not fight for my dream. Enough already of expecting miracles, expecting answers, expecting acceptance and understanding... enough of treating the subject as if it were an aberration or a political issue. I'm talking about rights as people, I'm talking about having the right to live my life as I want, I'm talking about having the right to love.*

*I don't want to be special, I don't want different treatment, on the contrary... I want to be an ordinary person...*

*I want to get married in Cuba because I'm Cuban, I want my country to love me as I am...*

(Social media post, Havana, 6 May 2017)

What is curious about this scenario is that marriage is not that common in Cuba, and this vision is more socially conservative and traditional than many other people hold. In 2011, of the Cubans who had some kind of conjugal bond, about half were formally married, and half were living in a consensual union (Censo de Poblacion y Viviendas 2012, 82). There was a feeling from many participants that the legal recognition offered by formal marriage gives protection and security for their partners in the event of ill-health or death, and parental

rights, which they otherwise cannot count on. In contrast, they felt unmarried opposite-sex couples were protected by Cuban social norms to ensure security and wellbeing. Lesbian and bisexual women participants felt that legal support based in rights discourses would go some way towards protecting them and their families.

This perhaps reflects a desire to turn the everyday experience of 'doing acts of kinship' (Freeman 2007, 305) into a socially and legally recognised form of 'being kin'. Practical kinship is performed by everyday acts, by self-determined groups of people who may or may not be blood relatives, including queer people and queer forms (ibid), but only some of these forms are recognised as official kinship, by society and the bureaucratic state. The impossibility of turning one's partner into a blood relative through the birth of a child biological to both partners (Härkönen 2016), means that participants were seeking alternative means of bonding their families. Heterosexual relationships are usually socially recognised as a form of kinship, and do not necessarily need to be legally recognised through formal marriage or other documentation. Where the Cubans in this study did not have their forms of queer kinship recognised, they were seeking changes in the legal system to guarantee the rights which are automatically accorded to traditional family forms.

It is important to note that not everybody wanted to get married, but those who did not usually expressed support for the concept of same-sex marriage. They expressed strong desires to legalise same-sex marriage and/or same-sex consensual union, and viewed the state as failing to meet its obligations for equality and LGBT rights. This is a case where the existing policy is viewed as actively obstructive. Although they may not choose marriage or union for themselves personally, they viewed it as a right which should be available to all people.

During the proposal of changes to the Family Code in 2007, Mariela Castro said:

*A lot of homosexual couples asked me to not risk delaying getting the law passed by insisting on the word marriage. In Cuba marriage is not as important as the family and at least this way we can guarantee the personal and inheritance rights of homosexuals and transsexuals.* (Voss 2008)

Although participants expressed a strong desire for formal marriage, CENESEX's pragmatic approach may be more successful for moving towards equal rights. The discussion, for both parties, is firmly rooted in a rights-based discourse of legal equality.

### *Reproductive assistance*

As a society, Cuba is strongly pro-natalist. Heidi Härkönen has noted that 'everyone wants to have children' (Härkönen 2016, 58); not wanting a child is almost inconceivable. Against this backdrop where society is generally very positive towards child-bearing, women face



particular social pressure to become mothers, in addition to their own individual preferences.

Mayte said:

*I love children. I like babies a lot and she [my partner] likes babies too. We want to have a family.*

(Interview, Havana, 6 May 2017).

Similarly, Ofelia said:

*I would like to have two children. I would like to have my own family, because my parents at some point will pass away, and my brother has his own family. And the people who are going to stay with you are your children.*

(Interview, Havana, 17 June 2017).

The desire for children is part of social relations and economic considerations, to fulfil the networks that people need to survive. Having a child together also functions as a proof of love between the couple (Härkönen 2016). Cuban policy has long promoted the idea of 'woman as mother' and the importance of motherhood (Andaya 2014), and Cubans often express the pleasure and joy that children bring (Hamilton 2012).

Cuba has a low birth rate: in the period 2010 to 2015, the average number of children a woman had over her lifetime was 1.7 (Data from UNData, <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=birth+rate&d=PopDiv&f=variableID%3a54>). Cuban policy supports in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and related treatments for people who have difficulties conceiving, available to all in principle, regardless of their marital status or their gender or sexual identity. However, access is limited for all people, due to resource constraints and expense. A range of other technologies, such as sperm banks, egg donation, surrogacy, and adoption, do not exist (interview, Havana, 3 July 2017).

Despite recent government efforts to stimulate more reproduction (Díaz-Briquets 2016), the assisted reproduction needed by many is not freely available. There are only four advanced treatment facilities in the country (Díaz-Briquets 2016) provided by the free national health service. The other medical options are to pay for private care, or go abroad. These options are economically vastly out of reach of all but the most elite Cubans.

The existing forms of assisted reproduction are available to LGBT people in principle, but not in practice. There is no direct prohibition of assistance for LGBT people, but nor are there protective and affirmative policies, which can result in discrimination. One medical

professional told me that resource constraints have led to an unofficial priority list for IVF managed by doctors, who usually give precedence to opposite-sex couples (interview, Havana, 3 July 2017). Prioritisation is also influenced by gifts, which are almost prerequisite to ensure decent healthcare (Härkönen 2016, 68), and attitudes of individual doctors have often come into play in family planning (Hamilton 2012, 34).

Due to discrimination (perceived or real) against same-sex couples, some participants referred to feigning an opposite-sex relationship in order to access assisted reproduction. Maritsa is Mayte's sister, whom I discussed above. She is 31, bisexual, and white. She is planning to have children with her girlfriend using a sperm donation from a gay male couple they know. She said she would perhaps go to the doctor for the insemination.

Maritsa: *So you go to the doctor, but it has to be outside Cuba. In another country....*

Evie: *you can't do that in Cuba? It's not possible?*

M: *you can do it, but it's a very...very hard way. And if they find out that we are homosexual, it will not help us that much.*

E: *Oh I see, so you would say 'we're a couple'. [Maritsa and the father]*

M: *Si. Maybe if you pay, you can get it.*

(Interview, Havana, 3 May 2017)

In a later interview, we referred to this kind of pretence to access healthcare, to find out if such experiences were common to other participants. Yadira is 25, white, and described her sexual orientation as 'I like people'.

Yadira: *If I am with this [female] partner, then artificial insemination; if I am with a guy, then the natural way.*

Research assistant: *Yes, but if you are a couple with your girlfriend, the doctors will as a requirement, ask you to be married with a guy.*

Y: *No, I don't think so. Here in Cuba, women can have a baby alone and also some friends can donate sperm. So you can do it.*

(Interview, Havana, 30 May 2017)

These conflicting stories show that there is a lack of clear information about what is possible and how to access healthcare. Participants knew of IVF and artificial insemination but did not know whether the state provided other technologies, such as sperm banks, egg

donation, surrogacy or adoption. No one had heard of any lesbian, bisexual, gay or trans people receiving state medical assistance, or assistance to adopt, but at the same time, some people believed that the health care system could provide this, and would do so for them if they required it. The multiple beliefs perhaps indicate an absence of coherent information from state-funded health providers, and an ad hoc system of navigating healthcare.

CENESEX's attempts to revise the Family Code included a legal provision for lesbian women to access fertility treatments (Kirk 2017), but the Code remains in the process of being translated into policy. While the policy framework is non-discriminatory in principle, it cannot be said to support the reproductive rights of LGBT people. Rather, it leaves a gap where their specific needs should be, which has resulted in a priority system that discriminates against people who do not conform to heterosexual social norms. There are examples of individual discrimination and unmet needs for LGBT people, while resource constraints mean that state services are not performing adequately for any and all people.

The most common option for lesbian and bisexual women was to get pregnant by a male friend or partner, either through intercourse or artificial insemination administered by themselves. When I asked Ofelia (25, bisexual, mulata) how she will have children, she said with a shrug, '*normal...madre soltera*' ('The normal way...single mother'). She said she would look for a heterosexual man to be the father and would have sex with him to get pregnant, but intended to be a single mother raising the children. For her this was a practical and logical decision. She said that having a relationship with a woman comes with some sacrifices such as not conceiving with her partner, but these are not insurmountable (interview, Havana, 17 June 2017).

In one of my first interviews, I asked Mayte about children. Her eyes lit up. She said she really wanted to have children, and that she has a male friend who has agreed to provide a sperm donation, that she and her partner will use to artificially inseminate herself. She asked me about adoption in Cuba but we agreed that this was extremely rare. She dismissed this as an option for herself, saying that she preferred to know who the father is (Interview, Havana, 6 May 2017).

The women who already had children had conceived through intercourse with a male partner. It was usually a sexual and romantic relationship, rather than a friend or casual sex. Many women had children when they were quite young, between 16 and 25, and although they may have known they were attracted to women, societal pressure and/or norms meant they also dated men.

To summarise, assisted reproduction exists in Cuba, but access is limited to those who are higher priority cases, which is usually not LGBT people. In practice, women usually

conceived through intercourse, as this is the most straightforward option. In this case, the absence of an affirmative policy for LGBT assisted reproduction and the lack of information received by citizens have resulted in unmet needs and discrimination.

It is important to note the differences between men in same-sex relationships and women in same-sex relationships, and the role of fathers and other caregivers for children. As there are no adoption or surrogacy services in Cuba, gay men are extremely unlikely to become biological parents unless they have sex with a woman, or act as a sperm donor and co-parent. Lesbian and bisexual women have more chance of receiving state help as reproduction is viewed as 'women's business', and they are more likely to be the primary caregiver of a child.

Within opposite-sex relationships in Cuba, men are often not involved (both as their decision and/or the mother's decision), meaning it is quite usual for women to decide on their own to have and raise a child (Härkönen 2016, 58). Lesbian and bisexual women participants, therefore, felt that they had average chances of becoming a parent and, due to Cuban norms of single motherhood or matrifocality, saw no stigma in not maintaining a relationship with the biological father. Several explicitly rejected the notion of the father being part of the family, saying they did not want a man in the middle of their relationship, and others had not even considered that the father might want to co-parent.

There are conflicting tensions around the choices, rights and responsibilities of fathers and the relatively higher level of control that mothers have over pregnancy and childrearing. Research on Caribbean families has often neglected men's roles and family bonds (Härkönen 2016) and there is a space for research focusing on this, particularly for non-heterosexual men.

#### *Lesbian and bisexual women as parents*

The existence of free education, healthcare and childcare in Cuba make it easier for women to raise children on their own, without dependence on a male breadwinner (Safa 2009). Lesbian and bisexual women become pulled into (or actively position themselves within) mainstream social institutions in the gender system when they become mothers (Berkowitz 2009), such as children's care, schooling, health and their own changed social position as parents. The Cuban policy framework that was designed to support heterosexual women also supports lesbian and bisexual women through increased child support from the state, although it does not have any specific provisions for LGBT parenting. This could be regarded as an instance where absence in policy can still have some positive effects.

Cuban policy supports the non-nuclear family structures commonly found in Cuba. Maritsa said:

*It's Cuba! It will be hard to find a couple which is married for 30 years... Here... that's like a fairytale.*

(Interview, Havana, 3 May 2017).

Children usually stay with their mother, with or without their father or another partner of hers, and other caregivers are also present at various times, including neighbours and extended family members (Hamilton, 2012, 30). The Family Code stipulates that there is no legal difference between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' children, for the purposes of parenting and inheritance (CEDAW 2011). In this context of normalised non-nuclear households, blended families and matrifocality, conceiving a child with an uninvolved third party, like Ofelia and Mayte plan to do, seems realistic. The lesbian and bisexual participants in this research thus conform quite strongly to Cuban family normativities, with marginal roles for men or fathers, and strong female autonomy.

Carmen's story illustrates some dimensions of how queer family life can work. Carmen is bisexual, 22, mulata and raising a child whom she has cared for since she was 15 and he was 9 months old. She was a classmate of – and very close friend of – the mother, and helped a lot with the baby when he was born, changing diapers and feeding. The mother wanted to go out more so Carmen started taking the baby to her own house, not just overnight but for two or three days a week. People started saying she was the godmother. While the child was with Carmen, the mother committed two or three crimes, and was sent to jail for ten years. The child started to live with Carmen and Carmen's mother full-time. He calls her 'mama'.

At the time of the interview, Carmen was living with her female partner, and the child was staying with Carmen's mother. She still saw him every day and continued to raise him, but her mother was now the main caregiver. The child's father was almost absent from her story, although his relatives are involved (Interview, Havana, 28 May 2017).

After we finished this interview, I commented to my research assistant that the situation seemed difficult and unusual to me. He shrugged and said 'no, if anything, that's more normal for Cuba than having a nuclear family'. The concept of family stretches beyond blood relatives, and children are mostly a welcome addition to a household, even if they are not blood kin, as above.

Since Cubans are generally not tied to ideals of marriage and nuclear families, lesbian and bisexual women's parenting options fall well within norms of Cuban motherhood and Caribbean matrifocality. None of the participants felt conceptually prevented from being a lesbian parent, a single mother or a family headed by two mothers. The norms of matrifocal and extended families in Cuba provide some space for queer, lesbian or bisexual women to

become parents. In some ways, becoming a mother is a form of social legitimation, since it is something widely expected of women, but it may also cause tensions with social perceptions of lesbians (Berkowitz 2009). Although the policy environment in Cuba is neutral, and non-nuclear families are well accepted in society, there remains some social discrimination about the suitability of lesbian and bisexual women as parents.

Carmen, above, said that she does not want the child to live with her and her female partner because she does not want him to know she is a lesbian. If his blood relatives found out he was being raised by lesbians, she thought they could use that as a reason to take the child away or get him taken away by the authorities (Interview, Havana, 28 May 2017). Similarly, Mayte, who is a proud lesbian and plans to have children, said that her mother does not approve: *“One issue my mother says is that she doesn’t want her grandchild living with two women, because that’s not a family. And a lot of people think like that, they think it’s a sin, living like this, that’s not a family”*. (Interview, Havana, 6 May 2017).

Carmen’s and Mayte’s stories echo a feeling found in Heidi Härkönen’s work, that homosexuality might be ‘contagious’. Some Cuban people hold a fear that children around homosexual adults might imitate what they see and become homosexual themselves (Härkönen 2016, 156). Early meetings of lesbian groups at CENESEX met public panic that children might witness and replicate ‘low-class’ behaviour (Saunders 2009). Carmen felt some prejudice against her in the fear that her sexual orientation might be used to accuse her of being an unfit parent. This prejudice is even greater for queer men and trans people, since they are not considered the ‘natural’ caregivers for children in the way that ‘women’ are.

The state support for childcare and mothers has also supported lesbian and bisexual women as parents. Although there are no policies around the specific needs of LGBT parents, this absence has not hindered these participants. They have tapped into the normative support for ‘women as mothers’, using a heteronormative discourse for their own purposes. This is not possible for fathers, co-parents, gay and bisexual men, and trans parents. The descriptions of social discrimination point out the need for anti-discrimination programmes about LGBT parents and LGBT families. The policy environment is quite supportive of non-nuclear family parenting, but has not yet tackled the specific social discrimination of LGBT parents.

### **Reflections on the Cuban state and LGBT issues**

Without prompting from me, most participants framed their answers in rights terms, specifically international human rights norms. They used LGBT categories to describe sexual orientation, in the same ways as the international mainstream. An early finding from this research is that ‘ordinary Cuban people’ conform to global LGBT narratives and frameworks

in the way they talk about themselves and construct their identities. For example, although marriage is not an important institution in Cuba, Cuban lesbian and bisexual women showed a desire for marriage and framed it as an equal rights issue, which perhaps comes from their awareness of global LGBT rights discourses.

Although Cuba is perceived by international actors to have a fractious relationship with 'human rights', this mostly relates to political rights [9]. In economic and social areas, Cuba has a long history of supporting and promoting a human rights discourse (Johnson 2012). For example, gender equality and women's rights are squarely positioned by Cuban political actors as within the UN-framed notion of human rights (Sarmiento 2010), while also staunchly defended as a socialist ideal (Johnson 2012). A primarily rights-based approach can be a narrow way to examine LGBT issues, but it appears to have strong traction in Cuba, as LGBT activists and allies are using UN frameworks and discourse to hold the state accountable. Perhaps this can be used as a platform for international development practitioners.

Currently, CENESEX is the primary source of information for Cuban people on all aspects of sex and gender. The narratives with which people describe themselves and learn about rights are heavily informed by CENESEX's campaigns, media coverage, and sponsorship of pop culture. It is a very powerful influence on the construction of sexualities and gender, as access to other information is still limited. CENESEX conforms to international LGBT norms, UN Conventions and agreements including CEDAW [10] and others, and has taken stances directly critical of the government when it has failed to uphold LGBT rights (Kirk 2011). CENESEX positions itself as a progressive leader in Cuba, and through its leadership, positions Cuba as a regional leader in sexuality and gender rights.

However, international commitments and support for LGBT rights have not translated into affirmative national policy. Cuba's policies are generally neutral towards LGBT people, on the assumption that they are included and protected under socialism's agenda of equality for all. This agenda has been entrenched for more than fifty years, and as a result, many participants believed in the power and support of the state. It is common for LGBT people in Cuba to report that they do not feel discriminated against by the state, since there are no actively discriminatory laws and policies, and no severe state repression and restriction (cf. Saunders 2010). People are more likely to report that discrimination comes from individual attitudes (Stout 2014, 40). Nonetheless, people involved in LGBT activism, CENESEX, and many lesbian and bisexual women participants claim that policy neutrality does not provide enough support, and that there is a need for changes in the law.

Lesbian and bisexual women are largely invisible in Cuban policy and public discussion. This means that some of their needs and rights are not being met, and indifference results in social isolation (Saunders 2009). However, some participants described a desire to blend in,

be normal and be invisible. Under the socialist rhetoric, being invisible can potentially be a position of strength, as the Revolution is supposed to eradicate identity-based inequalities (Andaya 2014, 3). Some participants did not want to mobilise around an identity category, preferring instead the assurance that they would be treated the same as everyone else. For example, the founders of the CENESEX lesbian and bisexual women's support network did not wish to separate themselves from the rest of Cuban society, explicitly rejecting a minority identity or a discourse of state repression (Saunders 2009).

Mayte expressed doubts about the use of the rainbow flag in Cuba:

*I don't think it's necessary to have the flag. It excludes LGBT people from common society (Interview, Havana, 6 May 2017).*

She felt LGBT people should be integrated, and not separated, even by a pride symbol. She wanted to be invisible, not 'tolerated' (Stout 2014, 42). The current situation for lesbian and bisexual women in Havana is one of tolerance as long as one is not too overt or public; '*no dice nada, se hace todo*' (say nothing, but do everything (Allen 2011)). Where social invisibility can play a protective role, this raises difficult questions about how practitioners can engage and support people who do not want to be visible.

Although the situation might seem accepting and permissive, and is certainly more progressive than many developing countries, there are tensions between Cuba's socialist policy approach and what participants said they wanted. Arguably, a legal system which does not identify any specific groups for special treatment is more egalitarian, and avoids the complexities of visibility, identification and intersectionality. Nonetheless, the lived experience of participants was that the current state systems leave them unsupported in some areas, which they wanted to address through integration and equal rights. A key question for practitioners is how to engage with a conflict between what citizens want and a progressive state ideology.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, I have discussed three overarching points arising from my research.

First, legalising same-sex marriage has been discussed since at least 2007 but rejected, revealing a tension with the strong desires of participants to have legally recognised unions. This law was viewed by participants as actively obstructing their rights.

Second, the absence of state policy for LGBT assisted reproduction has left a void which is navigated ad hoc by individuals, which can result in conflicting information, discrimination and unmet needs. The topic is not widely discussed and not currently under review in the government. This policy absence has left a gap which can counteract reproductive rights.



Third, lesbian and bisexual women's parenting options are well within Cuban norms, but are not actively supported by the government. The absence of policy or assistance for LGBT parenting, combined with the state support for non-normative family structures, means that there is some social and political space for lesbian and bisexual women parents.

I examined some of the tensions and contradictions between international policy, national policy, and social norms for lesbian and bisexual women in Havana. The article shows that policy is largely absent for this group, or neutral at best. Although neutrality can have some positive results, like the space for queer parenting, participants strongly identified a need for specific policies to protect them. They saw this as a human rights issue. They argued that discourses of equality for all are not enough to protect vulnerable groups from structural inequalities and discrimination.

Most of the work on LGBT issues and women's rights must be carried out in partnership with CENESEX, as international development organisations are not allowed to work independently in socialist Cuba. CENESEX is aligned with an international human rights agenda, meaning that activities with this emphasis will be better received. Reflecting the importance put on legal rights by participants, it seems clear that practitioners should focus on improving the policy and legal environment for LGBT people. This should draw on the international commitments already made by Cuba, and on turning these into national action. CENESEX continues to press for updates to the Family Code and other laws which recognise sexual and gender diversity, and which support non-heteronormative families. There is every likelihood that the Family Code will be updated in the next decade, but it requires a continued campaign involving citizens and the media to put pressure on the government to change.

Beyond legal rights, practitioners can improve social change. Cuban society already supports non-nuclear family forms and has little emphasis on marriage, which can be used as a platform for inclusivity of LGBT families. For example, there is little discussion of LGBT parenting and there remains social discrimination, which could be addressed through awareness-raising campaigns in society, and media representation. A medical focus could aim to develop reproductive assistance further, supporting all people and reducing the resource constraints which lead to discrimination. International organisations mostly focus on conservative forms of women's rights and gender equality, but have not applied a queer analysis or understanding of queer family forms. Discussions of improving Cuban women's lives need to include LBT women, but also need to examine the heteronormativities which assume motherhood, social reproduction, and economic empowerment following a model based on men's work. Gender equality campaigns could include a focus on fatherhood, especially for queer men, and those fathering children with lesbian and bisexual women.

Queering international development practice could help create a broader and more inclusive society for all.

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## Endnotes

[1] Facilities and technologies for assisted reproduction do exist in Cuba, but there are only enough resources to assist a few people per year. Hence, the competition for access is high.

[2] For a review of sexuality and gender diversity through the Cuban Revolution, see Kirk (2017).

[3] A nuclear family is a couple and their dependent children. A blended family includes a couple, their children, and their children from previous relationships. An extended family includes the above, plus step-relations, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, living together or close by. In Cuba, families also include people not related by blood, such as neighbours, close friends, or children of deceased friends.

[4] For more information on CENESEX's work, see <http://www.CENESEX.org/> (last checked by author 16 December 2017)

[5] "Cisgender" describes someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. It is the opposite of transgender.

[6] My research is funded by the IASSCS Emerging Scholars International Research Fellowship Program. <http://www.iasscs.org/communication-results-2017-iasscs-research-grants>.

[7] Snowballing is a method of finding participants by asking each subject if they know anyone else who might participate.

[8] Most people in Cuba have mixed ethnicity, between white, black, and some Chinese. A person's ethnicity may be considered differently by different observers, and by the person themselves. It is based on a combination of physical features, like hair, noses, and lips; and social features, like education, wealth, and level of culture. Mulata or mulato refers to the general category of mixed-race black and white. Jaba or jabao is a person between mulata and white, who is light-skinned and/or light-eyed, but with afro hair. India or indio is a person who is perceived to have indigenous features, although, in Cuba, they are not usually indigenous. For more information on race in Cuba, see Roland (2013).

[9] For a recent review of economic, political and social issues in Cuba, including the recent reform process, see Font and Riobo (2015).

[10] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

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