

A Castro Strives to Open Cuban's Opinions on Sex

The New York Times
June 9, 2007

HAVANA

TWENTY or so [transsexuals](#) sat in a circle recently discussing their woes: harassment, boyfriend troubles, the challenge of removing hair from their legs. Empathizing with them was Mariela Castro Espín, [Cuba's](#) premier sexologist.

"I know, I know," she said, putting her hand on one of her own legs to show she could relate.

Then the conversation took an interesting turn. The transsexuals, who are receiving training as [AIDS](#) counselors at the National Center for Sexual Education, which Ms. Castro directs, brought up sexual liaisons some of them had had with soldiers. Maybe counseling in the barracks was needed, the transsexuals said.

Ms. Castro smiled, raised her eyebrows but did not dismiss the suggestion out of hand. Homosexuality is illegal in Cuba's military. In fact, some Cubans have avoided military service altogether by claiming to be gay.

Making the proposal even more delicate, everyone in the circle knows, is the fact that Ms. Castro, 44, is the daughter of Raúl Castro, the commander of Cuba's armed forces and, with the recent health problems of his brother, Fidel, the temporary leader of the government.

Despite Ms. Castro's pedigree in Cuba's most famous family, however, no one seems to hold his — or her — tongue around her. While her father is known for his strait-laced bearing, Ms. Castro has a more down-to-earth air. A mother of three who is married to an Italian photographer, she speaks of topics that might make others blush.

“Sexuality does not just have a reproductive function,” she declared in an interview on the front porch of a Havana mansion, where the center is located, noting that sex is also about love and pleasure and discovery and experiment. “Human beings are much more diverse than we think.”

CUBA, like many islands around the Caribbean, is a sexually liberal place where relationships out of wedlock are commonplace and taboos seem to be few, but only within heterosexual relationships. Homosexuality, transvestitism and transsexuality, however, are another matter.

Historically, Cuba’s gays have experienced the wrath of the government, with many sent off to labor camps. The climate has greatly improved in recent years, most seem to agree. Still, transvestites and transsexuals continue to complain of police harassment, and those with AIDS remain stigmatized, making prevention programs a challenge.

“I suggest you take a stroll on La Rampa to see how freely people express their sexual orientation,” Ms. Castro said, mentioning a popular gathering spot for gays in Havana. “This doesn’t mean we don’t have to work in the political arena and in the education of all of society.”

Ms. Castro said she felt no pressure to enter the family business of politics. She studied psychology in college, she said, and is now on the forefront of Cuba’s effort to make sex, in all its variety, as natural a discussion topic as it is a physical act. Her center helped produce a soap opera on state television last year featuring a married man who discovered he was attracted to other men. It was hugely popular.

Ms. Castro, who is writing her Ph.D. dissertation on transvestitism, is also pushing for an overhaul of Cuban laws so that, among other things, the government health care system covers surgery for transsexuals and that new official identification documents are issued after the operation.

Already, a government panel reviews individual cases of those wishing to change their sex and refers some transsexuals to therapy

and hormone treatment. Currently, 26 transsexuals have been approved for treatment by the committee, with another 50 under review, Ms. Castro said.

She recalled several years ago her discomfort when some transvestites and transsexuals first approached her at the center to raise their difficulties with the authorities. "At the beginning, I didn't understand them," she said.

But the more she listened, the more she began to believe that Cuba's Communist state, in which she is a committed believer, ought to accept transvestites and transsexuals as comrades along with everyone else.

NO sex-related topic is off limits in the center's publication, *Sexology and Society*, which features artwork and poetry with sexual themes and academic articles dealing with subjects like gay bashing, domestic violence and hormone therapy for transsexuals.

Her magazine publishes research from scientists around the world regardless of their nations' relations with Cuba. That means American sex research sometimes finds its way onto the pages of *Sexology and Society*.

Ms. Castro attended a sexology conference in California several years ago, which was her only trip to the United States. A return trip seems unlikely any time soon, though, she said with a smile and a shrug, since she cannot get a visa.

Ms. Castro, who has two sisters and a brother, insists her family name "doesn't help me at all." To the contrary, she said, when she has tried to work with the Cuban military, commanders were so concerned about nepotism that they were uncooperative.

But Ms. Castro acknowledges that she has access to the very top of Cuba's bureaucracy, which certainly does not hurt in pressing her agenda.

She said she puts a copy of her center's magazine on her father's bedside table and briefs him on her work whenever she can. "He has

told me he supports me, that he supports the personal rights of homosexuals,” she said of her father, who is 75 and spent his life as a military man. “He always says go slowly, though, so you don’t build walls.”

Making the case to her uncle, Fidel, has been even more of a challenge. He is known for firing back questions at those briefing him and expecting knowledgeable answers. “I was terrified he would ask me something I didn’t know,” she said.

Now she gives him informal briefings whenever she can. He is a busy man, though, she said, so getting an audience is not easy.

Ms. Castro views her work as a continuation of that of her mother, Vilma Espín, who has been the head of the Cuban Women’s Federation for nearly half a century. The sexual education center, like just nearly every other group in Cuba, is part of the government bureaucracy. But Ms. Castro said she participated in politics as an everyday citizen, not as the niece of El Comandante, whom she recently described as being in “stupendous” condition.

Despite her government’s restrictions on political speech, Ms. Castro is an outspoken advocate for more open sexual discourse. The more young people learn about sexuality, she contends, the less they will pick up from the streets. And politicians, too, need to be briefed on the topic, she said, to lead to more enlightened public policy.

“If you suppress things, they will become hidden,” she said. “It has been proven in scientific research in Cuba and other countries that the more education you give adolescents and adults, the more people are free to make their own decisions.”