

Notes from a Cuban Diary: Forty Women Speak on Forty Years

Joanne Elvy

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Abstract: Many consider the 1961 Literacy Campaign—*Campaña de Alfabetización*—to be the backdrop for social, economic, cultural and ethical transformations that occurred in Cuba following 1959. The *Campaña* marked a definitive moment of liberation for Cuban women, as more than half of the volunteers were those who left their family homes to live and work with the illiterate in the countryside. This research features photographic portraits of women who participated as literacy teachers, together with a series of reflective testimonies as textural components.

Eneida, Santiago de Cuba



Osmara, Viñales



According to UNESCO, the illiteracy rate in Cuba before 1959 was almost 24%—one in four adults—with figures in rural areas estimated at 41%, compared to 11% in the urban centers (Jefferies, 1967). With educational reform a high priority in the early years of the Revolution, the year 1961 was designated the ‘Year of Education’ in Cuba; with over 250,000 citizens responding to a call to join massive literacy brigades as part of a movement to eradicate illiteracy in the country within one year. Fueled by an “ethical exhilaration” in the growing awareness of the social inequities in Cuba and the promise of a better life for all, those participating in the *Campaña de Alfabetización* were part of an event that would transform the way they viewed their world (Kozol, 1978, p. 344).

More than half of those who came forth to volunteer in this *Campaña* were women.

To take on the challenge,
to achieve a proper ‘cultural’ Revolution,
to raise the cultural awareness of our people,
this *Campaña de Alfabetización* was a necessity.

Libraries were built;
classrooms, in out-of-the way places, high in the mountainous regions.
Museums were opened, as venues to invite culture.

And with an illiterate people,
it is not possible to realize these kinds of social transformations.

Indeed, the *Campaña* was a necessity.

Involvis, 62 years old, Baracoa

What separated the Cuban *Campaña* from literacy movements occurring elsewhere before and after 1961, was its inclusion of young people between the ages of ten and nineteen, who came forth to join in the spirit of social justice. To be part of this popular movement as literacy *brigadistas* was a coming-of-age event for many young Cubans, as they would have otherwise never conceived the disparity between the lives they had led in the city, and the extreme poverty they would soon encounter in the countryside.

Children, young people, mothers, adults,
the elderly, workers, students, *campesinos* ...

Everyone who knew how to read, participated in this *Campaña*.

It was the first major task of the Revolution,
one that invited the people to become involved, en masse,
to resolve whatever challenges the country faced.

And for this reason, the *Campaña* held great value:
social value, economic value, political value ...

This was the broader formation of our consciousness as a people.

The participation of the women was tremendous, magnificent.

Romalinda, 71 years old, La Habana

Beyond the mechanics of reading and writing, it was the development of consciousness in all who participated—*campesino* and *brigadista*—which provided a vision for the Cuban people in respect to health care, education, and the conception of family and community, so they might break free from the repetition of poverty and ignorance.

As part of the process of mobilization for the battle against illiteracy, the Ministry of Education closed down city schools so that young people who met the minimum age and 6th grade requirement could participate in the *Campaña* as this exercise of citizenship building. Over 95,000 middle-class urban youth journeyed from their familial homes to live with *campesino* families in the Cuban countryside; to share in the labor by day, and to then hold classes for their new ‘students’ at night. Their ‘students’ numbered almost one million Cubans, those previously denied access to a formal education due to race, social class, gender, economic disparity and/or geographical isolation. These young teachers, *brigadistas*, became part of the *Brigadas Conrado Benítez*, in memory of a young black teacher who had been killed by counter-revolutionaries earlier that year.



Melva Camguy



Moriana Ciego de Avila

Many *campesinos* had not yet received the bread of knowledge.
These young *brigadistas* were brave,

traveling to far-off places
to teach reading and writing
to those who needed it.

With their workbooks, pencils, and manuals in hand,
these were the only arms that they would carry.

Luris, 74 years old, Baracoa

As the story of the Revolution became popularized into the language of everyday life, the heroes of the Revolution have been typically mythologized as male. The sexes in Cuba may be officially equal, but the ever-present man on the streets keeps his stories 'public' while hers remain private; history reminding us that the wife/mother forever negotiates between her public responsibilities and the ones in the home. As the cultural and social of pre-revolutionary Cuba provided little opportunity for women to take on active professional lives beyond an expected familial role, parents often made decisions on behalf of their unmarried daughters, who were rarely allowed to leave the house unescorted. For the young woman as *brigadista* out on her own for the first time, the *Campaña* marked a definitive change on how she would begin to view her life choices.

Humbelina, Pinar del Rio



Involvis, Baracoa



For Cuban women, the *Campaña de Alfabetización* was one grand life lesson.

In the case of those who were the only girls in their family,
some mothers also donned a uniform to join in the battle against illiteracy.

For me, though, as a young woman I became more independent.

Becoming a *brigadista*,
this was the moment I took charge of my life.
I became outgoing ... I became conscientious.

I wasn't going to be tied down again!

Dora, 56 years old, Santiago de Cuba

We *brigadistas* took on the biggest, most difficult task
that our country faced at that time.

For us, this *Campaña* was the first significant Revolutionary event
to occur for those of my age.

Myself, I was only 13 years old at the time.
To participate in such a massive undertaking,
well, it was a point of departure for me,
in respect to my personal independence and identity,
and the responsibilities that I took on as a young woman,

At that time, to see the conditions in which other women lived;
those my age or younger, who were already married with children,
when my friends and I still enjoyed the life of a student.
Living and working with the *campesinos*, then teaching them!
Everything about life in the countryside was so hard!
Carrying water up from the rivers, cooking over open fires;
We learned so much from these women.

Rosa, 54 years old, La Habana



Rosa, La Habana



Isabel, La Habana

With Cuban people coming together with a common goal in the battle against illiteracy, the *Campaña* became a vehicle for social change, a collective event that became monumental, larger than life. Solidarity amongst Cubans evolved as young and old from different social classes and backgrounds exchanged knowledge and experiences to unite the country. For many, this *obra* holds great sentimental value, the jewel of the Revolution, its ideals and principles from forty years ago continuing on into the present. Each recounting a memory unique to her body of experience, the stories of the women who volunteered are very different conceptually and personally from the male participants. Reflecting back to name the limited possibilities available to them before the *Campaña*—their own desires once contained and repressed—they take steps not to forget, in how they practice their convictions as citizens in the Cuba of today.

As a Revolutionary event, the *Campaña de Alfabetización*
sparked the consciousness in the Cuban people
to then help others.

Those who became literate went on
to become teachers themselves,
or doctors, qualified technicians, skilled workers.
Certainly, as we became educated as a people,
we came to realize what we had *achieved* as a people.

Alida, 57 years old, Ciego de Avila

Postscript: As an outsider to the Cuban experience, I am honored to have been invited into the homes of those who agreed to be part of this project. With my doctoral research visual in nature, I believe the language of photography can validate women's voices, for its intimate, poetic reading of lives lived transcending linear thought; to reveal the unspoken, when words alone fall short.

References

- Fagan, R. (1969). *C The Tranformation of Political Culture in Cuba*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Kozol, J. (1978). A new look at the literacy campaign in Cuba. *Harvard Educational Review*, 48, 341-377.
- Jefferies, C. (1967). *Illiteracy: A World Problem*. London: Pall Mall Press.